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Mapping Developing Countries' SMART Internationalisation Policy for Inward Foreign Direct Investment: A Scoping Review Protocol

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Abstract

This scoping review protocol aims to map SMART (Sustainable, Measurable, Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent) policies in the competition for inward foreign direct investment (IFDI), with an emphasis on emerging economies. According to the World Investment Report 2025, global FDI declined 11% to \$1.5 trillion in 2024, the second consecutive drop, amid rising rivalry, prompting governments to adopt SMART tools such as transparent incentives, e-government/one-stop services, digital monitoring, evidence-based regulations, and ESG compliance frameworks to attract capital and minimise risks. Drawing on fragmented evidence from public policy, international business, and development studies, this protocol examines the heterogeneous effects of FDI, shaped by institutional quality, governance, and regulation. The review supports a broader investigation into how institutions promote positive spillovers, including employment, wages, equity, health, education, sustainability, and R&D intensity, while addressing inequalities aligned with dependency theory. Adhering to the JBI methodology and PRISMA-ScR/PRISMA-S reporting guidelines, the review will search peer-reviewed and grey literature across Scopus, Web of Science, EconLit, UNCTAD, and OECD sources, without date limits, as of January 2026. The inclusion criteria focus on empirical/conceptual studies linking SMART policies to inward FDI and social outcomes. Data charting will include bibliographic details, definitions, institutional metrics, and impacts, with thematic synthesis, descriptive statistics, and bibliometric analysis via VOSviewer/Biblioshiny to uncover patterns and gaps. The study will be registered on OSF for transparency and quality assessment. The results will support the development of a conceptual framework for SMART FDI policies, provide policy recommendations to achieve sustainable gains in emerging markets, and identify research priorities.

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Keywords

SMART policy, inward FDI, developing countries, social outcomes, scoping review

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1. Introduction

This protocol outlines a systematic approach to address the following question: “What is known about SMART policies in the context of competition for inward FDI in emerging economies?” The competition for inward foreign direct investment (FDI) has intensified globally, as governments seek to attract capital amid a deepening slowdown in productive investment flows. According to the last World Investment Report (UNCTAD, 2025), global FDI fell by 11% in 2024, marking the second consecutive year of decline, with growth increasingly concentrated in the digital economy but uneven across regions, particularly in emerging markets (UNCTAD, 2025). This trend underscores the need for innovative policy approaches not only to increase investment inflows but also to ensure sustainable and inclusive outcomes.

In this context, Sustainable, Measurable, Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent (SMART) policies offer a framework for governance and sustainable development and have emerged as critical tools for attracting and managing FDI as they emphasise long-term viability, quantifiable metrics, accountability, adaptability, and transparency, aligning with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to address for example corruption (SDG 16 - Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and climate change (SDG 13: Climate Action) (United Nations, 2015, 2025). In practice, FDI attraction includes, for example, transparent incentives, e-government and one-stop services, digital monitoring systems, evidence-based regulations, and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) compliance frameworks (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022; UNCTAD, 2025), as promoted by the European Union’s Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD, 2022), the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI, 2023), or the Science-Based Targets Initiative (SBTi) (Science-Based Targets Initiative, nd) for Climate Action.

In emerging economies, the impacts of inward FDI are heterogeneous, often moderated by institutional quality, governance, and regulatory environments (Jude & Leveuge, 2017; Raza et al., 2021). Strong institutions, characterised by regulatory capacity, transparency, accountability, and enforcement of competition policies, can amplify positive spillovers, such as enhancements in employment, wages, labour standards, equity, health, education, sustainability, and research and development (R&D) intensity (Aloui et al., 2024; Mariotti and Marzano, 2021a, 2021b; Torres et al., 2016). As Cardoso (1972) highlights early, weak frameworks may exacerbate inequalities, as resource dependency theory suggests, postulating that FDI can perpetuate disparities in regions like Latin America without robust mediation (Cardoso, 1972). Later studies further illustrate the role of investment promotion agencies (IPAs) in leveraging targeted incentives (Harding & Javorcik, 2011; Torres et al., 2016), antitrust measures to ensure fair market access (Mariotti, 2023, 2025), and political factors, including regime changes that influence inflows (Dorobantu, 2010; Razin & Cieslik, 2024; Wilson, 1999). Among digitalisation trends, governance tools are essential for facilitating investment while addressing risks (UNCTAD, 2025).

Despite the importance of these insights, the consolidated evidence (law or scientific publications) on SMART policies for inward FDI remains fragmented across countries and disciplines, including public policy, international business, development studies, and digital governance. There is no unified synthesis of definitions, instruments (e.g., e-government platforms, ESG monitoring), implementation contexts, or social outcomes, which hinders effective policy design, particularly in emerging economies. Thus, a scoping review is well-suited to map this diverse landscape, identifying concepts, tools, gaps, and patterns without restricting to specific study designs (Peters et al., 2015).

The expected outcomes of this analysis encompass a robust conceptual framework for designing SMART FDI policies, i.e., strategic, measurable, aligned with national development priorities, realistic in implementation, and time-bound, that deliberately channel foreign direct investment toward sustainable and inclusive growth. This framework would integrate insights from established tools, such as the OECD’s FDI Qualities Policy Toolkit (OECD, 2022), which links investment promotion to broader domestic policies enhancing productivity, innovation, job quality, skills development, gender equality, and decarbonisation. By applying SMART principles, policymakers can move beyond generic attraction strategies to targeted reforms that maximise positive spillovers, such as technology transfer and digital infrastructure upgrades, while mitigating risks, including environmental degradation and the exacerbation of inequality. The work would also provide practical insights into securing long-term sustainable benefits from FDI amid accelerating digitalisation, including adapting promotion efforts to attract “digital FDI” (e.g., data centres, software firms), fostering asset-light models, bridging infrastructure gaps in the Global South, and aligning FDI with national digital economy strategies to support resilient, inclusive recovery and the green transition. Finally, it outlines forward-looking research agendas to address emerging gaps, including evaluating the interplay among regulatory dynamism, digital FDI flows, and SDG

outcomes; exploring host-country responses to Industry 4.0-driven investments; and investigating mechanisms to ensure the equitable distribution of benefits in an era of rapid technological change and evolving global value chains.

2. Methods

This scoping review will adhere to the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology (Peters et al., 2015, 2020). It will be reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018) and PRISMA extension for literature searches (PRISMA-S) (Rethlefsen et al., 2021). A scoping review is particularly appropriate for exploratory aims that seek to map fragmented evidence across diverse disciplines, as it provides a flexible framework for reconnaissance without the rigorous synthesis of efficacy or meta-analysis typical of systematic reviews.

According to the guidance outlined by Peters et al. (2015), this methodology fits in areas where the literature is heterogeneous, emerging, or not yet comprehensively reviewed, allowing researchers to clarify conceptual boundaries, identify key features such as the volume, nature, and distribution of studies, and highlight gaps in knowledge. Unlike systematic reviews, which focus on answering precise questions through critical appraisal and evidence integration, scoping reviews prioritise a broad overview, often incorporating quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method sources, to summarise findings graphically or descriptively, such as through charts or maps, without assessing methodological quality or drawing definitive conclusions on intervention effectiveness. Thus, such an approach adds value to studies in inter-disciplinary fields such as healthcare, where evidence may span multiple contexts, sources, or time periods, enabling the dissemination of preliminary insights and recommendations for targeted future research while avoiding premature narrowing that could overlook valuable reconnaissance opportunities (Rabiei et al., 2025).

The protocol was registered in the Open Science Framework (OSF) to promote transparency, reproducibility, increase methodological rigour, and avoid duplication. Here is the updated link (DOI: [<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/ZJNFR>]). This step, aligned with the established JBI guidance for systematic scoping reviews, publicly documents the review's objectives, research questions, inclusion criteria (encompassing population, concept, and context), search strategy, and planned approach to data charting and presentation.^{1,2}

2.1. Review Question

The primary review question is: "What is known about SMART (Sustainable, Measurable, Accountable, Responsive, Transparent) policies in the context of competition for inward foreign direct investment (FDI) in emerging economies, including definitions, instruments, institutional moderators, and social outcomes?"

The sub-questions include the following:

- How are SMART policies defined and operationalised in relation to inward FDI?
- What policy instruments (e.g., transparent incentives, e-government services, ESG frameworks) are associated with FDI attraction and social benefits to the host countries?
- How do institutional factors (e.g., governance quality, regulatory environments) moderate FDI impacts in host economies?
- What gaps exist in the literature regarding emerging economy contexts?

2.2. Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility will follow the JBI Population/Participants, Concept, Context (PCC) framework (Peters et al., 2020):

-
1. By making these details openly accessible before data extraction, registration facilitates external scrutiny, reduces the risk of *post hoc* modifications, and promotes accountability in the evidence synthesis process. Additionally, it helps prevent duplication of research efforts, as other investigators can readily identify ongoing or planned reviews in similar topic areas, thereby optimising resource allocation and contributing to a more efficient body of literature in emerging or heterogeneous fields.
 2. The [S3 Appendix](#) (Data Charting Form), which contains the complete data extraction template, covering bibliographic information, methodological approaches, SMART policy definitions, institutional indicators, social outcomes, and key findings, will be made available after the article is approved for publication, in accordance with peer review and journal policy requirements.

Participants/Population: Policymakers, investment promotion agencies (IPAs), multinational enterprises (MNEs), or populations in emerging economies affected by inward FDI (e.g., workers, communities). There are no restrictions on age, gender, or sector, but the focus is on aggregate-level impacts rather than individual cases.

Concept: SMART policies and mechanisms for inward FDI competition, including sustainable incentives, measurable regulations, accountable governance, responsive digital tools (e.g., one-stop shops), and transparent frameworks (e.g., antitrust, tax incentives, ESG compliance). Institutional moderators (e.g., corruption indices, regulatory quality) and social outcomes (e.g., employment, wages, equity, health, education, sustainability, R&D intensity) must be linked to FDI.

Context: Emerging economies (as classified by UNCTAD or World Bank, e.g., Brazil, India, China, South Africa), with comparative insights from transitional or developing contexts. Global or multi-country studies are included if they address emerging markets.

Types of Evidence Sources: Peer-reviewed articles (empirical, conceptual, qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods), grey literature (e.g., reports, policy briefs), and PhD dissertations. There are no date restrictions for capturing historical evolution, but searches will be current through December 2025. English-language sources only due to resource constraints and translation reliability issues; non-English abstracts will be screened, and if relevant, machine translation (e.g., Google Translate) will be attempted with reviewer verification (Sabiston et al., 2022). Excluded: Editorials, opinion pieces, conference abstracts without full text, and non-FDI-focused studies.

Inclusion Criteria:

- (i1) Empirical or conceptual studies on inward FDI in emerging economies (UNCTAD, 2025).
- (i2) Works addressing SMART policy dimensions (e.g., digital monitoring, evidence-based regulation) and social outcomes (Harding & Javorcik, 2011; Mariotti, 2025).
- (i3) Studies linking SMART policies (e.g., digital governance, incentives, ESG monitoring, antitrust) to inward FDI and institutional quality (Cardoso, 1972; Harding & Javorcik, 2011; UNCTAD, 2025).

Exclusion Criteria:

- (e1) Outward FDI-focused research (Sattar et al., 2022).
- (e2) Smart-city research without FDI regulation links (Christofi et al., 2021; Marchesani et al., 2023).
- (e3) Studies without policy mechanisms or social outcomes (Pandya, 2016; Self, 1993).
- (e4) High-income economy-exclusive studies without implications for emerging contexts (Forte & Abreu, 2023)
- (e5) Non-English articles that are untranslatable reliably.

2.3. Search Strategy

The search strategy was developed using the PCC framework. To minimise researcher bias and to systematically identify equivalent terms, we used the `litsearchr` package in R, following the methodology proposed by Grames et al. (2019) and Tudge (2021). The procedure comprises the following steps: (1) naïve search; (2) construction of a keyword co-occurrence network; (3) identification of change points in keyword importance; (4) creation of a candidate terms list; (5) grouping of terms into PCC-based concept categories; (6) generation of the master search string; and (7) iterative checking and refinement of results.

The process began with a naïve search in Scopus, Web of Science, and EconLit, using simple expressions representing the core elements of PCC (Population, Concept, Context). This initial search, conducted without filters, aimed to identify a set of clearly relevant articles to serve as seed articles. The results were exported in .ris format and imported into R software, where duplicates were automatically removed using `litsearchr`'s deduplication algorithm. Next, the titles and abstracts of the seed articles were processed using the Rapid Automatic Keyword Extraction (RAKE) algorithm, which generated an initial list of potential keywords. These terms were then analysed in “`litsearchr`” through the construction of a co-occurrence network, from which measures of term importance (especially frequency and degree centrality) were calculated. Based on these indicators, the (R) package identified a cut-off point to automatically select the most informative terms to represent the review topic. The resulting list was then manually screened by confirming, term by term, their conceptual relevance (TRUE/FALSE), removing irrelevant or overly broad items, and grouping synonyms. After this screening stage, the terms were organised into three PCC-aligned conceptual blocks:

- (1) Population/Participants (e.g., “investment promotion agenc*”, “IPA*”, “policymaker*”),

- (2) Concept (e.g., “investment promotion”, “tax incentiv*”, “competition for FDI”, “institutional qualit*”, “digital FDI”), and
- (3) Context (e.g., “developing countr*”, “emerging econom*”, “Global South”).

After this step, the `write_search` function in `litsearchr` was used to generate the master search string, combining Boolean operators (AND/OR), truncation (e.g., `invest*`), and quoted compound terms. The resulting search string was as follows: (“investment promotion agenc*” OR IPA* OR policymaker* OR “policy maker*” OR “government agenc*”) AND (“bilateral invest*” OR “bilateral investment treat*” OR determinant* OR “direct invest*” OR “direct investment inflow*” OR flow* OR “foreign direct investment*” OR FDI OR inflow* OR invest* OR “investment inflow*” OR “investment treat*” OR “outward foreign direct invest*” OR promot* OR “investment promotion” OR “investment facilitation” OR “investment incentiv*” OR “tax incentiv*” OR “fiscal incentiv*” OR subsid* OR “one-stop shop*” OR “single window” OR “special economic zone*” OR SEZ* OR “competition for FDI” OR “location competition” OR “tax competition” OR “corporate tax*” OR “regulator* qualit*” OR “corruption index*” OR “institutional qualit*” OR “ease of doing business” OR “investment climate” OR governance OR “digital FDI” OR “online portal*” OR “e-government” OR “e-governance” OR “foreign invest*”) AND (countri* OR “developing econom*” OR “developing countr*” OR “emerging econom*” OR “global south” OR BRICS OR “Latin America” OR Asia OR Africa)

After validation, the search string was adapted to each database’s syntax (e.g., TITLE-ABS-KEY in Scopus). Filters permitted under PRISMA-S, such as language and document type, were applied only after the searches were executed, without altering the logic of the initial strategy. The results were exported in `.ris` format, deduplicated in R, and subsequently imported into Rayyan for title/abstract and full-text screening. All searches were documented in accordance with PRISMA-S, including dates, databases, full search strings, and hit counts.

The grey literature was searched via Google Scholar (the first 200 results), institutional repositories (UNCTAD IRIS, OECD iLibrary, and the World Bank Open Knowledge Repository), and through hand-searching the reference lists of the included studies. Forward/backward citation tracking was performed with Litmaps and Google Scholar alerts. Experts from the Global Investment Competitiveness Network were contacted for unpublished reports. Searches were documented in accordance with PRISMA-S, including full search strings, dates and hit counts. For grey literature, a simplified and adapted search string was used: (“investment promotion agency” OR “IPA” OR “policy maker” OR “government agency” “foreign direct investment” OR FDI OR “investment promotion” OR “investment facilitation” OR “tax incentive” OR “special economic zone” OR “competition for FDI” OR “institutional quality” OR “investment climate” “developing country” OR “developing economy” OR “emerging economy” OR “global south” OR BRICS).

The search strategy was developed iteratively with a research librarian and piloted in Scopus to refine terms for sensitivity and specificity (Peters et al., 2020). No date or language limits will be applied initially, but the results will be filtered post hoc. The master search string combines keywords from key references (e.g., “investment promotion”, “competition policy”, “digital FDI”) using Boolean operators (AND/OR), proximity searches (e.g., “FDI NEAR/5 policy”), and truncation (e.g., “invest*”). Synonyms were derived from thesauri (e.g., MeSH for EconLit) and existing reviews on investment facilitation (Peters et al., 2020).

The strategy will be adapted for each database (e.g., subject headings in EconLit). Grey literature will be searched using Google Scholar (the first 200 results), institutional repositories (UNCTAD IRIS, OECD iLibrary, and the World Bank Open Knowledge Repository), and hand searches of the reference lists of the included studies. Forward/backward citation tracking will use Litmaps and Google Scholar alerts. Experts from the Global Investment Competitiveness Network will be contacted for unpublished reports. Searches, including full search strings, dates, and hit counts, will be documented in accordance with PRISMA-S.

The search strategy will be iteratively piloted and refined several times in accordance with established JBI methodological guidance for scoping reviews, which emphasises the importance of preliminary testing to enhance sensitivity, specificity, and overall relevance while minimising researcher bias and ensuring comprehensive coverage of heterogeneous literature (Peters et al., 2020). This iterative process involves initial testing in a primary database such as Scopus, where the draft search string is applied to retrieve a sample of records; these are then reviewed for alignment with the PCC framework, relevance to SMART policies and FDI outcomes, and identification of additional synonyms, missed concepts, or overly broad terms that may introduce noise. Adjustments—such as refining Boolean operators, incorporating proximity operators, adding or removing truncation/wildcards, or incorporating subject headings—are made based on the results, with subsequent re-piloting to validate improvements until the strategy achieves an optimal balance of recall and precision.

The full development process, including pilot iterations, rationale for modifications, and final search strings across all databases, will be transparently documented and reported in its entirety in an appendix (S1 Appendix: Full Search Strategy), drawing on best-practice recommendations for search transparency and reproducibility in scoping review protocols (Moran et al., 2008). This rigorous approach not only strengthens the methodological robustness of the review but

also facilitates future replication and supports the identification of emerging patterns in the fragmented evidence base on SMART FDI policies in emerging economies (see: [Tables 1 and 2](#))

2.4. Source Selection

References will be exported to Rayyan software (<https://www.rayyan.ai/>) for deduplication via automated algorithms supplemented by manual checks ([Ouzzani et al., 2016](#)). Two independent reviewers will screen titles/abstracts using Rayyan's blinding feature. Inter-rater agreement will be calculated using Cohen's Kappa (target > 0.7 for substantial agreement) ([Aguinis et al., 2023](#)). Disagreements will be resolved through discussion or by consulting a third reviewer. A pilot study of 50 records will calibrate the criteria and refine the process ([Smith & Duncan, 2022](#)). Full-text screening will follow, with reasons for exclusion logged (e.g., "no social outcomes" or "no relevant outcomes"). The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram will visualise the process ([Page et al., 2021](#)) (see: [Figure 1](#)).

2.5. Data Extraction

The data will be charted using a standardised, piloted form in Rayyan (or Excel), and tested on 5-10 studies for consistency ([Pollock et al., 2023](#)). Two reviewers will independently extract the data, with 20% of the data double-checked for accuracy. The extracted variables include the following:

Bibliographic: Author, year, title, journal, country/region, publication type.

Methodological: Study design (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed), sample/setting, data collection/analysis methods, theoretical frameworks.

Conceptual: SMART policy definitions/dimensions, FDI context (e.g., sector, greenfield vs. M&A), institutional indicators (e.g., World Governance Indicators scores).

Outcomes: Social impacts (e.g., employment rates, wage spillovers, equity indices) and enablers/barriers.

Other: Key findings, limitations, recommendations.

Missing values will not be formally imputed; instead, disagreements will be settled through consensus.

2.6. Data Analysis and Synthesis

The analysis will be descriptive and narrative, without a meta-analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis will identify patterns in SMART definitions, instruments, and outcomes using inductive coding in NVivo software (initial codes piloted on 10% of the data). Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies by year, region, sector) will be used in R (or Excel). Bibliometric analysis using i) VantagePoint (version 17.0), UCINET (version 6.758) and Gephi (version 0.10.1) and alternatively VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) to map keyword co-occurrences (threshold: minimum five occurrences), author networks, and citation clusters, with parameters such as normalisation method (association strength) reported ([Aguinis et al., 2023](#)). The synthesis will integrate findings narratively, accompanied by tables/figures that highlight themes (e.g., policy-outcome

Table 1. Search Strategy Using PCC Framework

PCC keyword block	Search terms
#1 Population (P):	"emerging econom*" OR "developing countr*" OR LMIC* OR "global south" OR "transition econom*"
#2 Concept (C):	"smart polic*" OR "smart regulat*" OR "evidence-based polic*" OR "digital governance" OR "e-government" OR "one-stop shop*" OR "investment promotion agenc*" OR "investment incentive*" OR "regulator* transparenc*" OR "ESG polic*" OR "monitor* compliance"
#3 Context (C/FDI):	"foreign direct investment" OR FDI
#4 Outcomes (social):	"social impact*" OR employment OR "labour standard*" OR wages OR "income inequalit*" OR education OR health OR gender OR environment* OR sustainab*
Master Boolean string (example to adapt in each database syntax):	(#1) AND (#2) AND (#3) AND (#4)

Source: Authors.

Table 2. Preliminary Secondary Sources

Organisation	Website	Description
UNCTAD	unctad.org	World Investment Reports, policy monitors, FDI statistics
World Bank	worldbank.org	Governance indicators, investment climate, digital gov.
OECD	oecd-ilibrary.org	Regulatory governance, investment policy reviews
IMF	imf.org	Policy advice, macro context
WTO	wto.org	Trade/investment policy environment
ILO	ilo.org	Labour standards/outcomes
IPA portals (e.g., Invest India, InvestSA)	(various)	One-stop shop/e-gov examples

Source: Authors.

matrices) and gaps (e.g., underrepresented regions). The enabling/constraining factors will be linked to dependency theory frameworks.

2.7. Quality Assessment

Although not required in JBI scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020), an optional quality assessment will enhance credibility without excluding studies, thereby allowing for a comprehensive mapping of the diverse and heterogeneous evidence base on SMART policies for inward FDI. This approach aligns with the exploratory nature of scoping reviews, which prioritise breadth over stringent methodological filtering, while adding rigour by systematically evaluating the strengths and limitations of included sources. For qualitative studies, we will employ the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, comprising 10 questions scored on a 0-2 scale per item, with thresholds defining high ($\geq 13/20$), moderate (7-12/20), and low ($< 7/20$) quality (Long et al., 2020). The quantitative sources will be assessed using a modified Downs and

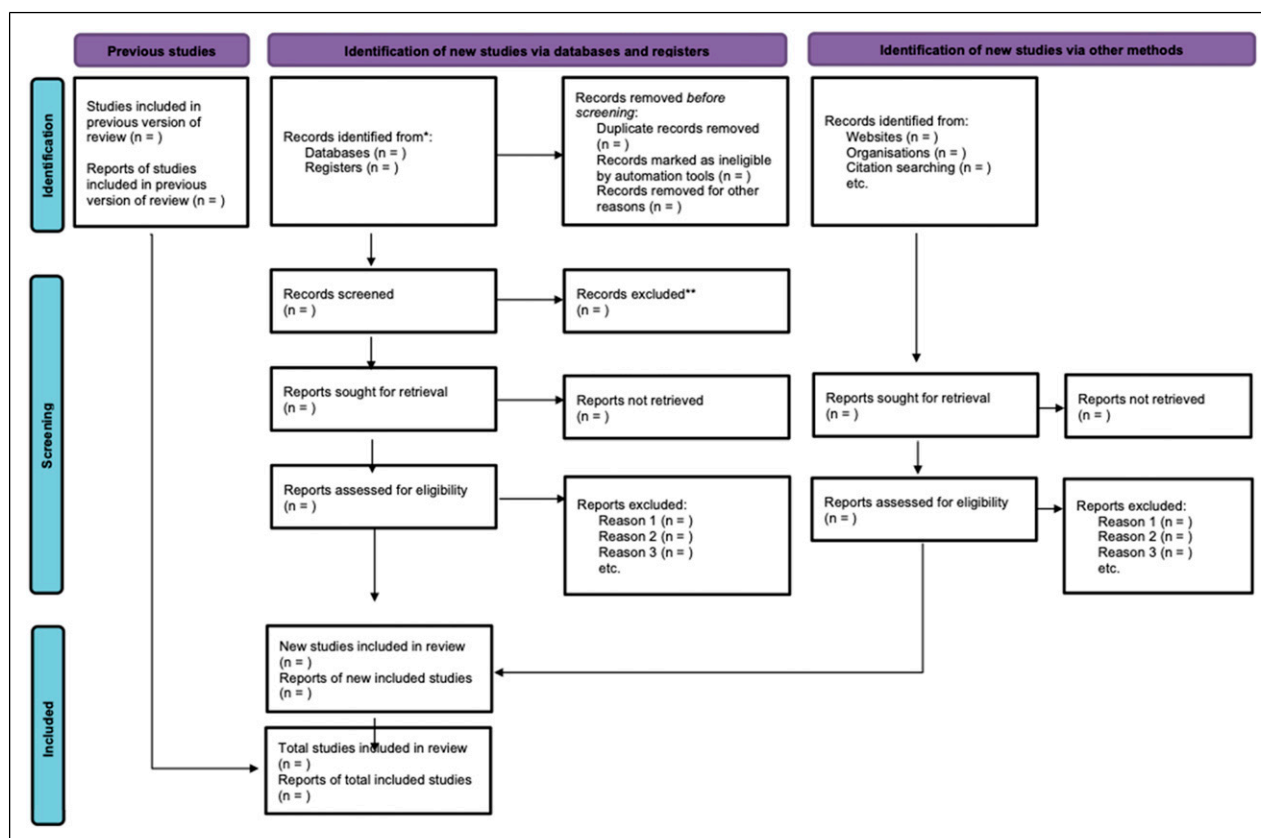


Figure 1. Prisma flow diagram template.

Source: Page et al. (2021)

Black (1998) checklist (27 items, with percentage scores categorizing high $\geq 70\%$ and low $< 70\%$ quality), while mixed-methods studies will follow an integrated approach as outlined by Noyes et al. (2019), which combines quantitative and qualitative evidence to explore factors such as effectiveness, acceptability, and contextual influences. By contextualising findings in the discussion—such as highlighting potential biases or methodological gaps in lower-quality studies—this assessment will strengthen the reliability of our thematic synthesis and policy recommendations, ultimately supporting more informed insights into FDI impacts in emerging economies without compromising the review’s inclusive scope.

For qualitative sources, we will utilise the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, a widely recognised tool for evaluating the rigour, credibility, and relevance of qualitative research (Long et al., 2020). This checklist consists of 10 targeted questions that address key aspects, including the clarity of research aims, the appropriateness of the methodology, the recruitment strategy, the data collection methods, the researchers’ reflexivity, the ethical considerations, the rigour of data analysis, the clarity of findings, and the overall value of the research. Each question will be scored on a 0–2 scale, where 0 indicates “no” or “can’t tell,” 1 signifies partial fulfilment (“yes, but with limitations”), and 2 denotes strong alignment (“yes”), yielding a total score out of 20. Based on these scores, studies will be categorised as high quality ($\geq 13/20$), reflecting robust methodological practices and trustworthy insights; moderate quality (7–12/20), indicating acceptable but improvable elements; or low quality ($< 7/20$), highlighting significant shortcomings that may affect interpretability. This structured appraisal will not lead to exclusion but will inform our interpretation of the findings, allowing us to weigh the contributions of qualitative evidence more judiciously within the broader scoping review framework, particularly when exploring nuanced social outcomes such as equity and sustainability in FDI contexts.

For quantitative sources, we will apply a modified version of the Downs and Black checklist (Downs & Black, 1998), a validated and widely used instrument comprising 27 items that appraises the methodological quality of both randomised and non-randomised studies of healthcare interventions. This checklist evaluates key domains including reporting clarity, external validity, internal validity (bias and confounding), and statistical power, with most items scored dichotomously (yes/no, awarding 1 point for “yes”) and item 27 on power potentially scaled (e.g., 0–5 points in some adaptations, although often simplified in reviews to 0 or 1). In line with common modifications seen in evidence synthesis (e.g., to enhance applicability across diverse study designs or to address power calculation ambiguities), we will derive an overall percentage score by dividing the total achieved points by the maximum possible (typically 27 or adjusted for non-applicable items), categorizing studies as high quality ($\geq 70\%$, indicating strong methodological robustness, low risk of bias, and reliable findings) or low quality ($< 70\%$, signalling notable limitations such as inadequate reporting, selection bias, or insufficient power that may undermine confidence in results). This structured evaluation will not result in exclusion of studies but will enrich our interpretation of quantitative evidence—particularly empirical analyses of FDI impacts, spillovers, and institutional moderators—by enabling us to highlight potential biases or strengths in the discussion, thereby supporting more nuanced thematic synthesis and policy-relevant insights into SMART policy effectiveness within emerging economies.

This study adopts a mixed-methods design via an integrated approach following Noyes et al. (2019). This involves deliberately combining and synthesising quantitative evidence (e.g., on intervention effectiveness) with qualitative evidence (e.g., on acceptability, feasibility, context, and implementation factors) within a single review framework. The approach clarifies purposes and designs for mixed-method syntheses, particularly for complex interventions and health systems, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how and why effects occur, while addressing complexity through methods such as juxtaposing findings in matrices, using logic models, or applying frameworks like WHO-INTEGRATE. It supports robust guideline development or evidence-informed decision-making by integrating the two evidence streams at key stages rather than treating them separately. Quality will contextualise findings in the discussion (e.g., noting biases in low-quality studies).

2.8. Ethical Considerations and Dissemination

Ethical approval is not required for this scoping review, as it relies exclusively on secondary data from publicly available peer-reviewed and grey literature, with no involvement of human participants, no primary data collection, and no identifiable personal information. Conflicts of interest have been declared as none by all the authors. To maximise accessibility and impact, the final results of the review will be published open access in a reputable peer-reviewed journal, presented at relevant international conferences (e.g., UNCTAD or World Investment Forum), and disseminated through concise policy briefs targeted at key stakeholders, including policymakers, investment promotion agencies, and development practitioners, in emerging economies. Recognising the rapidly evolving nature of global FDI trends, digitalisation, and sustainability frameworks (e.g., recent UNCTAD reports), the review will be updated biennially if substantial new evidence emerges, ensuring that the conceptual framework and policy recommendations remain current and responsive to ongoing shifts in the field. This commitment to periodic updates aligns with the dynamic policy landscape and supports

sustained contributions to evidence-informed decision-making for inclusive and sustainable FDI attraction in developing contexts.

3. Discussion

This scoping review protocol outlines a rigorous approach to mapping the evidence on SMART policies in the competition for inward FDI, particularly in emerging economies. By synthesising fragmented literature across disciplines, we anticipate identifying key definitions, policy instruments (e.g., digital governance tools, transparent incentives, ESG frameworks), institutional moderators (e.g., regulatory quality, governance indices), and social outcomes (e.g., employment spillovers, equity improvements). The review will highlight gaps, such as underrepresented regions (e.g., South America, Sub-Saharan Africa) or sectors (e.g., digital vs. traditional industries), and patterns in how stronger institutions mitigate FDI-related inequalities, aligning with dependency theory. Expected outcomes include a conceptual framework for operationalising SMART policies, practical insights for policymakers to enhance sustainable FDI benefits, and research agendas addressing digitalisation trends (UNCTAD, 2025). Limitations may arise from the scoping nature of the study (Oliveira et al., 2025), which prioritises breadth over depth, and from potential biases in the grey literature. Nonetheless, this work will contribute to unified action in global investment policy, promoting inclusive development.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

Data Availability Statement

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study. All relevant data from this study will be made available upon study completion.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online

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