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## **Mediating Effect of Corporate Sustainability Strategy on Wellbeing and Sustainability of FELDA Settlers**

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### **Abstract**

The palm oil business is currently at stake due to labour shortages and high input costs, which affects the FELDA settlers to sell palm oil fruits as the millers refuse to purchase them. Consequently, the desire for more sustainable products has led researchers to investigate the issues and challenges faced by FELDA settlers. This research aims to identify the impact of FELDA settlers' social, environmental, and financial wellbeing, with mediating effect of corporate sustainability strategy. The findings postulate that social, environmental, and financial wellbeing were mediated by corporate sustainability strategy, while corporate sustainability strategy's direct relationship with sustainability was accepted.

**Keywords:** FELDA settlers; wellbeing; sustainability; corporate sustainability strategy

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### **1.0 Introduction**

The new business model for the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) with the theme "Self Reliant Settlers, Sustainable FELDA" is set to provide settlers with a better understanding of FELDA's new direction and opportunities for higher and more consistent earnings. The main objective of FELDA's new economic model is to create additional income streams for the settlers so they would no longer have to rely entirely on oil palm. The FELDA Settler Development Program (PPP) includes inter-cropping that is capable of delivering results in the short term and generates more income for FELDA settlers (Bernama, 2019). The purpose of PPP is to ensure a more sustainable future, safeguard the wellbeing of the settlers, and ensure plantation industry development and higher productivity through modern technology. Some pilot projects include planting chillies, mushrooms, leafy vegetables, and rabbit breeding. Conceived as a poverty-reduction strategy by the producing countries (Malaysia and Indonesia), the demand for palm oil has risen sharply since 1995, and expected to increase four-fold by 2050.

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FELDA, in its effort to eradicate poverty through the cultivation of oil palm and rubber trees, and carrying its role by providing adequate and advanced facilities, is encouraging the youths to improve their socioeconomic status and quality of life by allowing various economic activities. Unfortunately, 96,799 FELDA settlers are already in the 51 to 79 age group, while only 6,360 settlers are from the younger generation between 31 and 50 years old. This generation is not interested in pursuing their parents' path in the palm oil sector due to the labour-intensive nature of the industry, low work satisfaction, and poor employment conditions and progress. A study by Kamaruddin et al. (2016) suggest that young people who perceive the working environment as unattractive and filthy are less likely to work in this sector. They continue to presume the available employment in the agriculture industry as burdensome and exhausting to carry out. Therefore, to inspire the government's new direction for FELDA, the paper aims to identify the impact of FELDA settlers' social, environmental, and financial wellbeing, with mediating effect of corporate sustainability strategy.

1.1 Background of Study

Palm oil production is a key driving factor in the country's agro-industry. It has made considerable success and now accounts for a sizable portion of global palm oil output and export. As a result, FELDA was no longer accepting new settlers in 1990. However, the rapid development in this sector has created many issues, including the dependency on foreign workers. According to Stapa et al. (2019), locals are less interested in working in the plantation industry, despite the variety of job options in the industry. Likewise, intensive efforts promote and raise industry awareness among the youths. However, Malaysian youths are not interested in working in plantations, and they rank the agricultural sector third after manufacturing and retail for the job opportunity. A critical problem with FELDA and its commercial arm, Felda Global Ventures (FGV), is that the plantations under the latter's watch are aging. FGV's prospectus in 2012 indicated that 36% of its plantations were between 21 and 25 years and 16.9% were over 25 years (Khor et al., 2015). In essence, almost 53% of FGV's plantations were classified as old seven years ago. Another alarming problem is that about 17,000 settlers in the low-income bracket were heavily in debt and utterly dependent on their income from oil palm plantations. To make it worse, the oil palm plantation is facing the challenges of being too dependent on foreign workers; European Union (EU) banned palm oil for biofuel use as it claimed oil palm cultivation speeded up deforestation and global warming, and the third FELDA generation has migrated to the city instead of pursuing the plantation business.

2.0 Literature Review

Sustainability is maintaining a specific rate or level of processes and actions in which humankind avoids the exhaustion of natural resources in balancing ecology to preserve the quality of life. In general, any organization pursuing sustainable development needs to perform a holistic triple bottom line approach, involving the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity (Elkington, 2013). FELDA's new direction is aligned with FELDA's sustainability focus and initiative to increase settlers' income. Additionally, FELDA is proactively collaborating with agencies such as the Department of Agriculture, Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (MARDI), and Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority (FAMA) in formulating a complete ecosystem for the settlers. Leveraging the right expertise and experience from the agencies will create a supply chain system in managing raw materials, information, and capital flows related to procurement, production, and distribution of products and services (Johan & Nasir, 2021). Therefore, the literature review explains the variables for social wellbeing, environmental wellbeing, financial wellbeing, and corporate sustainability strategy as the mediator, as shown in Figure 1.

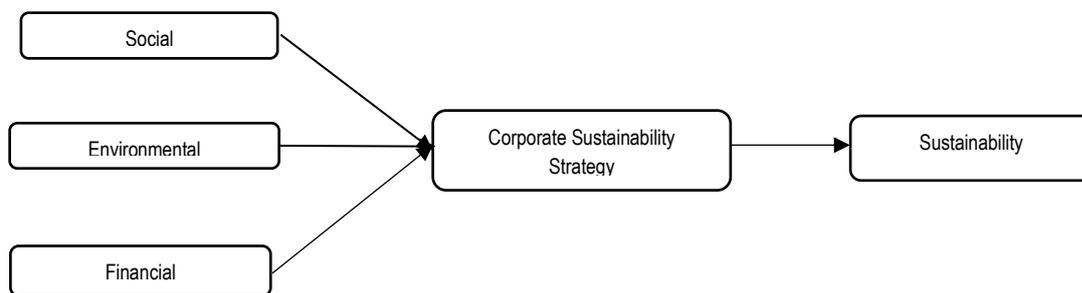


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

2.1 Social Wellbeing

Social wellbeing results from social connections and groups; it encompasses social integration, social acceptance, social participation, social upgrading, and social coherence. Social wellbeing is also related to business decisions and directions which should consider the settlers' interests. FELDA needs to ensure that workers are fairly compensated together with benefits of both health and life that are commensurate with their work in order to ensure the FELDA settlers' wellbeing. Another critical concern is the demographic shifts resulting from higher dependence on foreign workers and urban migration of the second and third generations of FELDA for better opportunities and living (Massard, 1982). The relevance of social wellbeing is significant for improving FELDA settlers' quality of life (Abd Aziz et al., 2012). Since social wellbeing refers to the FELDA settlers themselves, the roots of FELDA should be maintained to strengthen people, planet, and profit. Therefore, attractive employment packages for the industry should be formulated and offered to the younger generations.

### 2.2 Environmental Wellbeing

Environmental wellbeing denotes our interaction and response to the natural world by experiencing feelings of gratitude and admiration. It also relates to the organization's need to ensure that each process in operations has zero or minimum negative impact on the environment. Additionally, operational processes involving raw materials selection, product design, process decisions, location decisions, packaging, and shipping methods up to the product disposal should have sustainable procedures and processes by reducing carbon footprints, life cycle assessment, and costing merit investment (Hashim et al., 2022). The state of balance, strength characterizes environmental sustainability, and interconnection that enables civilization to meet its demands and that never exceeds the capacity of its supporting ecosystem to continue regenerating the services required. FELDA is concerned with attaining environmental goals and is interested in getting actions to invest in human capital and understands that organizations would never be able to reach environmental sustainability without engaging the settlers as stakeholders (Nisar et al., 2021). The Felda settlers' involvement in the environment is noteworthy in safeguarding their knowledge, awareness, and daily business activities (Bakar et al., 2015).

### 2.3 Financial Wellbeing

Financial wellbeing is when someone can completely meet current and ongoing financial obligations by feeling secure with their financial future and able to make choices that allow them to be happy with life. In the case of FELDA, the entity has been successfully maximized the financial dimension, albeit compromising and ignoring other dimensions of people and the planet. This has affected FELDA's reputation, corporate image, and credibility in addressing the resettlement of poor rural Malaysians into newly built areas to improve their economic standards (Baliga et al., 2019). FELDA settlers have expected FELDA to create wealth for the community and the nation through sustainable profit sharing and distribution based on FELDA's financial performance, and not just Hari Raya cash handouts or allocations (which FELDA has been giving them since 2003). Consequently, the efforts to diversify FELDA income through commercialization have failed to improve the productivity and socioeconomic outcomes of the FELDA settlers (Johan & Nasir, 2021).

### 2.4 Corporate Sustainability Strategy

By definition, corporate sustainability strategy (CSS) is an integration of sustainable development principles into business operations. The previous FELDA model until 2011 enabled the settlers to earn incomes based on crop yield and later receive dividends from investment with Koperasi Permodalan Felda. Initially, for FELDA settlers, the entity managed all the commercial plantations and investments, which later were relinquished to Felda Global Ventures Bhd (now FGV Holdings Bhd) and Felda Investment Corporation Sdn Bhd (FIC) in 2013. Then in 2013, despite FGV's positive outlook with RM10.5 billion public listing and initial dividend, FGV and FIC failed to deliver expected returns to the settlers. In 2019, FELDA introduced a new business model where it will rent and utilize land from settlers long-term. In addition, the "Sara Hidup" and "Pendahuluan Hasil" aids will be enhanced to provide needs-based loans and a repayment system based on the settlers' income. The sustainable strategy salvages the FELDA's social and environmental aspects as a new corporate philosophy and strategic management process (Bergman et al., 2017). It is worth noting that one of FELDA's long-term strengths may be related to the fact that FELDA was meant for the poor, landless, and young citizens, who later had grown old benefiting from the scheme and aid. Unfortunately, since the settlers are too reliant on the government's initiatives and financial aid, CSS seems to be not effective and has further caused unfavorable outcomes for the settlers.

## 3.0 Methodology

For this study, the quantitative approach with preliminary information gathering was incorporated into the primary data collection. Data were collected from 204 settlers of FELDA Moakil, Segamat, Johor. The survey questionnaire comprises two parts. Part A is the demographic information, and Part B is the items for variables of social, environment, financial, corporate sustainability strategy, and sustainability on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. The sample size for this research was calculated using the G\*Power 3.1 software with a setting as follows:

$f^2 = 0.05$ ,  $\alpha = 0.20$ , power = 0.80 and number of predictors = 3. The minimum sample required for this research is 134. However, to get a higher power and for better accuracy, researchers decided to set it at 200 respondents

### 3.1 Respondents Demographic

The demographic profiling includes gender, age, service length (years), monthly income, and the number of households. Of the 204 responses, 55.9% are male, and 44.1% percent are female. Next, respondents at the age of 51 years old and above are 40.7%, followed by 41 – 50 years old at 37.3% and 21 – 40 years old at 22.1%. Subsequently, 61.8% of the settlers have served more than ten years, 29.4% are 6 – 10 years, and only 8.8% settlers have served between 1 – 5 years. Then, the highest income category is in the range of RM3,500 – RM5,499 at 55.4%, followed by RM1,500 – RM3,499 at 31.4%, RM1 – RM1,499 at 9.8%. About 3.4% of settlers have a monthly income of RM5,500 – RM7,499. Finally, 64.7% of settlers have 1 – 3 people per household. It is because their children are married or have left home to work in the city. Likewise, 33.3% of the respondents have 4 – 7 people per household, and 2% of the respondents are with more than eight people per household.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographics

Demographic Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	114	55.9
Female	90	44.1

Age	21-40	45	22.1
	41-50	76	37.3
	51 - ≥	83	40.7
Service Length (years)	1 – 5 years	18	8.8
	6 – 10 years	60	29.4
	> 10 years	126	61.8
Income per month	< RM1,499	20	9.8
	RM1,500 – RM3,499	64	31.4
	RM3,500 – RM5,499	113	55.4
	RM5,500 – RM7,499	7	3.4
No. of Households	1 – 3	98	64.7
	4 – 7	68	33.3
	8 - ≥	4	2.0

#### 4.0 Analysis and Results

Researchers used partial least squares (PLS) modeling using the SmartPLS 3.3.7 version (Ringle et al., 2015) as the statistical tool to examine the measurement and structural model as it does not require normality assumption and survey research is not normally distributed (Chin et al., 2003). Since data was collected using a single source, researchers first tested the issue of Common Method Bias by following the suggestions of Kock and Lynn (2012) and Kock (2015) by testing the fullcollinearity. In this method, all the variables will be regressed against a common variable and if the VIF  $\leq 3.3$ , then there is no bias from the single source data. The analysis yielded a VIF of less than 3.3; thus, single source bias is not a serious issue with the data.

Table 2. Full Collinearity Testing

Environmental	Financial	Social
1.006	1.022	1.018

#### 4.1 Measurement Model

Researchers followed the suggestions of Anderson and Gerbing (1988) to test the model developed using a 2-step approach. First, researchers tested the measurement model to test the validity and reliability of the instruments used, following the guidelines of Hair et al. (2019) and Ramayah et al. (2018). Then, researchers ran the structural model to test the hypothesis developed. Researchers assessed the loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) for the measurement model. The loadings values should be  $\geq 0.5$ , the AVE should be  $\geq 0.5$ , and the CR should be  $\geq 0.7$ . As shown in Table 3, the AVEs are all higher than 0.5, and the CRs are all higher than 0.7. The loadings were also acceptable, with only one or two loadings less than 0.708 (Hair et al., 2019). Then in step 2, researchers assessed the discriminant validity using the HTMT criterion suggested by Henseler et al. (2015) and updated by Franke and Sarstedt (2019). As shown in Table 4, the values of HTMT were all lower than the criterion of  $\leq 0.90$  as such, and researchers can conclude that the respondents understood that the five constructs are distinct. Taken together, both these validity test has shown that the measurement items are both valid and reliable.

Table 3. Measurement Model

Constructs	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
Corporate Sustainability Strategy	CSS2	0.89	0.777	0.874
	CSS3	0.872		
Environmental	Env1	0.717	0.713	0.829
	Env3	0.954		
Financial	Fin1	0.778	0.533	0.82
	Fin3	0.768		
	Fin4	0.705		
	Fin5	0.664		
Social	Soc1	0.768	0.581	0.805
	Soc3	0.66		
	Soc5	0.848		
Sustainability	Sus1	0.741	0.614	0.826

Sus2 0.759  
 Sus3 0.847

Note: Item Soc2, Soc4, Env4, Fin 2, Phy2, Phy3 were deleted due to low loadings

**Table 4. Discriminant Validity (HTMT)**

	CSS	Environmental	Financial	Social	Sustainability
CSS					
Environmental	0.264				
Financial	0.519	0.089			
Social	0.363	0.115	0.228		
Sustainability	0.462	0.346	0.386	0.217	

#### 4.2 Structural Model

As Hair et al. (2017) and Cain et al. (2017) suggested, researchers did the assessment through multivariate skewness and kurtosis. The results showed that the data collected was not multivariate normal; Mardia's multivariate skewness ( $\beta = 71.425, p < 0.01$ ) and Mardia's multivariate kurtosis ( $\beta = 536.670, p < 0.01$ ). Thus, following the suggestions of Hair et al. (2019), reporting the path coefficients, the standard errors, t-values, and p-values for the structural model using a 5,000-sample re-sample bootstrapping procedure (Ramayah et al. 2018). Also, based on the criticism of Hahn and Ang (2017) that p-values are not a good criterion for testing the significance of a hypothesis and suggested using a combination of criteria, such as p-values, confidence intervals, and effect sizes. Table 5 shows the summary of the criteria to test the hypotheses developed. Overall, the R2 were 0.217 ( $Q^2 = 0.154$ ) and 0.108 ( $Q^2 = 0.062$ ), which indicates 21.7% and 10.8% of the variance in CSS and Sustainability can be explained by the predictors respectively, and the direct relationship of CSS and Sustainability was supported for H4. To test the mediation hypotheses, researchers followed the suggestions of Preacher and Hayes (2004; 2008) by bootstrapping the indirect effect. Since confidence interval does not straddle a 0, it can be concluded that there is significant mediation as shown in Table 6, Social Wellbeing  $\rightarrow$  CSS  $\rightarrow$  Sustainability ( $\beta = 0.071, p < 0.01$ ), Environmental Wellbeing  $\rightarrow$  CSS  $\rightarrow$  Sustainability ( $\beta = 0.056, p < 0.05$ ), and Financial Wellbeing  $\rightarrow$  CSS  $\rightarrow$  Sustainability ( $\beta = 0.11, p < 0.01$ ) were all significant. The confidence intervals bias corrected 95% also did not show any intervals straddling a 0, thus confirming the findings. Thus, H1, H2 and H3 were supported.

**Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Direct Effect**

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-values	p-values	BCI LL	BCI UL	f <sup>2</sup>	VIF
H4	Corporate Sustainability Strategy -> Sustainability	0.329	0.059	5.612	0	0.215	0.413	0.122	1

Note: 95% confidence interval with a bootstrapping of 5,000

**Table 6. Hypothesis Testing Indirect Effects**

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-values	p-values	BCI LL	BCI UL
H1	Social -> Corporate Sustainability Strategy -> Sustainability	0.071	0.025	2.908	0.002	0.035	0.112
H2	Environmental -> Corporate Sustainability Strategy -> Sustainability	0.056	0.027	2.067	0.019	0.015	0.098
H3	Financial -> Corporate Sustainability Strategy -> Sustainability	0.11	0.031	3.585	0	0.062	0.159

Note: 95% confidence interval with a bootstrapping of 5,000

### 5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The new business model for the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) with the theme "Self Reliant Settlers, Sustainable FELDA" is a timely and much-needed approach and solution to provide additional income streams for the settlers and eradicate poverty. While FELDA's mandate and long-term strength is helping the poor, landless, and young population to improve and elevate their socioeconomic wellbeing, the continued efficacy, success and sustainability of the scheme could be jeopardized by several demographic factors; including aging settlers burdened with high debts, urban migration for better living and economic opportunities, and diminishing, if not loss of plantation industry appeal as the employment of choice to the younger generation.

The FELDA's reform plan with a new business model is expected to uplift the wellbeing and lift the burden of the aging settlers who are saddled with high debts. In addition, the revival of FELDA's New Generation Housing Project (FGBF), if successfully implemented,

is projected to benefit almost 5,000 settlers from the new generation. For the scheme's continuity and sustainability, it is imperative and timely for the leadership and management of FELDA to revisit to reformulate a better approach and strategy to enhance the industry attractiveness, including fairer, rewarding, and more competitive employment and remuneration packages to attract the younger generation to work in the industry (Hashimet al., 2020). The hypothesis testing concluded that the corporate sustainability strategy (CSS) mediates between FELDA settlers' social, environmental, and financial wellbeing with sustainability; settlers' social, environment, and financial wellbeing impact the CSS. Thus, CSS boosts sustainability. It is crucial to highlight that financial wellbeing has the highest t-value of 3.585, followed by social of 2.908 and environment of 2.067, which indicates financial wellbeing is the strongest predictor in this study (Abd Aziz et al., 2012; Bakar et al.).

Since the research was only focusing on one FELDA settlers' location with three variables of social, environment and financial wellbeing, it is proposed that a follow-up in-depth study, that is a semi-structured interview with the settlers be carried out to further explore other wellbeing factors such as physical, intellectual, and religiosity. Moreover, it is also crucial to conduct a focus group interview with FELDA, FGV, and government agencies in the preliminary study and to extend the corporate sustainability strategy construct to ensure that the strategy that has been created is needed to bring changes to the sustainability development of FELDA settlers. It must be conducted not only in the plantation area studied but also extended to other areas to ensure a balanced, inclusive, and holistic development in all FELDA plantations and settlements. For example, a study of the different oil palm and rubber settlers lifestyles should be performed to discover relevant measures that maybe employed to assist and enhance their sustainable status.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the field of community environment/social psychology.

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