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From quality systems to sustainable value creation: how TQM supports ESG-oriented performance in Moroccan industrial firms

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Abstract :

This revised theoretical article examines how total quality management (TQM) can support ESG-oriented performance in Moroccan industrial firms and clarifies the organizational conditions under which this contribution becomes substantive rather than symbolic. While prior research has convincingly linked TQM to operational discipline, customer satisfaction and efficiency gains, the literature remains fragmented regarding the way quality systems can be converted into environmental, social and governance outcomes in emerging industrial settings. Building on a structured conceptual review of the literature and an integrative theoretical reading that combines stakeholder theory, the resource-based view and legitimacy theory, the paper develops a mechanism-based framework that explains how TQM influences ESG-oriented performance through six interrelated pathways: process discipline and prevention, evidence-based decision making, employee involvement and learning, stakeholder-responsive relationship routines, continuous improvement and corrective learning, and leadership framing as a moderating condition. The core contribution of the article lies in showing that TQM does not merely coexist with ESG ambitions; it can operate as the organizational infrastructure that makes responsible performance measurable, discussable, auditable and improvable over time. The framework also clarifies that the most original pathway is not simple standardization, but the transformation of quality routines into a revisable learning system capable of supporting sustainable value creation. For Moroccan industrial firms facing simultaneous pressures of competitiveness, export integration, certification, legitimacy and organizational transformation, this perspective helps explain why TQM may become a strategic platform for operational responsibility rather than a narrow compliance device.

Keywords : Total quality management, ESG-oriented performance, sustainable value creation, stakeholder-responsive routines, Moroccan industrial firms.
Classification JEL : M11, M14, L21, Q56
Paper type : Theoretical Research

Résumé :

Cet article théorique révisé analyse la manière dont le Total Quality Management (TQM) peut soutenir la performance orientée ESG dans les entreprises industrielles marocaines et précise les conditions organisationnelles qui rendent cette contribution substantielle plutôt que symbolique. Alors que les travaux antérieurs ont largement montré l’apport du TQM à la discipline opérationnelle, à la satisfaction client et à l’efficacité, la littérature demeure fragmentée quant à la façon dont les systèmes qualité peuvent être convertis en résultats environnementaux, sociaux et de gouvernance dans les contextes industriels émergents. En s’appuyant sur une revue conceptuelle structurée de la littérature et sur une lecture théorique intégratrice mobilisant la théorie des parties prenantes, la resource-based view et la théorie de la légitimité, l’article propose un cadre explicatif fondé sur six mécanismes complémentaires : la discipline et la prévention des processus, la décision fondée sur les preuves, l’implication et l’apprentissage des employés, les routines relationnelles orientées vers les parties prenantes, l’amélioration continue et l’apprentissage correctif, ainsi que le cadrage du leadership comme condition modératrice. La contribution centrale de l’étude consiste à montrer que le TQM ne coexiste pas seulement avec les ambitions ESG ; il peut constituer l’infrastructure organisationnelle qui rend la performance responsable mesurable, discutable, auditable et améliorable dans le temps. Le cadre met également en évidence que l’apport le plus original du modèle réside moins dans la standardisation en elle-même que dans la transformation des routines qualité en système d’apprentissage révisable au service de la création de valeur durable. Pour les entreprises industrielles marocaines soumises à des pressions simultanées de compétitivité, d’intégration aux chaînes d’exportation, de certification et de légitimité, cette lecture permet de repositionner le TQM comme plateforme stratégique de responsabilité opérationnelle.

Mots clés : management de la qualité totale, performance orientée ESG, création de valeur durable, routines parties prenantes, entreprises industrielles marocaines.
JEL Classification : M11, M14, L21, Q56
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1. Introduction

Industrial firms are now judged through a broader performance lens than the traditional triangle of cost, quality and delivery. Customers, regulators, financiers, supply-chain partners and employees increasingly expect firms to demonstrate responsible resource use, safer working conditions, transparent governance routines and a credible capacity to create value over time. In practical terms, this means that operational excellence is no longer sufficient on its own; organizations are also assessed according to the reliability of the internal systems through which environmental, social and governance commitments are translated into action. This shift is particularly salient in emerging economies, where industrial modernization, global market integration and stakeholder scrutiny are advancing at the same time. In this context, total quality management (TQM) remains one of the most widely diffused managerial philosophies for structuring processes, reducing variability, preventing defects and improving customer satisfaction. Classic studies have associated TQM with operational and financial benefits, including superior reliability, process control and performance improvement (Hendricks & Singhal, 2001; Kaynak, 2003). Yet the dominant framing of TQM still tends to privilege conformance, efficiency and internal discipline. Such a framing captures an important part of quality management, but it underestimates the broader strategic potential of TQM in organizations that are now expected to document responsible performance, learn from deviations and sustain legitimacy across multiple stakeholder groups. At the same time, ESG-oriented performance has become a key language for evaluating corporate responsibility. In this article, ESG-oriented performance refers to the firm's ability to generate measurable and repeatable environmental, social and governance outcomes through embedded managerial routines rather than through symbolic reporting alone. Sustainable value creation is understood as the capacity to align operational performance, stakeholder legitimacy and long-term organizational viability. Organizational infrastructure refers to the system of routines, controls, data practices, communication channels and learning mechanisms that make such alignment possible. These definitions are necessary because the concepts are often used in broad or ambiguous ways in the literature. A first stream of research has already shown that quality management can improve financial, operational and innovation outcomes. A second stream has examined sustainability, environmental management or responsible supply-chain practices. However, the bridge between these bodies of work remains underdeveloped. Recent studies on sustainability priorities and responsible operations show that environmental and social goals require process integration and managerial coherence rather than isolated initiatives (Longoni & Cagliano, 2015). Research on TQM and corporate responsibility also suggests that quality systems may support broader managerial factors, including environmental management and organizational performance (Tarí et al., 2012; Jabbour et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the relationship between TQM and ESG-oriented performance remains conceptually fragmented, especially when the focus shifts from external disclosure to the internal routines that make responsible performance credible. This fragmentation is especially relevant for Moroccan industrial firms. These organizations increasingly face export-related quality requirements, certification pressures, stakeholder expectations and demands for organizational transparency, while still operating under constraints of cost, process maturity and competitive volatility. In such a setting, ESG cannot be treated as a detached communication exercise. Its credibility depends on whether firms possess internal routines capable of stabilizing operations, documenting deviations, mobilizing employees, coordinating with stakeholders and revising standards when necessary. These are precisely the areas in which TQM may offer an underappreciated contribution. This article therefore asks the following question: through which mechanisms, and under which conditions, can TQM support ESG-oriented performance in Moroccan industrial firms? To answer this question, the paper develops an integrative conceptual framework that repositions TQM as a dynamic organizational infrastructure for sustainable value creation. The academic contributions are threefold. First, the article clarifies how TQM can be connected to environmental, social and governance performance without reducing ESG to a reporting logic. Second, it specifies six mechanisms through which quality routines may influence ESG outcomes. Third, it articulates the complementary role of stakeholder theory, the resource-based view and legitimacy theory in explaining why the TQM–ESG relationship matters. Managerial implications are discussed separately in the discussion section rather than being treated as a theoretical contribution in themselves.

2. Literature review

2.1. TQM as a socio-technical capability

TQM is commonly defined as an organization-wide philosophy that embeds quality into processes, structures and relationships in order to satisfy customers and continuously improve organizational performance. Its classical principles include leadership commitment, customer focus, employee involvement, process management, evidence-based decision making, relationship management and continuous improvement (Deming, 1986; Juran, 1988; ISO, 2015). The value of these principles lies not only in standardization but also in the prevention of costly variation before it becomes visible as failure, waste or reputational damage. A useful distinction in literature opposes hard and soft quality practices. Hard practices include process mapping, standardization, measurement systems, corrective action, auditing and statistical control. Soft practices include employee participation, training, communication, problem-solving culture and leadership commitment. Research has shown that TQM is most effective when these two dimensions reinforce each other rather than being managed separately (Samson & Terziovski, 1999; Talib et al., 2013). This distinction is important for the present study because ESG-oriented performance depends precisely on that duality: environmental and governance outcomes require formal controls, while social outcomes depend strongly on voice, learning and participation. This socio-technical reading of TQM also helps explain why quality systems sometimes produce ambivalent effects. When hard practices dominate and are disconnected from learning, quality can degenerate into bureaucratic formalism. Conversely, when soft practices are emphasized without process discipline, improvement efforts may remain diffuse and non-repeatable. A balanced TQM system can therefore be seen as a capability that combines operational discipline with organizational learning, making it potentially relevant for sustainability-oriented outcomes that require both control and adaptability.

2.2. ESG-oriented performance and sustainable value creation

The ESG perspective emerged from debates on corporate responsibility, stakeholder accountability and sustainability performance, but it has increasingly become an operational concern rather than a purely financial or reporting concept. Environmental performance typically relates to waste prevention, resource efficiency, emissions, pollution control and process discipline. Social performance includes employee well-being, health and safety, competence development, participation and responsible treatment of external stakeholders. Governance performance concerns transparency, traceability, ethics, internal control and the reliability of decision-making routines (Eccles et al., 2014; Friede et al., 2015). These dimensions are not foreign to the logic of quality management. Process discipline, traceability, deviation control and continuous improvement are directly relevant to environmental governance. Employee involvement and safety routines shape the social dimension. Documentation, auditability and evidence-based decisions contribute to governance quality. However, ESG initiatives often remain weakly connected to day-to-day operational routines. When this happens, firms may produce disclosure without internal transformation. The challenge is therefore not simply to adopt sustainability vocabulary but to develop an organizational infrastructure that enables responsible performance to be measured, discussed and corrected over time. This is where the notion of sustainable value creation becomes relevant. Following the broader literature on stakeholder value and shared value, sustainable value creation refers here to the firm's ability to generate durable operational and relational benefits while preserving legitimacy and reducing avoidable harm (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Under this definition, the contribution of TQM to ESG is not automatic. It depends on whether quality routines actually help the firm integrate efficiency, responsibility and learning.

2.3. Tensions and debates in the TQM-sustainability relationship

Although the overlap between TQM and sustainability appears intuitive, the relationship is not free of tension. Critical research has shown that process management may favour exploitation over exploration and may reduce flexibility when routines become excessively rigid (Benner & Tushman, 2003). Similar concerns arise in ESG contexts: if standards are treated as immutable, firms may focus on passing audits rather than improving underlying practices. A narrow compliance orientation can therefore weaken both innovation and responsible performance. The quality-sustainability linkage is also debated because the literature often connects TQM more clearly to operational or financial performance than to broader social and environmental outcomes. Yet several studies have opened this bridge. Tarí et al. (2012) show that TQM is associated with managerial factors, including environmental management. Jabbour et al. (2014) highlight complementarities between TQM and environmental management practices. Longoni and Cagliano (2015) demonstrate that environmental and social sustainability priorities require integration into operations strategies. Ikram et al. (2020) further suggest that quality, environmental and social certifications can strengthen international trade performance, indicating that quality-related standards may help firms respond to external legitimacy pressures. These insights are important but still insufficient for a mechanism-based understanding of how TQM supports ESG-oriented performance in industrial firms, particularly in the Moroccan context. Much of the literature treats quality, sustainability and legitimacy as adjacent topics rather than as interdependent managerial systems. The present article addresses this gap by proposing a more explicit theoretical integration and by clarifying the conditions under which TQM shifts from a certification device to a learning-based platform for responsible performance.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Structured conceptual review approach

The article adopts a structured conceptual review rather than a purely narrative or impressionistic discussion. The aim is not to claim the exhaustiveness of a full systematic review, but to increase transparency in the selection and interpretation of sources, in line with the reviewer's recommendation. The search process focused on three clusters of literature: TQM and performance, TQM and sustainability or environmental management, and ESG-oriented performance or governance routines in industrial settings. Keywords included combinations of "total quality management", "quality management", "ESG", "sustainability", "environmental management", "social performance", "governance", "industrial firms" and "emerging economies". The review privileged peer-reviewed journal articles, major standards and foundational theoretical works published mainly between 1990 and 2025, while allowing earlier canonical references when they remained conceptually central. Sources were included when they contributed directly to at least one of the following goals: defining the core components of TQM, clarifying ESG-oriented performance, identifying mechanisms linking quality routines to environmental, social or governance outcomes, or supporting the selected theoretical lenses. Sources were excluded when they addressed product quality in a purely technical sense without organizational implications, or when they discussed ESG solely from a capital-market disclosure perspective without attention to internal routines. This structured approach does not eliminate all interpretive choices, but it strengthens the rigor of the conceptual development. It also helps justify the integrative nature of the framework by showing that the proposed model was derived from recurring mechanisms across bodies of literature that are often treated separately. Following Creswell and Creswell (2018), theoretical construction in this article is therefore based on transparent source selection, concept clarification and integrative interpretation rather than on unstructured commentary.

3.2. Integrative theoretical lenses

Stakeholder theory offers a first explanation for why TQM may affect ESG-oriented performance. Firms do not create value only for shareholders; they operate within a constellation of stakeholders whose support conditions access to resources, legitimacy and continuity (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). TQM becomes relevant in this perspective because it institutionalizes listening, complaint handling, corrective action, process review and relationship management. These routines can be extended beyond customers to suppliers, employees, regulators and communities. The resource-based view provides a second lens by interpreting mature quality systems as organizational capabilities rather than as isolated tools. TQM can generate valuable and difficult-to-imitate combinations of knowledge flows, process reliability, problem-solving routines and cross-functional coordination (Barney, 1991). Hart's (1995) natural-resource-based extension of the RBV is especially useful here because it links capability development to pollution prevention, product stewardship and sustainable competitiveness. Under this reading, TQM contributes to ESG when it supports the internal discipline required to turn responsible ambitions into repeated practice. Legitimacy theory adds a third perspective. Firms increasingly face institutional expectations to demonstrate environmental responsibility, social accountability and governance integrity. Yet legitimacy is fragile when responsibility remains rhetorical. TQM can strengthen substantive legitimacy because it embeds documentation, traceability, review cycles and accountability into ordinary operations. The three lenses are therefore complementary rather than redundant: stakeholder theory explains why responsiveness matters, the RBV explains why routines matter as capabilities, and legitimacy theory explains why credible implementation matters for survival and external acceptance.

4. Conceptual framework and research propositions

The framework identifies six propositions. The first five correspond to primary mechanisms through which TQM can influence environmental, social and governance outcomes. The sixth proposition captures the moderating role of leadership framing and dynamic learning orientation, which determines whether standards remain revisable and whether quality routines become drivers of substantive improvement instead of rigid compliance artifacts.

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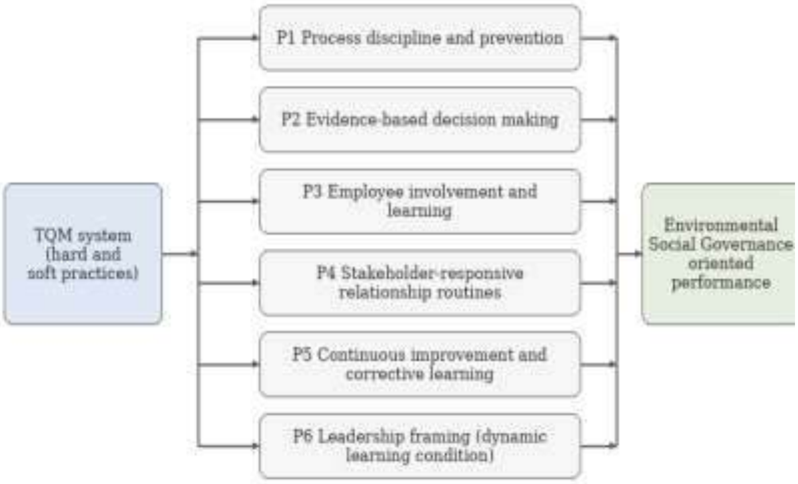
Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking TQM and ESG-oriented performance



Source: Developed by the authors.

Table 1: Core TQM practices, ESG pathways and theoretical anchors

TQM practice	Primary ESG pathway	Expected outcome	Theoretical anchor
Process management and standardization	Environmental discipline and prevention	Less waste, fewer defects, better resource use and lower process losses	RBV + natural-resource-based view
Fact-based decision making and traceability	Governance quality	Auditable decisions, better documentation, stronger accountability	Legitimacy theory
Employee involvement and learning	Social performance	Safer work, stronger voice, capability development and engagement	Stakeholder theory + RBV
Relationship management routines	Stakeholder responsiveness	Better supplier coordination, complaint handling and external credibility	Stakeholder theory
Continuous improvement and corrective learning	Sustainable adaptation	Iterative ESG progress and problem-solving discipline	RBV + legitimacy theory
Leadership framing of quality	Moderating condition	Higher conversion of quality routines into substantive ESG outcomes	Dynamic capabilities perspective

Source: Developed by the authors.

Proposition 1

TQM strengthens the environmental dimension of ESG-oriented performance when process discipline, preventive control and root-cause analysis reduce waste, rework, nonconformities and avoidable resource losses.

Proposition 2

TQM strengthens the governance dimension of ESG-oriented performance when traceability, documentation quality and evidence-based decision routines make organizational choices more auditable, less arbitrary and more accountable.

Proposition 3

TQM strengthens the social dimension of ESG-oriented performance when employee involvement, learning routines and safety-oriented participation transform quality improvement into a mechanism of capability development and responsible work organization.

Proposition 4

Stakeholder-responsive relationship routines mediate the relationship between TQM and ESG-oriented performance by improving responsiveness, coordination and trust across customers, suppliers, employees and regulatory interfaces.

Proposition 5

Continuous improvement strengthens the contribution of TQM to ESG-oriented performance when review cycles, corrective action and iterative learning prevent ESG from being reduced to one-off compliance or symbolic reporting.

Proposition 6

The positive effect of TQM on ESG-oriented performance is stronger when leadership frames quality as a dynamic learning and value-creation system rather than as a narrow compliance device.

5. Discussion

5.1. Environmental implications

The environmental contribution of the framework lies in relocating sustainability from a peripheral reporting function to the heart of process discipline. TQM contributes to the environmental dimension of ESG when standards, controls and root-cause analysis reduce defects, waste, overconsumption and uncorrected process deviations. This interpretation aligns with prior work linking quality management and environmental management practices (Jabbour et al., 2014) while also clarifying that the mechanism is not environmental commitment in the abstract, but prevention embedded in routines. In Moroccan industrial firms, where competitiveness often depends on process consistency and export reliability, such prevention logic can generate both ecological and operational gains. The framework also suggests that the environmental effect of TQM is likely to be stronger in firms that use standards as tools for learning rather than as fixed administrative checklists. Inflexible formalism may stabilize current processes but fail to address emerging sustainability requirements. By contrast, a revisable quality system can treat environmental deviations as signals for process redesign, supplier coordination and managerial learning. This point helps distinguish the present framework from more generic claims that TQM and sustainability are naturally compatible.

5.2. Social implications

The social dimension is shaped less by documentation alone than by the lived quality of participation. TQM can support social performance when employees are treated as active contributors to improvement rather than as passive executors of procedures. Suggestion systems, deviation reporting, safety communication and cross-functional problem solving make quality routines socially meaningful because they recognize experience, voice and competence. In that sense, the soft dimension of TQM is not peripheral; it is central to socially credible ESG-oriented performance. This argument also helps mobilize references that were previously underused in the manuscript. Carroll's (1999) broader discussion of corporate responsibility underlines the importance of social obligations, while Sadikoglu and Zehir (2010) show that quality practices are closely linked to organizational learning and employee-related performance factors. The implication is that social ESG outcomes are not produced by HR policy alone; they depend on how everyday operational routines value participation and corrective learning.

5.3. Governance implications

Governance is perhaps the ESG dimension most directly aligned with the classical strengths of TQM. Quality systems privilege traceability, documented procedures, review cycles and evidence-based decisions. These elements support governance because they reduce arbitrariness, improve accountability and make deviations discussable. In many firms, governance failure is not due to the absence of formal values, but to the absence of reliable routines for documenting, escalating and correcting problems. TQM can narrow that gap. This governance effect is especially important in contexts where firms must demonstrate credibility to customers, regulators and supply-chain partners. From a legitimacy perspective, documented and auditable routines help reduce the distance between declared responsibility and actual practice. Governance-oriented ESG performance therefore depends not only on disclosure, but on whether quality routines generate trustworthy operational evidence.

5.4. Managerial implications

The first managerial implication is that TQM should be redesigned as a sustainability-supporting system rather than maintained as a certification artifact. Management reviews should extend beyond defect rates and customer complaints to include indicators related to waste intensity, safety observations, corrective action closure, supplier responsibility and traceability quality. Each implication derives directly from the proposed mechanisms: environmental benefits from prevention, social benefits from participation, and governance benefits from evidence-based routines. A second implication is that Moroccan industrial firms should avoid creating parallel ESG structures with weak operational anchoring. Existing quality routines such as kaizen meetings, internal audits, corrective action reviews and management reviews can serve as vehicles for responsible performance when the agenda is broadened. Third, leadership should invest in cross-functional learning so that standards remain revisable through evidence. Fourth, stakeholder-facing quality routines including supplier evaluation, complaint handling and communication discipline should be treated as trust-building devices rather than as administrative formalities.

5.5. Limitations and future research

The article remains theoretical and therefore cannot demonstrate the empirical strength of the proposed relationships. Its structured conceptual approach improves transparency, but it does not offer a formal bibliometric review or statistical validation. A second limitation is contextual: the framework is tailored to Moroccan industrial firms and has not been compared systematically with other MENA settings or sectors with different regulatory and technological conditions. A third limitation concerns possible sectoral heterogeneity; capital-intensive, labour-intensive and export-oriented industries may not activate the same mechanisms with the same intensity. Future research can address these limits through several designs. Survey-based work could test whether ISO 9001-certified Moroccan industrial SMEs exhibit stronger ESG-related process discipline and governance quality than non-certified firms. Comparative case studies could explore how leadership framing shapes the difference between bureaucratic quality systems and learning-oriented ones. Mixed-method designs could also examine whether firms that integrate ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and social responsibility routines achieve stronger stakeholder trust and more credible ESG trajectories than firms that manage these domains separately.

5.6. Contextual relevance for Moroccan industrial firms

The contextual contribution of the article is thus not to claim Moroccan exceptionalism, but to show why the TQM–ESG linkage becomes strategically salient in emerging industrial settings marked by institutional hybridity, export exposure and uneven managerial maturity. This contextualization also opens the door to future comparative work across Moroccan, Tunisian, Egyptian or broader MENA manufacturing settings. In the Moroccan and wider North African context, the framework is especially relevant because many industrial firms are inserted into international value chains where quality assurance and responsible conduct are assessed simultaneously. Certification requirements, buyer audits, supplier development expectations and increasing attention to environmental and social practices all create pressures that cannot be managed through disconnected systems. Repositioning TQM as an operational backbone for ESG-oriented performance may therefore help Moroccan firms align competitiveness with legitimacy more coherently. Finally, the Moroccan context highlights a broader issue for emerging economies: responsible performance requires translation into routines that employees can understand, managers can monitor and partners can trust. This is precisely why TQM remains relevant despite critiques of formalism. Its value does not reside in paperwork alone, but in the possibility of converting dispersed expectations into structured learning loops. When that conversion occurs, quality systems become a credible backbone for sustainable value creation. This contextual reading is also useful from a policy and ecosystem perspective. Support agencies, professional associations and industrial clusters often encourage certification, process upgrading and export readiness, while ESG-related demands are introduced through separate channels. The framework developed here suggests that these agendas should be aligned more deliberately. Firms are more likely to progress when quality systems, environmental routines, social responsibility practices and governance controls are treated as mutually reinforcing layers of organizational capability rather than as isolated labels managed by different departments. The practical relevance of this argument is reinforced by the increasing convergence between buyer requirements, certification logics and sustainability expectations in sectors such as automotive components, agrifood processing, chemicals, textiles and industrial subcontracting. In these sectors, quality failures, environmental incidents or governance weaknesses do not remain confined to the plant; they affect delivery reliability, customer trust, audit outcomes and access to contracts. An integrated TQM–ESG perspective can therefore help managers understand that responsible performance is not a separate corporate function but a property of operational discipline itself.

6. Conclusion

This article examined how TQM can support ESG-oriented performance in Moroccan industrial firms and argued that the relationship is neither automatic nor merely rhetorical. TQM contributes to sustainable value creation when it operates as a dynamic organizational infrastructure composed of process discipline, evidence-based governance, employee involvement, stakeholder-responsive routines and continuous improvement. Under these conditions, quality systems can do more than stabilize operations; they can help firms make responsible performance measurable, discussable and improvable over time. By integrating stakeholder theory, the resource-based view and legitimacy theory, the article also showed that the relevance of TQM for ESG lies in the convergence of three logics: responsiveness to multiple stakeholders, the development of hard-to-imitate organizational capabilities, and the production of credible, legitimate routines. This theoretical integration helps explain why quality management should not be reduced to narrow conformity. Its strongest contribution appears when leadership frames quality as a learning and value-creation system rather than as an administrative end in itself. The revised framework therefore offers a more explicit and

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context-sensitive basis for future work on quality and sustainability in emerging industrial settings. It suggests that for Moroccan firms facing simultaneous pressures of competitiveness, certification, export integration and legitimacy, TQM may become a strategic platform for operational responsibility. Even if empirical validation remains necessary, the article provides a structured conceptual foundation for understanding how quality systems can support not only efficiency and customer satisfaction, but also environmental discipline, social credibility and governance robustness.

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