

Post-Boycott Legitimacy Repair in Global Supply Chains: The Re-engagement of Uzbekistan's Textile Industry

Farmon Asadov (f.asadov@lancaster.ac.uk)
Lancaster University, the UK

Anas Iftikhar (a.iftikhar@lancaster.ac.uk)
Lancaster University, the UK

Asliddin Abdulloyev (a.j.abdulloyev@buxdu.uz)
Bukhara State University, Uzbekistan

Abstract

Uzbekistan's cotton and textile sector is emerging from an NGO-led eleven-year boycott that successfully ended state-imposed forced labour but left new challenges for reintegration into Western supply chains. This study examines the boycott's unintended consequences and how to ethically re-engage. We identify multifaceted barriers - including skill and quality gaps, weak local institutions, and enduring reputational stigma - that hinder Uzbek firms' re-entry. We also outline stakeholder-recommended strategies such as international certifications, independent monitoring, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and capacity-building. The concept of post-boycott "legitimacy repair" and "remedial isomorphism" are introduced, offering insights into managing supply chain reintegration after such sanctions.

Keywords: Uzbekistan; Textile industry; Supply chain reintegration

1. Introduction

Forced labour, commonly subsumed under the rubric of modern slavery, persists in contemporary supply networks despite an expanding architecture of hard-law instruments such as the UK Modern Slavery Act (2015), the EU Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence (2024), and the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 2014 Protocol to the Forced Labour Convention (Crane 2013; Wilhelm et al. 2024). Recent inter-governmental estimates place the number of victims at more than forty million, subjected to bonded labour, debt servitude, and coerced recruitment (LeBaron 2021; ILO 2024). Although policy initiatives have heightened corporate awareness, the eradication of forced labour remains elusive, hampered by fragmented oversight and the opacity of multi-tier networks (Gold et al. 2015; Crane et al. 2022).

The Uzbek cotton industry epitomises these implementation challenges. For decades the state's annual mobilisation of citizens institutionalised forced labour through a tightly

coupled political–economic apparatus that privileged production quotas over rights (McGuire & Laaser 2018; Schaefer & Hauge 2023). Responding to mounting evidence, the NGO-led Cotton Campaign orchestrated a global boycott in 2011, ultimately signed by more than 330 international brands and retailers, who pledged not to source Uzbek cotton until coercive practices ceased. Independent monitoring by the ILO confirmed in the 2021 harvest that systemic state-imposed forced labour had ended, prompting the Cotton Campaign to lift its eleven-year embargo in March 2022 (Human Rights Watch 2022; Cotton Campaign 2022). The episode is widely regarded as a landmark victory for private governance and transnational advocacy.

Abolition of state coercion, however, produced an unintended result: commercial re-engagement has remained limited. After a decade of exclusion, Uzbek cotton/textile exporters confront a credibility deficit and sluggish market re-entry. Many Western buyers are unaware of, or unconvinced by, the reforms; a 2024 investigation found that few European procurement teams had registered Uzbekistan’s progress, while most still equated its cotton with historical abuses (Giz 2024). As firms seek to capitalise on reforms they therefore encounter formidable barriers in regaining trust, meeting international due-diligence standards, and reconnecting with global markets. The Uzbek case thus offers a unique setting for examining how a supplier country can reclaim legitimacy following prolonged exclusion.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the post-boycott reintegration of Uzbekistan’s cotton and textile sector into Western value chains. We address two research questions:

- RQ1 : Barriers to Re-Entry: What are the primary barriers confronting Uzbek cotton/textile firms as they seek to re-enter Western supply chains after the boycott?
- RQ2: Enabling Strategies: What strategies do Uzbek stakeholders and international actors (e.g. government, industry, NGOs, brands) recommend to enable ethical re-engagement and rebuild credibility post-boycott?

Theoretically, we anchor our analysis in institutional and stakeholder perspectives to explain how coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures intersect with stakeholder interests and resources. We introduce the constructs of “*legitimacy repair*” (Kuruppu et al. 2019), the process by which stigmatised actors seek re-acceptance, and “*remedial isomorphism*”, whereby organisations emulate recognised best practice to demonstrate conformity with emerging expectations (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). Our findings extend stakeholder theory by showing how rigorously adversarial relations can evolve into multi-stakeholder governance oriented toward continuous improvement. Practically, our findings offer guidance for policymakers, NGOs, and corporations seeking to ensure sustained improvements once a boycott is lifted. In the sections that follow, we first review the relevant literature on institutional and stakeholder perspectives in global supply chain governance. We then outline our methodology, present findings on the barriers and enabling strategies for Uzbekistan’s re-entry, and discuss theoretical and practical implications before concluding with avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review

Institutional theory argues that organisational practice is shaped by coercive, normative and mimetic forces (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). In many developing-country supply chains, forced labour persists where oversight is weak or politically captured (LeBaron 2021). Civil society actors therefore mobilise coercive tools, NGO-led boycotts and consumer campaigns, to jolt firms and supplier governments into action; yet these efforts

can sideline smaller or “innocent” suppliers and accelerate buyer exit (Kadfak et al. 2023; Shalpegin et al. 2025). Normative devices, such as corporate codes of conduct, social audits, certifications and international conventions, often stall at symbolic adoption when monitoring is thin (Nath et al. 2023; Huq et al. 2014). Mimetic isomorphism likewise prompts firms to imitate peers chiefly to signal legitimacy rather than to dismantle exploitative models (Huq & Stevenson 2020). The result is “mock compliance”, public claims that conceal ongoing labour abuses (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen 2014; New 2015). These shortcomings have fuelled calls to explore deep tiers of the supply chain, especially suppliers in emerging countries; to understand their perspectives and the institutional pressures shaping their behaviour; and to look beyond corporate self-reporting (LeBaron 2021; Lotfi & Walker 2024).

A stakeholder lens (Freeman 1984; Parmar et al. 2010) adds that boycotts and sanctions can address urgent labour abuses (Mayer & Thein 2014) but can also curtail market access for compliant producers and heighten worker precarity (Shalpegin et al. 2025). The widely analysed Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh’s garment sector illustrates this tension: global outrage pushed brands into the 2013 Accord on Fire and Building Safety (Huq & Stevenson 2020), yet later studies reveal uneven remediation and sustained price pressure, suggesting reforms falter once media scrutiny fades (Donaghey & Reinecke 2018). Parallel patterns surface in cobalt (Umpulla & Dummett 2024), seafood (Wilhelm et al. 2020) and electronics supply chains (Islam & van Staden 2018), where headline-driven pledges seldom translate into routinised respect for labour rights (LeBaron 2021; Crane 2019).

Prior work explains how coercive pressure ignites reform but offers scant insight into what follows. We know little about (i) whether newly adopted norms become routinised when campaigns subside, (ii) how stakeholder interaction shifts as reputational risk recedes, and (iii) which governance mechanisms embed or erode labour rights gains. The temporal dynamics of “legitimacy repair” in post-campaign supply chains therefore remain under theorised and empirically thin.

Our study addresses this gap by examining how Uzbek cotton/textile key stakeholders navigate evolving institutional pressures, recalibrate alliances and work to entrench labour rights gains following boycott termination.

3. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative a revelatory case (Yin, 2018) – a unique situation where a country has overcome systemic forced labour through external pressure and is now attempting to re-enter global markets. We conducted 29 semi-structured interviews in 2023 with key stakeholders: 15 interviews with managers/owners of Uzbek cotton/textile firms, 5 with NGO and labour advocates involved in the cotton campaign, 4 with Uzbek government or industry officials (from relevant ministries and the national textile association), and 5 with Western apparel brand representatives (sourcing or sustainability managers). Each interview (approximately 60 minutes) covered perceptions of challenges since the boycott ended and suggested actions for reintegration. To triangulate and enrich our data, we also gathered extensive secondary information: relevant policy documents and new legislation (e.g. updates to labour laws), reports from NGOs and international organizations (such as Cotton Campaign press releases, ILO and Human Rights Watch assessments of forced labour, Uzbek Forum monitoring reports), and media coverage (news and investigative articles from 2011–2025 discussing the boycott and its aftermath). These sources provided factual context and helped verify claims from interviews.

All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim (and translated to English when necessary). We then performed a thematic analysis of the data using NVivo 12 software. Our coding process combined a deductive approach (starting with categories informed by our research questions and theoretical framework) and inductive openness to new themes. We initially defined broad codes corresponding to RQ1 (barriers) and RQ2 (strategies), and sub-codes like “skills gap”, “finance issues”, “governance”, “reputation” for barriers, and by stakeholder group for strategies (e.g. “NGO recommendations”, “firm strategies”). As we coded interviews, we added any emergent themes that did not fit pre-existing codes. Through iterative coding and comparison, we distilled the findings into two main thematic sets aligned with our research questions. We cross-checked interview insights against the documentary evidence to ensure consistency: for example, if officials claimed certain improvements, we looked for confirmation in ILO reports; if brands mentioned specific sourcing requirements, we checked those against published codes of conduct. This triangulation and coding rigor bolster the reliability of our case study findings.

4. Findings

4.1. Barriers to Re-Entry

Uzbek cotton and textile firms face an array of barriers as they attempt to re-enter Western supply chains after the boycott. These barriers can be grouped into three categories – (a) internal socio-economic constraints, (b) institutional/governance weaknesses, and (c) external market and reputational challenges – which often interlink.

Table 1. Summary of barriers by category

Category	Specific Barrier	Conclusions from interviews
Socio-Economic	Skills and Capability Gaps	A shortage of skilled labour and modern managerial know-how after years of isolation.
	Productivity and Quality Issues	Lower efficiency and inconsistent product quality, owing to outdated practices and technology.
	Financing Constraints	Limited access to affordable capital for investment in upgrades and compliance.
Institutional	Weak Civil Society Oversight	Nascent or restricted role of independent unions and NGOs in monitoring labour rights.
	Governance and Transparency Gaps	Corporate governance practices and transparency in firms are below international expectations.
	Patchy Local Enforcement	Inconsistent enforcement of new labour standards and regulations at regional/local levels.
	Reputational Stigma	A lingering “tainted” country image due to the history of forced labour, causing a credibility deficit.
Market-Related	Lack of Market Linkages	Severed relationships with Western buyers and lack of existing networks to leverage.
	Intense Global Competition	Entrenched competitors (e.g., Bangladesh, Vietnam) make it hard to win orders, especially with no track record.
	Logistical Disadvantages	Challenges of being landlocked and distant from ports, leading to higher shipping costs and longer lead times.

(a) Socio-economic barriers: Years of isolation and state control have left a significant skills and capacity gap. Firms lack sufficient experienced technical and managerial talent familiar with international quality and compliance demands, since workforce development stagnated during the boycott.

Despite recent investments in modern equipment, many producers struggle with low productivity and inconsistent quality, which raises concerns for Western buyers

accustomed to reliable standards. In addition, firms have struggled to obtain affordable capital for modernization, as financing options have historically been limited or costly.

(b) Institutional and governance barriers: On the institutional side, Uzbekistan’s domestic mechanisms for labour oversight remain weak in the post-boycott period. Independent trade unions and NGOs—which could serve as local watchdogs for labour rights—are still nascent or constrained, meaning there is little independent monitoring from within. Enforcement of labour laws and standards, while improved on paper, can be uneven at regional and factory levels due to varying local governance capacity. The legacy of a top-down system means a genuine culture of compliance and worker voice is only slowly emerging. Moreover, transparency and corporate governance in the industry are not yet fully aligned with international expectations. For example, irregularities were reported during the cotton sector’s privatization. In sum, without strong local civil society and consistent enforcement, there is a risk that labour standards could backslide or issues go undetected unless international scrutiny continues.

(c) Market and reputational barriers: Externally, Uzbek firms face reputational and market-access challenges. A decade-long boycott created a lingering stigma around Uzbek cotton – many international buyers still associate the country with forced labour and are wary of sourcing there. Rebuilding reputation will take time and proof of sustained ethical practices. In addition, Uzbek exporters lack established relationships with Western brands: their former clients moved on, so relationships and networks must be rebuilt from scratch. Furthermore, being landlocked (adding logistical costs and delays) and still exporting mainly lower-value inputs (cotton fibre, yarn) rather than higher-value finished goods puts Uzbekistan at a structural disadvantage compared to established sourcing countries with well-oiled supply chains.

4.2. Stakeholder Perspectives on Re-Engagement

Despite the hurdles, stakeholders have outlined strategies to enable ethical re-engagement. Different groups emphasize different aspects, but there is broad agreement on maintaining strict labour standards and rebuilding trust as trade resumes.

Table 2. Stakeholder groups and their recommended strategies.

Stakeholder Group	Key Strategy Themes	Conclusions from interviews
NGOs (Labor Advocates)	Independent Monitoring and Verification	Ongoing independent monitoring and verification of labor conditions (post-boycott).
	Empower Local Voices	Build local capacity for worker rights (education, support for unions/grievance mechanisms).
	Stakeholder Collaboration Platforms	Create formal platforms for ongoing dialogue between stakeholders essentially institutionalizing multi-stakeholder governance for the sector.
	Policy Reforms & Incentives	Strengthen labor laws and enforcement (aligned with ILO standards); provide economic incentives (tax breaks, subsidized loans) for firms to improve compliance and capacity.
Uzbek Government	International Partnerships & Image-Building	Partner with global standards initiatives and host outreach to signal credibility (e.g., join Better Cotton Initiative, invite foreign auditors, promote success stories).
	Buyer–Supplier Matchmaking and Market Linkages	Both government and industry association representatives stressed efforts to actively reconnect Western buyers with local producers.
	Capability Upgrading	Invest in training, modern equipment, and process improvements to meet global quality and safety standards (closing the skills/productivity gap).
Uzbek Firms (Producers)	Certifications & Compliance	Pursue internationally recognized certifications (BCI for cotton, WRAP/SA8000 for factories, ISO standards) and welcome third-party audits to signal reliability.

Western Brands/Retailers	Market Reconnection	Proactively seek partnerships and pilot orders, even if initially small, to build a track record; diversify products and move up the value chain to offer more than basic commodities.
	Cautious, Verification-Driven Sourcing	Approach Uzbek sourcing gradually – start with small pilot engagements; require strict due diligence (no orders without independent certification and audits verifying labor conditions).
	Collaborative Engagement	Participate in multi-stakeholder initiatives and support capacity-building (partner with NGOs/government programs) to ensure standards are met; share best practices or even co-invest in supplier improvements where needed.

NGOs and Labour Advocates: This group urges vigilance to ensure reforms hold. They advocate continued independent monitoring of labour conditions, greater transparency (allowing observers and audits), and empowerment of workers and local civil society to sustain standards. NGOs encourage brands to re-engage only under a “trust but verify” approach – in other words, to return gradually and with credible oversight in place. Notably, having achieved their aim of ending forced labour, most NGOs have shifted from calling for a boycott to supporting cautious re-entry under strict conditions.

Uzbek Government and Industry: Officials stress that Uzbekistan is now open for responsible business and underscore the reforms implemented. They point to new laws (e.g. a 2023 labour code aligning with ILO conventions) and a commitment to enforce labour standards with zero tolerance for abuses. To build credibility, they are partnering with international organizations and certification initiatives (inviting programs like BCI and ILO monitoring) and offering incentives for local firms to improve (such as support for those who get certified). They are also actively courting Western buyers through trade missions and assurances of compliance. The goal is to signal strong political will and practical support for ethical sourcing, to encourage brands to return under these improved conditions.

Uzbek Textile Firms: Local manufacturers are keen to regain Western buyers and are taking concrete steps to upgrade. Many are pursuing internationally recognized certifications (BCI, WRAP, SA8000, etc.) and improving their internal processes (quality control, HR practices) to meet global standards. They are also rebuilding connections by reaching out to brands – sending product samples, welcoming audits, and fulfilling small trial orders to prove their capabilities. However, these firms acknowledge challenges: they often need technical training and better access to finance to fully modernize. In essence, the firms are willing and making changes to become compliant and competitive, but external support (from government or partners) would help accelerate their progress.

Western Brands: Western apparel brands adopt a very cautious stance regarding Uzbekistan. While they cautiously welcome the end of forced labour, they will only source from Uzbek suppliers under strict conditions. Their approach is to re-engage gradually – for instance, starting with limited orders or sourcing via intermediaries – and only once suppliers are verified as compliant (through reputable audits or certifications). Many brands prefer to act within multi-stakeholder frameworks (such as BCI or other collaborative initiatives) which provide added oversight. Some brands have offered guidance or training to potential Uzbek suppliers to help them meet requirements. Ultimately, however, Western companies prioritize protecting their reputation: they require clear evidence of sustained compliance and credible monitoring before scaling up sourcing. This cautious optimism ensures that any re-engagement happens with rigorous due diligence.

5. Discussion and Contributions

5.1 Discussion of Findings

Our evidence shows that lifting a boycott does not guarantee immediate re-legitimation or prompt restoration of market ties (cf. Lotfi & Walker, 2024). Even though Uzbekistan ended state-imposed forced labour—a key grievance prompting the boycott—firms still face socio-economic, institutional, and market-related barriers (Section 4.1). These constraints create a “legitimacy vacuum”, in which formal compliance (eliminating forced labour) coexists with lingering suspicion among Western buyers.

As Section 4.2 demonstrates, diverse stakeholders propose strategies to fill this vacuum, including third-party certifications, multi-stakeholder oversight, and capacity-building initiatives. NGOs emphasize continuous independent monitoring to deter any resurgence of forced labour; Uzbek government representatives highlight updated laws aligned with ILO standards; and local firms invest in technology and training to meet Western quality and compliance expectations (Huq & Stevenson, 2020). Meanwhile, Western brands exercise caution: they require verifiable evidence of sustained reforms before scaling up orders, reflecting ongoing reputational concerns (Shalpegin et al., 2025).

Critically, our findings reveal unintended consequences associated with private governance campaigns, reinforcing the need for follow-up remediation (Umpulla & Dummett 2024). Although the boycott succeeded in eradicating forced labour, it also inflicted economic penalties on many Uzbek workers and firms during the prolonged exclusion (Shalpegin et al., 2025). This aligns with broader concerns that large-scale sanctions can marginalize producers who lacked control over the initial violations. In the Uzbek case, the industry could have remained ostracized despite reforms, had stakeholders not proactively pursued reintegration efforts. Thus, simply declaring victory at the end of a boycott is insufficient: private regulatory interventions must incorporate a coherent “exit strategy” to prevent long-term exclusion.

Collectively, these findings suggest that post-boycott transitions demand sustained institutional work, rather than a passive assumption that market forces will reward ethical reforms (LeBaron, 2021). Indeed, bridging entrenched governance gaps and overcoming reputational deficits requires a deliberate process of legitimacy repair (Figure 1). In line with stakeholder theory, we also observe a shift from adversarial to collaborative dynamics (Figure 2) as NGOs, brands, government agencies, and producers increasingly converge on the goal of stabilizing labour standards while rebuilding commercial ties. However, these partnerships remain fragile without coordinated oversight and transparent accountability.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

Our study extends institutional theory by examining post-sanction institutional recovery, which is less explored than initial legitimation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). We highlight a process of legitimacy repair, wherein industries must regain credibility after suffering significant reputational damage tied to unethical practices. In Uzbekistan’s case, this entails a strategic adoption of recognized certifications, standards, and practices—what we term remedial isomorphism—designed to distance the cotton/textile sector from its past reliance on forced labour. Unlike classic isomorphic change driven by competitive or professional pressures, remedial isomorphism emerges after external coercion (the boycott) is lifted, spurring renewed efforts to align with international norms and reclaim global market access.

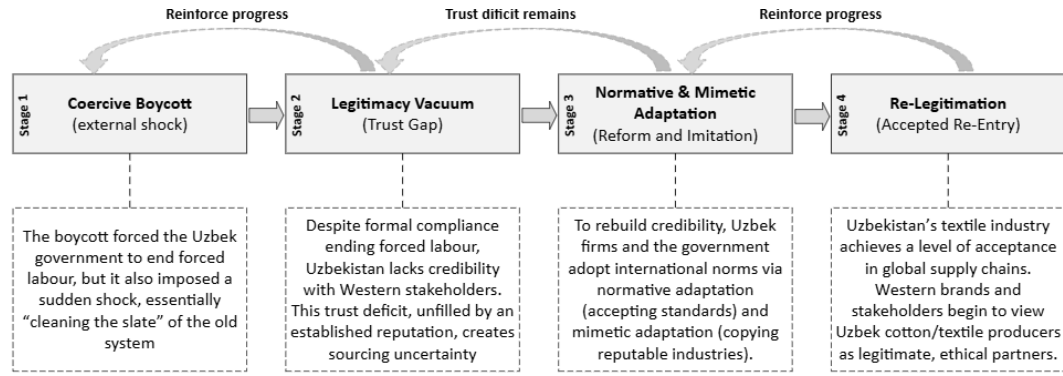


Figure 1. Conceptual model of legitimacy repair in a post-boycott context.

Furthermore, our analysis underscores the temporal dimension of institutional change. While the boycott yielded rapid formal compliance (e.g., banning forced labour), embedding deeper behavioural, managerial, and cultural reforms has proceeded more slowly. Consequently, institutional work must persist beyond the coercive phase to embed novel norms and practices, especially where local civil society remains weak or unevenly integrated into governance (Huq et al., 2014; Nath et al., 2023). This finding enriches current research by illuminating the precarious “afterlife” of external sanctions, where the absence of a strong enforcement mechanism can jeopardize long-term legitimacy gains. We also advance stakeholder theory by illustrating how adversarial coalitions can evolve into collaborative networks once a critical goal (abolishing forced labour) is achieved. Former opponents—NGOs, government authorities, and global brands—may share overlapping interests in maintaining reputational safeguards and stable sourcing relationships. This dynamic reconfiguration of stakeholder salience (Freeman, 1984; Parmar et al., 2010) suggests that post-conflict phases can foster meaningful cooperation, provided that monitoring structures remain robust.

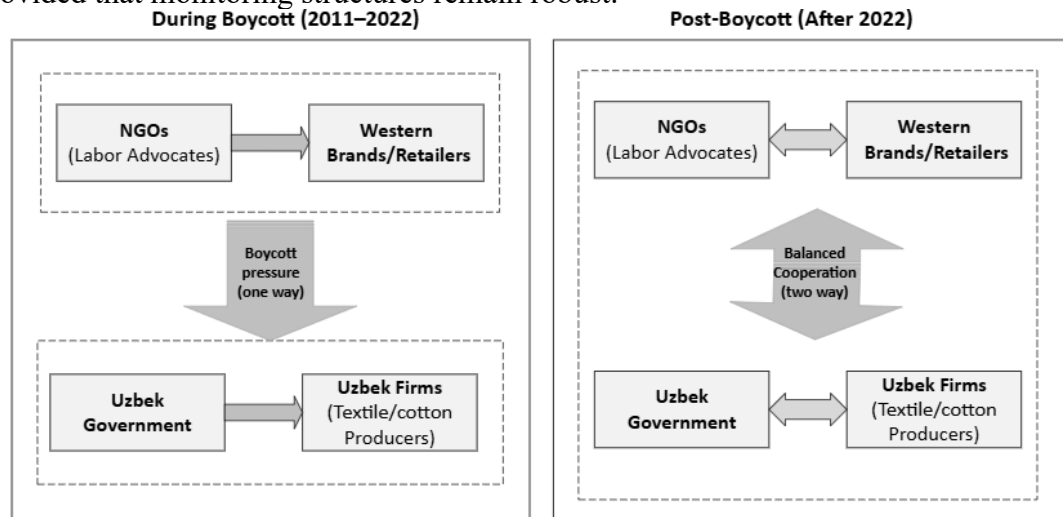


Figure 3. Stakeholder influence map during and after the boycott.

5.3 Managerial and Policy Implications

A pivotal insight for managers, policymakers, and NGOs is that boycott exit strategies must be systematically planned. Simply declaring victory over forced labour leaves a gap in oversight, trust, and shared guidance (Shalpegin et al., 2025). To mitigate this, stakeholders can develop clear “off-ramp” frameworks, defining phased milestones—

such as validated certifications, consistent third-party audits, and evidence of worker empowerment—that trigger progressive loosening of sourcing restrictions.

Who implements these off-ramps? Government bodies can offer financial incentives for meeting global standards, while international NGOs provide capacity-building for local unions, NGOs and oversight expertise (Anner, 2019). Brands and industry coalitions can detail transparent criteria for re-engagement, assuring suppliers that meeting certain benchmarks leads to tangible commercial opportunities.

When and how to roll them out? An internationally recognized organization (e.g., ILO or a similar body) could lead early audits and publicly certify improvements, enabling buyers to re-enter with reduced reputational risk. Over time, a multi-stakeholder platform—comprising government, producers, civil society, and global brands—would maintain ongoing governance and reduce the likelihood of backsliding (Nath et al., 2019). In short, legitimacy repair requires sustained coordination, transcending the immediate removal of external coercion. Without an orchestrated off-ramp, even a successful boycott can perpetuate commercial exclusion and undermine the very labour rights it aimed to protect. By designing robust pathways for reintegration, stakeholders can ensure that once-marginalized suppliers genuinely re-legitimize and align with international ethical standards.

6. Conclusion

Uzbekistan’s post-boycott journey illustrates a broader lesson for sustainable supply chain management: ending an abusive practice via external pressure is only step one, and what follows is equally critical. The 11-year cotton boycott succeeded in catalysing the elimination of forced labour, but our study shows that true reintegration into global markets requires rebuilding trust and legitimacy through sustained effort. By examining the barriers (skills, institutional, reputational) and stakeholder-led solutions to overcome them, our study underscores the need for deliberate legitimacy repair and remedial isomorphism after such a boycott. The Uzbekistan case provides a cautiously optimistic example that with commitment from all sides and robust oversight, a formerly shunned supplier can re-enter global supply chains responsibly. The insights from this case offer valuable guidance for managing similar post-sanction transitions in other contexts, emphasizing transparency, collaboration, and a structured path to regain credibility in the pursuit of ethical, inclusive globalization.

Finally, we note some limitations of this research and avenues for future inquiry. This study focused on a single-country case with unique historical and socio-political conditions; thus, while many insights are conceptually relevant, outcomes may differ in other contexts (e.g. different industries or countries coming off sanctions). Comparative studies could examine other post-boycott scenarios to see if similar barriers and enabling factors arise, or if different strategies are needed. A longitudinal study of Uzbekistan’s reintegration over the next several years would also be valuable to assess which recommendations prove most effective: for example, tracking whether Western brands significantly increase sourcing from Uzbekistan, and whether labour standards continue to be upheld or improve further as engagement grows. Such research would contribute to the broader understanding of how global supply chains can responsibly reconnect with a supplier country after a period of exclusion, and how lasting institutional change can be achieved in the wake of private regulatory interventions.

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