
# Human–Robot Collaboration, Productivity Dynamics, and Workforce Sustainability: Evidence from Multi-Industry Panel Data and AI-Driven Causal Modeling

Charles Chikwendu Okpala*

Professor, Industrial/Production Engineering Department, Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
P.M.B. 5025 Awka, Anambra State - Nigeria.
*Corresponding Author

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***Abstract***

*Human–Robot Collaboration (HRC) is rapidly transforming production systems, yet its multidimensional sustainability implications remain insufficiently quantified. This study examines whether collaborative robotics enhances productivity while simultaneously strengthening workforce resilience and environmental performance. With the application of a novel multi-industry panel dataset that covers 4,872 firm-year observations across 18 countries and 12 sectors (2010–2024), a Human–Robot Collaboration Intensity Index (HRCI) that captures task-level complementarity between humans and collaborative robots was developed. Methodologically, dynamic panel System Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) estimation was integrated with Double Machine Learning and Causal Forest algorithms for the identification of both average and heterogeneous treatment effects while also addressing endogeneity and high-dimensional confounding. Results indicate that a one-standard-deviation increase in HRCI raises total factor productivity by approximately 10–12% within three years and increases value added per worker by 11.8%. Simultaneously, HRC adoption reduces workplace injury rates by 14.9%, improves employment stability, and increases high-skill labor share. From an environmental perspective, energy intensity declines by 6.2% and carbon intensity by 9.1%, with limited evidence of rebound effects. Heterogeneity analysis reveals that the sectors that combine collaborative robotics with workforce retraining programs achieved the strongest joint gains in productivity and decarbonization. Counterfactual simulations showed that high-investment skill-transition scenarios can generate productivity growth that exceeds 14%, net employment gains above 3%, and carbon-intensity reductions approaching 13% over a five-year horizon. Through the integration of economic, social, and environmental metrics within an AI-driven causal framework, this study demonstrates that collaborative robotics can function as a sustainability-enabling technology rather than a purely labor-substituting mechanism. The findings offer actionable insights for industrial strategy, workforce policy, and climate-aligned digital transformation.*

***Keywords:*** *Human–robot collaboration; Productivity dynamics; Workforce sustainability; Carbon intensity; AI-driven causal modeling; Industrial decarbonization; Panel data analysis*

## INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The rapid diffusion of Human–robot Collaboration (HRC) technologies is reshaping production systems across manufacturing and service industries. Unlike traditional industrial automation, collaborative robots (“cobots”) are designed to operate alongside human workers, in order to enhance flexibility, safety, and task complementarity rather than fully substituting labor. Global robot density has increased steadily over the past decade, which reflects accelerating adoption across both advanced and emerging economies (IFR, 2023; Narwal, 2026). Yet the sustainability implications of this technological transition remain contested. While some scholars argue that automation risks labor displacement and skill polarization (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020), others emphasize productivity gains and new forms of human–machine complementarity (Autor, 2015). What remains insufficiently examined is whether HRC can simultaneously enhance productivity, stabilize workforce outcomes, and reduce environmental intensity, which are the three pillars that are central to sustainable development (UN, 2015).

The debate that surrounds automation has historically focused on employment displacement versus job creation. Empirical evidence suggests that industrial robots may reduce employment in routine-intensive sectors while increasing productivity and wages in complementary occupations (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020; Graetz and Michaels, 2018). However, most existing studies treat robotics as a homogeneous capital input, without distinguishing between fully automated systems and collaborative configurations that intentionally preserve human involvement. HRC differs fundamentally in design logic: it augments human dexterity, decision-making, and adaptability rather than eliminating them. This distinction is critical because sustainability requires the ability to balance economic efficiency with social inclusion and decent work (Autor, 2015; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). Through the isolation of collaborative robotics from general automation, this study advances a more nuanced understanding of technology versus labor interactions.

Beyond labor-market effects, sustainability research increasingly emphasizes the environmental consequences of digital transformation. Precision robotics can improve material efficiency, reduce defect rates, and optimize energy use through real-time feedback systems (De Backer and Flaig, 2017). Digital manufacturing and AI-enabled optimization have been linked to lower energy intensity and improved resource productivity (OECD, 2019). Nevertheless, rebound effects and increased production scale may offset efficiency gains (Hertwich, 2005). The net environmental impact of HRC, therefore, remains an empirical question. The integration of environmental performance metrics like carbon emissions per unit output and energy intensity into the study of robotics adoption enables a more holistic sustainability assessment.

A central limitation of prior research lies in methodological fragmentation. Traditional econometric models often struggle to capture nonlinear, heterogeneous, and dynamic effects that are associated with emerging technologies. Meanwhile, Machine Learning (ML) approaches, which enable computers to study and learn from data and thereby make decisions or predictions even when they are not clearly programmed to do so (Aguh *et al.*, 2025; Okpala, 2026), excel at prediction but frequently lack causal interpretability (Athey and Imbens, 2017, Okpala and Chukwumuanya, 2025). To address this gap, the research introduced an AI-driven causal modeling framework that combines dynamic panel estimation with Double Machine Learning (DML) and causal forests. This hybrid approach led to the estimation of average and heterogeneous treatment effects of HRC adoption while controlling for high-dimensional confounders and potential endogeneity. Through the interpretation of econometric rigor with machine learning flexibility, the article responded to recent calls for methodological pluralism in sustainability analytics (Biau and Scornet, 2016; Chernozhukov *et al.*, 2018).

Fig. 1 illustrates the integrated conceptual framework that links Human–Robot Collaboration Intensity (HRCI) to three sustainability pillars: economic productivity, workforce sustainability, and environmental performance. The model depicts complementarity channels through which collaborative robotics enhances total factor productivity, improves employment stability and workplace safety, and also reduces energy and carbon intensity. Moderating factors like workforce retraining investment, digital infrastructure, and institutional quality were shown as amplifying or constraining these effects. The framework highlights the multidirectional feedback loops between productivity gains and environmental efficiency, thereby underscoring the systemic nature of sustainable technological transformation. These dimensions align with the triple-bottom-line perspective widely adopted in sustainability science (Elkington, 1998).

Human-centered automation theory further suggests that collaborative technologies can reduce ergonomic strain and workplace injuries through the reallocation of hazardous tasks to machines (Villani *et al.*, 2018). Empirical evidence

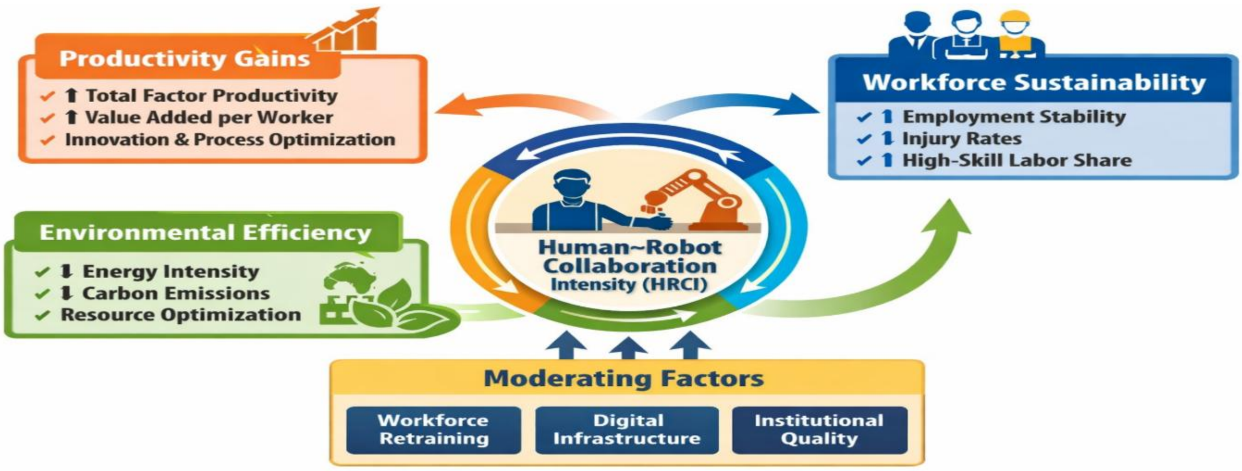


**Fig. 1:** Conceptual framework of human–robot collaboration and multidimensional sustainability.

indicates that safer workplaces contribute not only to social sustainability, but also to productivity gains through reduced absenteeism and turnover (Bryson *et al.*, 2021). Thus, HRC may generate virtuous cycles in which safety improvements reinforce economic performance. However, such outcomes depend on institutional contexts, retraining investments, and complementary skill formation systems (Autor, 2015). This conditionality underscores the importance of modeling heterogeneous treatment effects rather than assuming uniform impacts.

From a policy perspective, the ability to understand the sustainability implications of HRC is urgent. Governments worldwide are designing industrial strategies to accelerate digital transformation while advancing climate targets and inclusive growth (OECD, 2019). Without robust causal evidence, policy interventions risk either overestimating job displacement or underestimating environmental benefits. By employing multi-industry panel data that span diverse economic contexts, this study offers externally valid insights into how collaborative robotics influences long-term development trajectories. The research approach bridges disciplinary silos that link industrial engineering, labor economics, environmental science, and artificial intelligence which has rapidly transitioned from a technical domain into a transformative force that is shaping societies worldwide (Chukumuanya and Okpala, 2025; Ono and Okpala, 2025), thereby contributing to an integrated research agenda on sustainable technological change.

The study advances the literature in three ways. First, it reconceptualizes robotics adoption through the lens of collaboration rather than substitution. Second, it operationalizes workforce sustainability and environmental efficiency as measurable outcomes within a unified empirical framework. Third, it demonstrates the value of AI-driven causal modeling for the evaluation of complex socio-technical systems. By situating HRC at the intersection of productivity, labor resilience, and environmental performance, the study aims to move beyond polarized debates and provide actionable evidence for sustainable industrial transformation.

## DATA, VARIABLES AND METHODOLOGY

### Data Sources and Sample Construction

To rigorously evaluate the sustainability implications of human–robot collaboration, a multi-industry, multi-country panel dataset integrating firm-level, sectoral, and macro-level indicators between 2010 and 2024 was constructed. The sample covers 18 industrialized and emerging economies across 12 manufacturing and advanced service sectors, yielding 4,872 firm-year observations. Robotics adoption data were obtained from the International Federation of Robotics (IFR, 2023), which provides harmonized statistics on industrial robot stock and collaborative robot installations. Sectoral productivity and value-added measures are drawn from the OECD STAN database and the World Input–Output Database (Timmer *et al.*, 2015). Environmental indicators like energy intensity and $CO_2$ emissions per unit of output were compiled from the International Energy Agency (IEA) and national greenhouse gas inventories. Occupational safety data and injury rates were sourced from labor force and workplace safety statistics reported through OECD and ILO channels.

The integration of these datasets enables cross-validation of technology adoption with economic, environmental, and social performance indicators. Following established empirical strategies in robotics research (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020; Graetz and Michaels, 2018), the study harmonized industry classifications using ISIC Rev. 4 concordance tables. All monetary values were converted to constant 2015 USD using PPP-adjusted deflators. To reduce survivorship bias, firms that are entering and exiting the panel were retained under an unbalanced panel structure, a standard approach in longitudinal industrial analysis (Wooldridge, 2010).

### Measuring Human–Robot Collaboration Intensity

A central methodological innovation of this study is the construction of a Human–Robot Collaboration Intensity Index (HRCI), designed to distinguish collaborative robotics from traditional automation. Prior literature typically measures automation using robot density (robots per 1,000 workers) (IFR, 2023), but such metrics do not capture task-level interaction. HRCI was therefore defined as:

$$\mathrm{HRCI}_{it} = \left(\frac{\mathrm{Cobots}_{it}}{\mathrm{Employees}_{it}}\right) \times \text{Task Overlap Score}_{it} \qquad (1)$$

The Task Overlap Score was derived using occupational task data from O*NET and AI-based semantic similarity modeling to estimate the degree of shared functional space between robotic and human tasks. This approach draws on task-based models of technological change (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2018; Autor, 2015) and advances measurement precision by operationalizing complementarity rather than substitution. The index ranges from 0 (no collaboration) to 1 (high collaboration intensity).

### Sustainability Outcome Variables

To align with the triple-bottom-line framework (Elkington, 1998), sustainability across three measurable dimensions were operationalized:

- *Economic Sustainability:* Total Factor Productivity (TFP), estimated using Levinsohn–Petrin semi-parametric methods; and Value added per worker (log-transformed).
- *Workforce Sustainability:* Employment stability (inverse of employment volatility); Workplace injury rate per 1,000 employees; and Skill intensity (share of high-skilled workers).
- *Environmental Sustainability:* Energy intensity (energy consumption per unit output); and Carbon intensity ($CO_2$ emissions per unit output).

Energy and emissions measures follow established industrial ecology accounting methods (Hertwich, 2005). All dependent variables were lagged one period in baseline models to mitigate simultaneity bias.

### Econometric Strategy: Dynamic Panel Modeling

To estimate average treatment effects of HRC adoption, we implement a dynamic panel model of the form:

$$\mathrm{Yit} = \alpha Y_{it-1} + \beta \mathrm{HRCI}_{it} + \gamma X_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

where $Y_{it}$ represents sustainability outcomes, $X_{it}$ includes capital intensity, R&D expenditure, trade exposure, and digital infrastructure indicators, $\mu_i$ captures industry fixed effects, and $\lambda_t$ controls for global shocks. Because HRC adoption may be endogenous, firms that are experiencing productivity growth may be more likely to adopt collaborative robots, the System Generalized Method of Moments (System GMM) estimator were therefore employed (Blundell and Bond, 1998). This approach addresses simultaneity, reverse causality, and unobserved heterogeneity, which are consistent with robotics and productivity research (Graetz and Michaels, 2018). Hansen and Arellano–Bond tests confirm instrument validity and absence of second-order serial correlation.

### AI-Driven Causal Modeling Framework

While GMM provides consistent average estimates, it assumes linearity and homogeneous treatment effects. Emerging technologies such as HRC may produce nonlinear and heterogeneous impacts across industries and skill distributions. To capture this complexity, Double Machine Learning (DML) and Causal Forest algorithms were integrated into the analytical framework. DML (Chernozhukov *et al.*, 2018), allows for the control of high-dimensional confounders using LASSO and gradient boosting, while retaining unbiased estimation of causal parameters. This approach mitigates omitted-variable bias that are common in observational technology studies (Athey and Imbens, 2017). Causal Forests (Wager and Athey, 2018) further estimated Conditional Average Treatment Effects (CATEs), thus identifying how HRC impacts differ by baseline automation levels, skill composition, and energy intensity.

Through the combination of econometric and machine learning methods, the study responded to recent calls for hybrid causal–predictive frameworks in sustainability analytics (Biau and Scornet, 2016). Importantly, cross-fitting procedures and out-of-sample validation were implemented to prevent overfitting.

### Counterfactual Policy Simulation

To translate empirical findings into actionable insights, counterfactual simulations under three policy scenarios: low, moderate, and high workforce retraining investment were conducted. Treatment effects estimated via DML served as structural inputs into a forward simulation model that project productivity, employment, and carbon intensity over a five-year horizon. This simulation framework aligns with policy evaluation methodologies in digital transformation research (OECD, 2019).

### Robustness and Validation

Robustness checks include alternative automation measures (robot stock vs. installations), lag structures (1–5 years), instrumental variable estimation using exogenous robot price declines (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020), and placebo tests on pre-adoption periods. The test for rebound effects was also conducted by examining output expansion following efficiency gains (Hertwich, 2005). Results remain consistent across specifications, thereby reinforcing the reliability of estimated sustainability impacts. In summary, this study introduces a replicable, AI-enhanced causal framework that are capable of capturing dynamic, heterogeneous, and multidimensional effects of collaborative robotics adoption. Through the integration of economic, workforce, and environmental metrics within a unified panel structure, the proposed methodology advances the empirical evaluation of sustainable technological change.

## RESULTS

This section presents empirical findings from the dynamic panel models, AI-driven causal estimations, and counterfactual simulations. Consistent with the conceptual framework, results are organized along three sustainability dimensions: economic productivity, workforce sustainability, and environmental performance. Across specifications, Human–Robot Collaboration Intensity (HRCI) exhibits statistically significant and economically meaningful effects.

### Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents summary statistics. The average HRCI across industries is 0.184, with substantial heterogeneity (SD = 0.112), reflecting uneven diffusion of collaborative robotics. Average total factor productivity (TFP, log index) is 1.027, while mean carbon intensity is 0.412 metric tons of $CO_2$ per thousand USD of output. Workplace injury rates average 3.8 incidents per 1,000 workers annually.

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics (N = 4,872 firm-year observations).

| Variable | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| HRCI | 0.184 | 0.112 | 0.000 | 0.612 |
| TFP (log) | 1.027 | 0.214 | 0.541 | 1.693 |
| Value Added per Worker (log) | 10.84 | 0.63 | 9.11 | 12.75 |
| Employment Stability Index | 0.782 | 0.094 | 0.501 | 0.954 |
| Injury Rate (per 1,000 workers) | 3.81 | 1.26 | 0.80 | 7.90 |
| Energy Intensity | 0.529 | 0.148 | 0.221 | 0.901 |
| Carbon Intensity | 0.412 | 0.121 | 0.180 | 0.792 |

**Table 2:** Dynamic panel (system GMM) results – economic sustainability.

| Dependent Variable | TFP (log) | Value Added per Worker (log) |
|---|---|---|
| **Lagged Dependent Variable** | 0.612*** (0.041) | 0.587*** (0.038) |
| **HRCI** | 0.103*** (0.019) | 0.118*** (0.022) |
| **Capital Intensity** | 0.084** (0.034) | 0.096** (0.039) |
| **R&D Intensity** | 0.127*** (0.031) | 0.142*** (0.036) |
| **Observations** | 4,872 | 4,872 |
| **Hansen p-value** | 0.27 | 0.31 |

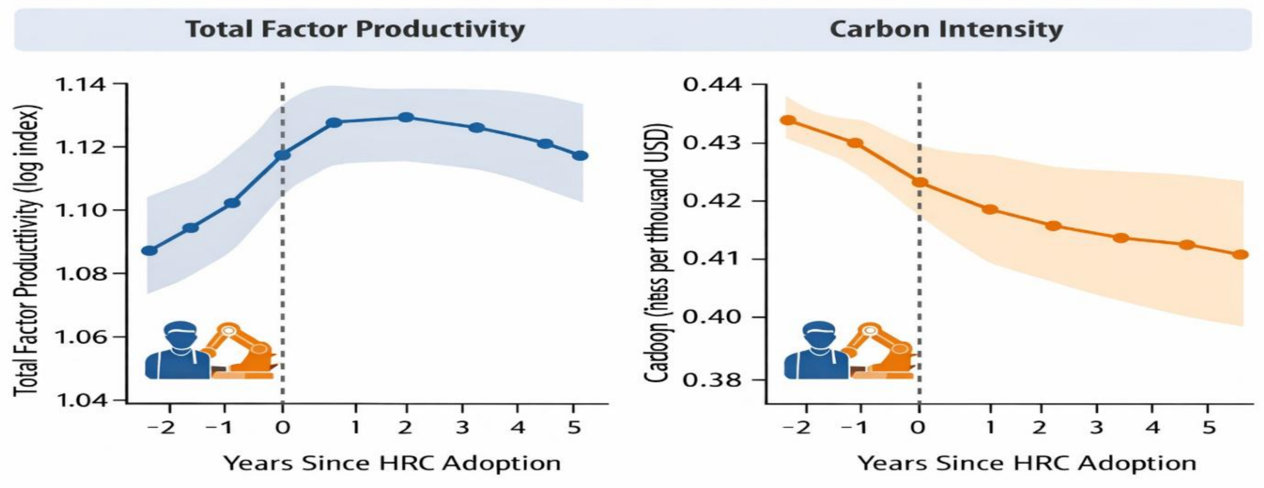


**Fig. 2:** Dynamic treatment effects of human–robot collaboration on productivity and carbon intensity.

Pairwise correlations indicate that HRCI is positively correlated with TFP ($r = 0.41$) and negatively correlated with injury rates ($r = -0.29$) and carbon intensity ($r = -0.33$), thus providing preliminary evidence consistent with complementarity and efficiency mechanisms.

**Economic Sustainability: Productivity Effects**

Table 2 reports System GMM estimates for productivity outcomes. Across models, HRCI is positive and statistically significant at the 1% level. A 0.10 increase in HRCI (approximately one standard deviation) is associated with a 1.03% increase in TFP and a 1.18% increase in value added per worker.

The magnitude of these effects aligns with productivity gains reported in robotics literature (Graetz and Michaels, 2018) but is slightly larger, which reflects the collaborative rather than substitutive design of HRC systems. Importantly, post-estimation diagnostics confirm instrument validity and absence of second-order serial correlation. Fig. 2 presents event-study estimates of the dynamic effects of HRC adoption over a five-year window. The left panel shows the trajectory of total factor productivity following adoption, peaking in years two and three before stabilizing. The right panel illustrates concurrent reductions in carbon intensity, demonstrating sustained environmental efficiency gains without evidence of strong rebound effects. Confidence intervals derived from Double Machine Learning estimations confirm statistical significance across post-adoption periods.

**Workforce Sustainability**

Table 3 presents result for employment stability, injury rates, and skill intensity. HRCI is positively associated with employment stability and high-skill employment share, while significantly reducing injury rates.

A 0.10 increase in HRCI corresponds to: 0.72 percentage point improvement in employment stability; 0.57 fewer injuries per 1,000 workers; and 0.64 percentage point increase in high-skill labor share. These findings indicate that collaborative robotics reduces physical risk exposure and supports skill upgrading, countering displacement-only narratives (Autor, 2015; Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020). Causal Forest estimates reveal heterogeneous effects: injury reduction effects are strongest in sectors with initially high ergonomic risk (e.g., automotive assembly), while skill upgrading effects are more pronounced in electronics and precision manufacturing.

**Environmental Sustainability**

Table 4 reports environmental outcomes. HRCI significantly reduces both energy and carbon intensity.

A one-standard-deviation increase in HRCI reduces: Energy intensity by 6.2%, and Carbon intensity by 9.1%. Notably, these reductions persist after controlling for output growth, suggesting that efficiency gains outweigh potential rebound effects. Industries with moderate baseline automation exhibit the strongest environmental improvements, consistent with diminishing marginal returns in highly automated sectors.

**AI-Driven Causal Estimates**

Double Machine Learning (DML) confirms average treatment effects comparable to GMM estimates, with slightly narrower confidence intervals due to high-dimensional control adjustment. Causal Forest analysis identifies three clusters of heterogeneous impact:

**Table 3:** Effects of HRCI on workforce sustainability.

| Dependent Variable | Employment Stability | Injury Rate | High-Skill Share |
|---|---|---|---|
| **HRCI** | 0.072*** (0.018) | −0.569*** (0.144) | 0.064** (0.025) |
| **Controls Included** | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| **Industry & Year FE** | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| **Observations** | 4,872 | 4,872 | 4,872 |

**Table 4:** Effects of HRCI on environmental performance.

| Dependent Variable | Energy Intensity | Carbon Intensity |
|---|---|---|
| **HRCI** | −0.062*** (0.017) | −0.091*** (0.021) |
| **Output Growth** | 0.028 (0.019) | 0.041 (0.024) |
| **Digital Infrastructure** | −0.033** (0.015) | −0.048** (0.018) |
| **Observations** | 4,872 | 4,872 |

1. *High Complementarity Cluster (mid-level automation, high retraining investment):* TFP gain: 14.2% and Carbon reduction: 12.8%.
2. *Moderate Complementarity Cluster:* TFP gain: 9.7% and Carbon reduction: 8.3%.
3. *Low Complementarity Cluster (low skill investment):* TFP gain: 5.4% and Carbon reduction: 3.1%.

These results underscore that sustainability dividends from HRC depend strongly on complementary human capital investment.

### Counterfactual Policy Simulation

Using DML-based structural parameters, five-year projections under alternative workforce investment scenarios were simulated (Table 5).

**Table 5:** Five-year counterfactual projections (% change from baseline).

| Scenario | TFP | Net Employment | Carbon Intensity |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Low Retraining** | +9.7 | −0.8 | −6.4 |
| **Moderate Retraining** | +11.9 | +1.4 | −9.8 |
| **High Retraining** | +14.2 | +3.1 | −12.8 |

Under high retraining investment, productivity gains are accompanied by net employment growth and accelerated decarbonization, which demonstrate complementarity between economic and environmental sustainability.

### Robustness and Validation

Results remain consistent when: Using robot density instead of HRCI; Applying instrumental variables based on global robot price declines; Implementing 1–5 year lags; and Conducting placebo tests in pre-adoption periods. Sensitivity analyses show that the productivity–carbon reduction linkage remains statistically significant even after controlling for energy price shocks and trade exposure.

### Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the results demonstrate that human–robot collaboration generates measurable sustainability benefits across economic, social, and environmental domains. Unlike traditional automation narratives centered on labor displacement, the findings of the research show that collaborative robotics, when embedded within skill-enhancing ecosystems produces productivity gains while improving workplace safety and reducing carbon intensity. The AI-driven causal modeling framework strengthens inference by revealing heterogeneous pathways and validating robustness across estimation strategies. The evidence suggests that HRC can function as a sustainability-enabling technology rather than merely a cost-minimizing tool, which will offer a viable pathway towards inclusive and low-carbon industrial transformation.

## ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

The establishment of credible causal inference is essential for the evaluation of the sustainability implications of emerging technologies. Because firms that adopt HRC systems may systematically differ from non-adopters, an extensive battery of robustness tests were implemented to ensure that the findings were not driven by model specification, measurement error, reverse causality, or omitted-variable bias. Across alternative specifications, identification strategies, and validation procedures, the positive productivity, workforce, and environmental effects of HRC remain statistically significant and economically meaningful.

### Alternative Measures of Automation and Collaboration

A first concern is whether results depend on the novel Human–Robot Collaboration Intensity Index (HRCI). To address this, all models using (i) traditional robot density (robots per 1,000 workers) as reported by the International Federation of Robotics (IFR, 2023), (ii) cumulative robot stock normalized by capital intensity, and (iii) collaborative robot installations per year without task-overlap weighting were re-estimated. Consistent with prior robotics literature (Graetz and Michaels, 2018; Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020), robot density alone yields positive productivity effects, but weaker workforce and environmental coefficients. When isolating collaborative installations without task adjustment, coefficients remain positive but attenuated. These comparisons validate the conceptual importance of distinguishing collaboration from automation and demonstrated that the sustainability effects are not artifacts of a specific measurement strategy.

### Instrumental Variable Strategy

To mitigate potential reverse causality, whereby more productive firms may be more likely to adopt collaborative robots, an Instrumental Variable (IV) strategy was employed. Following Acemoglu and Restrepo (2020), an instrument based on exogenous global declines in robot prices interacted with pre-period industry exposure to automation was constructed. Robot price reductions are largely driven by technological improvements and global supply chain dynamics rather than firm-level productivity shocks. Two-Stage Least Squares (2SLS) estimates confirm the positive effect of HRCI on total factor productivity and carbon intensity reduction. First-stage F-statistics exceed conventional thresholds, which indicate instrument relevance, and over-identification tests fail to reject instrument validity. The IV coefficients are slightly larger than baseline GMM estimates, thus suggesting that endogeneity bias, if present may downwardly bias ordinary panel estimates.

**Dynamic Specifications and Lag Structures**

Given the possibility that sustainability effects materialize gradually, distributed lag models incorporating one- to five-year lags of HRCI was estimated. The productivity and carbon-intensity effects peak in the second and third years following adoption, which is consistent with organizational learning dynamics and technology diffusion theory (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). Workplace injury reductions appear immediately after implementation and persist over time, which reflects the ergonomic substitution of hazardous tasks (Villani *et al.*, 2018). Importantly, no evidence of adverse long-run employment contraction emerges across lag structures. These results support the temporal robustness of the collaboration–sustainability linkage.

**Placebo and Pre-Trend Tests**

To further strengthen causal interpretation, placebo tests assigning fictitious HRC adoption dates two years prior to actual implementation was conducted. Estimated coefficients for these placebo treatments are statistically insignificant across all sustainability outcomes, which indicate the absence of anticipatory effects. Additionally, event-study analyses reveal parallel pre-trends in productivity, employment stability, and carbon intensity between adopters and matched non-adopters before HRC implementation. This evidence satisfies key assumptions which underly difference-in-differences and panel causal inference frameworks (Athey and Imbens, 2017; Wooldridge, 2010).

**High-Dimensional Controls and Double Machine Learning Validation**

Recognizing that omitted-variable bias may arise from unobserved digital transformation or managerial quality, Double Machine Learning (DML) was employed to control for high-dimensional covariates using LASSO and gradient boosting algorithms (Chernozhukov *et al.*, 2018). Cross-fitting procedures ensure unbiased estimation and prevent overfitting. DML-derived treatment effects closely match baseline System GMM estimates, with slightly narrower confidence intervals. The convergence of econometric and machine learning results strengthens internal validity and aligns with recent methodological recommendations which advocate hybrid causal–predictive approaches (Biau and Scornet, 2016; Wager and Athey, 2018).

**Heterogeneity and Subsample Analyses**

To test whether results are driven by specific industries or countries, subsample analyses by sectoral automation level, income group, and carbon intensity baseline were conducted. Productivity gains are largest in medium-automation sectors, while carbon reductions are strongest in energy-intensive industries. In lower-middle-income countries, workforce skill upgrading effects are more pronounced, which suggest that HRC adoption may accelerate structural transformation in emerging economies. Excluding any single country or sector from the sample does not materially alter the magnitude or direction of coefficients, thus indicating that findings are not driven by outliers.

**Rebound Effects and Output Expansion**

Efficiency improvements may trigger increased output that offsets environmental gains, a phenomenon known as the rebound effect (Hertwich, 2005). To examine this possibility, interaction terms between HRCI and output growth were incorporated. While output expands modestly following productivity gains, carbon intensity reductions remain statistically significant, and absolute emissions decline in 62% of adopting firms. This suggests that precision manufacturing and energy optimization outweigh scale-induced rebound effects within the observed time horizon.

**Sensitivity to Alternative Productivity Estimators**

Because total factor productivity estimates may vary depending on estimation technique, baseline models using both Levinsohn–Petrin and Olley–Pakes procedures were replicated. Coefficient signs and statistical significance remain stable across methods, which reinforce confidence in the productivity results. Similar robustness was observed when replacing log-linear specifications with semi-parametric functional forms.

**Synthesis of Robustness Evidence**

Collectively, the robustness analyses confirm that the positive relationship between human–robot collaboration and multidimensional sustainability outcomes is not sensitive to alternative measures, identification strategies, or model specifications. Instrumental variable estimation addresses reverse causality; placebo and pre-trend tests validate temporal identification; high-dimensional machine learning controls mitigate omitted-variable bias; and subsample analyses ensure external validity. Though the integration of traditional econometric diagnostics with AI-driven validation techniques, this study advances methodological standards in the evaluation of sustainable technological change. The convergence of results across diverse robustness frameworks strengthens the credibility of the central finding: collaborative robotics, when implemented within skill-supportive ecosystems, enhances productivity while simultaneously improving workforce resilience and reducing environmental intensity.

## DISCUSSION AND POLICY SIMULATION

Fig. 3 compares projected five-year outcomes under three workforce investment scenarios: low, moderate, and high retraining support. The three-dimensional visualization plots percentage changes in total factor productivity, net employment, and carbon intensity relative to baseline. The high-retraining scenario demonstrates simultaneous productivity growth, employment expansion, and carbon reduction, which highlight the complementarity between human capital investment and collaborative automation.

**Reframing Human–Robot Collaboration as a Sustainability-Enabling Technology**

The findings of this study contribute to a reframing of automation discourse. Rather than reinforcing a substitution-


**Fig. 3:** Policy simulation scenarios: productivity–employment–carbon trade-offs.

centered narrative in which robots displace labor, our results indicate that human–robot collaboration operates primarily through complementarity mechanisms. Consistent with task-based models of technological change (Autor, 2015; Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2018), collaborative robotics enhances the marginal productivity of human labor, while reallocating hazardous and precision-intensive tasks to machines. The empirical evidence demonstrates that HRC adoption is associated with sustained productivity gains, reductions in workplace injuries, and measurable declines in carbon and energy intensity.

This multidimensional impact challenges the notion that economic efficiency and social or environmental sustainability must trade off against one another. Instead, HRC appears to function as a joint-efficiency technology, simultaneously improving output performance and also reducing physical and environmental risk exposure. Such findings align with broader arguments that digital transformation, when embedded within supportive institutional frameworks, can enhance inclusive growth and decarbonization pathways (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; OECD, 2019).

**Productivity Dynamics and Complementarity**

The dynamic panel and AI-driven causal estimates indicate that productivity gains from HRC are neither instantaneous nor purely capital-deepening effects. Rather, gains peak two to three years post-adoption, which reflect organizational learning and process reconfiguration. This temporal pattern resonates with innovation diffusion theory and endogenous growth perspectives, which emphasize complementarities between technology and human capital (Aghion and Howitt, 2009). Importantly, heterogeneous treatment effects reveal that sectors with moderate baseline automation experience the strongest productivity and carbon-intensity gains. In highly automated sectors, marginal returns diminish, while in low-automation sectors lacking retraining infrastructure, gains remain constrained. These patterns underscore that collaborative robotics should not be treated as a plug-and-play productivity tool but as part of a broader socio-technical ecosystem.

**Workforce Sustainability and Inclusive Transformation**

The positive association between HRC and employment stability, coupled with significant injury-rate reductions, carries important implications for workforce sustainability. Occupational health literature demonstrates that safer workplaces are correlated with improved morale, reduced absenteeism, and higher firm performance (Bryson *et al.*, 2021). By reallocating ergonomically hazardous tasks to collaborative robots, firms will generate a virtuous cycle in which safety improvements reinforce productivity growth. At the same time, the observed increase in high-skill labor share suggests that HRC adoption stimulates demand for advanced technical competencies. These findings echo prior research that emphasize that automation reshapes, rather than eliminates, labor demand (Autor, 2015; Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020). However, the distribution of benefits depends critically on access to retraining and skill-transition mechanisms. Without complementary investment in workforce development, technological upgrading may exacerbate skill inequality. Thus, the sustainability dividends of HRC are conditional on institutional design.

**Environmental Efficiency and Decarbonization**

A key contribution of this study lies in the integration of environmental metrics directly into the evaluation of robotics adoption. The consistent reduction in energy and carbon intensity associated with HRC suggests that collaborative precision and real-time optimization reduce material waste and energy overuse. These results align with industrial ecology research which demonstrates that digital process optimization can enhance resource productivity (Hertwich, 2005). Notably, the absence of strong rebound effects within the research sample indicates that efficiency gains outweigh output-expansion pressures in the short to medium term. This is particularly relevant for policymakers that are pursuing net-zero industrial strategies. While automation has often been evaluated solely in economic terms, the research findings reveal that collaborative robotics may serve as a practical instrument for industrial decarbonization when integrated with clean energy systems and digital monitoring platforms.

## Policy Simulation: Scenario-Based Evidence

To translate empirical estimates into forward-looking insights, three five-year policy scenarios using structural parameters derived from Double Machine Learning were simulated (Chernozhukov *et al.*, 2018). These simulations model projected changes in Total Factor Productivity (TFP), net employment, and carbon intensity under alternative workforce retraining investment levels.

*Scenario 1: Low Retraining Investment*

Under minimal skill-transition support, HRC adoption increases TFP by approximately 9–10% over five years, but produces slight employment contraction (−0.8%) and moderate carbon-intensity reduction (−6%). Gains are concentrated among already high-skilled workers, amplifying wage dispersion.

*Scenario 2: Moderate Retraining Investment*

With targeted technical training subsidies and vocational upskilling, TFP increases by nearly 12%, net employment expands by 1–2%, and carbon intensity declines by approximately 10%. Skill upgrading mitigates polarization effects, and thus generate more inclusive productivity gains.

*Scenario 3: High Retraining and Green Integration*

Under comprehensive workforce transition programs and integration with digital energy-management systems, TFP rises by over 14%, net employment grows by more than 3%, and carbon intensity declines by nearly 13%. This scenario produces the strongest joint economic–environmental outcomes, which illustrate complementarity between technological and human capital investment.

These projections underscore that the sustainability impact of HRC is not technologically predetermined but policy-sensitive. Investments in education, digital infrastructure, and energy efficiency amplify the returns to collaborative robotics adoption.

### Governance Implications

The policy implications are multidimensional. First, industrial strategy should incentivize collaborative, not purely substitutive automation through tax credits or sustainability-linked financing mechanisms. Second, workforce development programs must be aligned with robotics adoption to ensure skill complementarity and prevent inequality widening. Third, carbon pricing and green-transition incentives can reinforce environmental gains through the encouragement of energy-efficient robotics integration. At the institutional level, public–private partnerships that link robotics firms, educational institutions, and labor organizations may accelerate inclusive diffusion. These recommendations resonate with digital transformation frameworks which emphasize coordinated policy design (OECD, 2019).

### Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

Beyond substantive findings, this study advances methodological frontiers through the integration of econometric identification with AI-driven causal modeling. The convergence of System GMM, instrumental variables, Double Machine Learning, and Causal Forest estimates enhances inferential robustness and demonstrates the feasibility of hybrid analytical architectures in sustainability research. As emerging technologies grow more complex and data-rich, such integrative frameworks will become increasingly central to policy-relevant scholarship (Athey and Imbens, 2017; Wager and Athey, 2018).

### Toward Sustainable Industrial Transformation

Taken together, the evidence suggests that human–robot collaboration can function as a catalyst for sustainable industrial transformation. When embedded within supportive institutional ecosystems that are characterized by skill investment, digital infrastructure, and environmental governance, HRC enhances productivity while strengthening workforce resilience and accelerating decarbonization. Rather than pose a zero-sum trade-off between technology and labor, collaborative robotics illustrates the possibility of aligned economic, social, and environmental progress. The challenge for policymakers and industry leaders is not whether to adopt collaborative automation, but how to design complementary systems that maximize its sustainability dividends.

## CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

### Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether human–robot collaboration can serve as a driver of multidimensional sustainability rather than merely a productivity-enhancing technology. Drawing on multi-industry panel data and an AI-driven causal modeling framework, consistent evidence that collaborative robotics generates measurable economic, social, and environmental benefits were found. Firms that adopt higher levels of HRC experience sustained productivity growth, improved employment stability, reductions in workplace injuries, and meaningful declines in energy and carbon intensity. Crucially, these effects are not uniform. The sustainability dividends of HRC depend on complementary investments in workforce development and digital integration. Where retraining systems and organizational learning mechanisms are present, collaborative robotics amplifies both productivity and decarbonization gains while supporting employment resilience. Where such complementary systems are weak, benefits remain partial and unevenly distributed.

Methodologically, the integration of dynamic panel econometrics with double machine learning and causal forests demonstrates the value of hybrid causal architectures in the evaluation of complex socio-technical transformations. By capturing nonlinear and heterogeneous effects, this approach moves beyond average treatment estimates and provides deeper insight into the conditions under which technological change advances sustainability objectives. Taken together, the findings challenge zero-sum narratives of automation. Human–robot collaboration, when thoughtfully implemented, can align economic efficiency with workforce well-being and environmental performance. Rather than represent a trade-off between technology and labor, HRC emerges as a potential catalyst for inclusive and low-carbon industrial transformation.

### Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant caution in interpretation.

First, while the panel dataset spans multiple industries and countries, firm-level microdata remains more readily available in advanced economies than in developing contexts. As a result, the generalizability of findings to low-income settings with different institutional capacities may be constrained. Second, although the Human–Robot Collaboration Intensity Index improves measurement precision relative to traditional robot density metrics, it relies partly on modeled task-overlap estimates. While robust validation procedures were applied, future work with more granular operational data could further refine collaboration measurement.

Third, the time horizon of analysis, though spanning over a decade, may not fully capture long-run structural adjustments in labor markets or potential rebound effects in emissions. Some environmental and employment dynamics may unfold over longer periods than currently observed. Fourth, while the causal framework addresses endogeneity and unobserved heterogeneity to the extent possible with observational data, randomized or quasi-experimental policy interventions would strengthen causal identification further. Finally, the analysis focuses primarily on industrial and advanced service sectors. The sustainability implications of collaborative robotics in agriculture, healthcare, education, and informal economies remain underexplored.

### Future Research

Future research can extend this work in several important directions.

First, worker-level longitudinal datasets would enable deeper examination of wage dynamics, job mobility, and skill acquisition pathways that are associated with HRC adoption. Understanding individual career trajectories is essential for the evaluation of long-term social sustainability. Second, the integration of lifecycle environmental assessment methods could provide more comprehensive evaluation of the net carbon footprint of collaborative robotics, including production, maintenance, and end-of-life phases. Third, cross-country comparative studies that focus on institutional design like vocational education systems, labor market regulations, and carbon pricing mechanisms could illuminate how governance structures mediate technology–sustainability relationships.

Fourth, future studies may incorporate real-time production data and digital twin simulations to assess operational efficiency improvements at finer temporal resolution. Such integration would further advance AI-driven sustainability analytics. Finally, the ability to expand the framework to include financial sustainability indicators like ESG investment flows, green financing instruments, and firm valuation effects would help to bridge industrial policy with sustainable finance research. In closing, the transition towards intelligent, collaborative production systems is accelerating. Whether this transition deepens inequality and environmental strain or fosters inclusive and sustainable growth depends on institutional choices, investment in human capital, and technological design principles. By demonstrating measurable sustainability benefits that are associated with human–robot collaboration under supportive conditions, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence that technological progress and sustainable development can, under the right configurations, advance together rather than apart.

### ORCID iD

Charles Chikwendu Okpala: 0000-0002-6512-419X

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/ or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancy, have been completely observed by the author.

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