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Determinants of FELDA Settlers' Wellbeing and Sustainability: The mediating role of corporate responsibility

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Abstract

Over the past years, indefinite harvests in the palm oil and rubber sectors have amplified the pressure on FELDA settlers, especially those living in rural areas. Fortunately, with the government support of financial aid amounting to RM6.23bil, FELDA is expected to expedite a new business model in salvaging the settlers and ensuring their sustainability. The concerns on the palm oil industry and FELDA settlers' wellbeing have inspired researchers to investigate the issues and challenges, and the findings postulate that immediate resolution is vital to ameliorate settlers' wellbeing and for them to sustain and uphold the palm oil and rubber business.

Keywords: FELDA settlers; wellbeing, sustainability, corporate responsibility

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1.0 Introduction

Malaysia aims to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The goals serve as a comprehensive and inclusive roadmap for the nation to build a better and sustainable future. The goals, such as, ending poverty in all forms; ensuring healthy living and promoting wellbeing for all ages; securing inclusive and equitable quality education, and promoting lifelong learning; are timely for the FELDA settlers, who primarily refer to family-based enterprises cultivating up to 50 hectares of oil palm. Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) was established on July 1, 1956 for the development of land and relocation, and with the objective of poverty eradication through the cultivation of oil palm and rubber.

FELDA is Malaysia's largest rural land development scheme and is recognised as the most successful example of managing smallholders. In early 2019, FELDA introduced a new business model of managing settlers' land under a long-term lease. The new business model, amongst others, provides income diversification opportunities to settlers so as to ensure sustainable earnings and

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living. To this end, the government provided financial aid of RM6.23 billion, RM1bil was channelled to the planting of fruits, vegetables, and kenaf as a diversification strategy to reduce reliance on oil palm and rubber crops (Adnan, 2019).

FELDA, in delivering on its mandate and socio-economic development objectives, has encouraged the settlers' younger generations to improve their socioeconomic status and quality of life by participating in various economic activities. The agency is also providing Housing Credit Guarantee Scheme under Malaysia Budget 2023. While FELDA has bounced back from huge debts and overcome weak management issues, the scheme participants have yet to be convinced by the results and outcomes of the new business model. They are still downside risks stemming from the European Union's plan to terminate palm oil-based transport fuels by 2030, acute shortage of plantation foreign workers, volatility of palm oil prices, and the expected lower demand for the commodity within the next 10 years due to alternative resources for renewable energy, and the issues of trust among settlers towards the corporate role of FELDA. Settlers highlighted their disappointment with the lack of initiatives and assistance offered by FELDA to address the rising cost of living and low returns on palm oil and rubbers (Johan et al., 2022). Therefore, the paper aims to explore and identify the factors affecting FELDA settlers' wellbeing towards sustainability and whether the role of corporate responsibility mediates their wellbeing and sustainability. The purpose of the study is two-fold: i. to explore the factors affecting FELDA settlers' wellbeing toward sustainability

ii. to identify the role of corporate responsibility and whether it mediates FELDA settlers' wellbeing and sustainability

2.0 FELDA Current Scenario

Palm oil production is the mainstay and growth driver for the nation's agricultural sector. A key driver of the country's agro-industry, palm oil production has grown significantly, accounting for a significant portion of global output and export. Malaysia was once the largest producer and exporter of palm before Indonesia took over as the world's leading producer and exporter in 2006. While FELDA has stopped accepting new settlers since 1990, this sector's growth and rapid development has created many strategic and operational issues, including the pressing need for manpower and increased 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 provided. Notwithstanding the intensive efforts to promote and raise industry awareness among the youth, Malaysian youth do not want to work on plantations, and they rate the agriculture sector third for career opportunities after manufacturing and retail. Another area for improvement faced by the industry is the aging plantations. The plantations managed by Felda Global Ventures (FGV), FELDA's commercial arm, are aging, with lower yield and productivity. According to FGV's prospectus in 2012, 16.9% of its plantations were more than 25 years old, while 36% were between 21 and 25 years old (Khor et al., 2015). Moreover, 53% or more of FGV's plantations were deemed "old" seven years ago. Another worrying issue is that 17,000 low-income settlers were completely reliant on their revenue from oil palm crops and were deeply in debt. 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.

3.0 Literature Review

3.1 Corporate responsibility and sustainability

Corporate responsibility (CR) refers to the company's commitment to ethical behavior that considers its operations' economic, social, and environmental effects on society. Effective CR management benefits all stakeholders while adding value to the organization and preserving its long-term viability. Happiness, health, wellbeing, integration, and empowerment are social values beyond financial transactions and profit-making. Moreover, CR to stakeholders is undeniably related to corporate value and profitability. According to Bhagwat (2011), sustainability refers to an organization's activities, typically considered voluntary, that demonstrate the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations. In order to understand and enhance current efforts, most responsible organizations will continue to revise their short and long-term agendas.

Sustainability is the ability to maintain a certain rate or level of processes and actions in which humankind avoids the exhaustion of natural resources in balancing ecology to maintain the quality of life. In general, any organization pursuing sustainable development needs to perform a holistic approach to the triple bottom line, involving the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity (Elkington, 2013). Thus, corporate responsibility and sustainability are essential for organization performance measurement components addressing business ethics, corporate social performance, global corporate citizenship, and stakeholder management. The sustainable strategy salvages the FELDA's social and environmental aspects as a new corporate management philosophy and strategic management process (Bergman et al., 2017). 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.

3.2 Social wellbeing

Social factors such as health, social integration, acceptance, and equality are crucial to sustainability. The population's prevalent ideas, conventions, and behavioural patterns are examples of social determinants which represent an organization's external environment (Mostepaniuk et al., 2022). Corporate responsibility (CR) is a corporate management strategy that applies sustainability ideas and improves social welfare inside and outside a firm. Activities that promote social sustainability also include a dedication to and engagement in the community, and an organization may be socially responsible to the public, stakeholders, and itself through CR. Thus,

FELDA's constant relationship with multiple stakeholders may increase the settlers' sustainability performance in the long term by assisting, developing, and maintaining valuable intangible assets of both internal and external benefits (Su & Swanson, 2019).

3.3 Environmental wellbeing

The health of the environment is one of the main components of sustainability. Therefore, environmental concerns are crucial for firms' pledges and sustainable business strategies (Ruokonen & Temmes, 2019). The performance of environmental mitigation programmes organised by an organization is measured against natural and non-living elements of natural systems, such as air, land, and water. Environmental wellbeing also includes well-known aspects like robust and diverse ecosystems, which include fewer factors below the surface, like the regional effects of technology transfer (Rela et al., 2020). Environmental CSR (ECSR) initiatives put forth by businesses can lessen the negative effects on the environment by practicing waste management, energy conservation, and resource management in order to gain favorable outcomes on the FELDA settlers' and FELDA's sustainability performance (Rela, et al., 2020).

3.3 Financial wellbeing

Tapping corporate responsibility (CR) into practice enhances an organisation's reputation and fosters respect, which may boost sales. The stakeholder theory establishes that businesses should strive for the most significant long-term advantage in the three areas of sustainability, which are people, planet, and profit. Because there are CR spillover effects across the business networks, an organization's strong CR performance does impact its suppliers' and rivals' financial returns.

Likewise, financial wellbeing affects the quality of life, and an individual's level of financial wellbeing positively affects his or her self-assuredness and fulfilment in life (Oquaye et al., 2022). Thus, it can be argued that better financial wellbeing, more sustainable life for the FELDA settlers. Furthermore, on the organisational level, attending to employees' financial wellbeing is a social responsibility where actions are taken to contribute to a larger social good. Thus, promoting financial wellbeing contributes to organisations' CR goals, which have been displayed to improve image and trust. Hence, by fostering the settler's financial wellbeing, FELDA may improve its sustainability.

3.4 Physical Wellbeing

Corporate social and environmental responsibility (CSER) aims to improve the lives of society's poor, elderly, children, youth, and those with disabilities. Johansson (2022) examined the research on the connection between CSER and physical activity and how CSER influences population health behaviour.

CSER initiatives are supposed to help address environmental concerns, promote physical and emotional wellbeing, and change the health behaviour of both internal and external stakeholders. Responsible executives are anticipated to aid their organisations in implementing population health improvement plans (Maak et al., 2016). To fulfill social obligations and enhance the health and wellbeing of all their stakeholders, FELDA should mobilise resources to encourage physical activity in society.

3.5 Intellectual wellbeing

Bananuka (2021) discovered that intellectual capital is highly connected with sustainability reporting methods in Uganda's financial services organisations. This means that an increase in the level of intellectual capital will result in the degree of sustainability reporting practices. Nakyeyune et al. (2022) postulated a positive relationship between intellectual capital and sustainability reporting practice. Besides, intellectual capital also plays a significant part in determining regional competitiveness, and it is thought that the most critical intellectual resources are those that lead to the formation of competitive advantage and, as a result, can improve the economic situation of a region (Januškaite & Užiene 2018)

To summarize, the literature review explains the factors of FELDA settlers' social wellbeing, environmental wellbeing, financial wellbeing, physical wellbeing, intellectual wellbeing, and corporate responsibility as the mediating role towards sustainability, as shown in Figure 1.

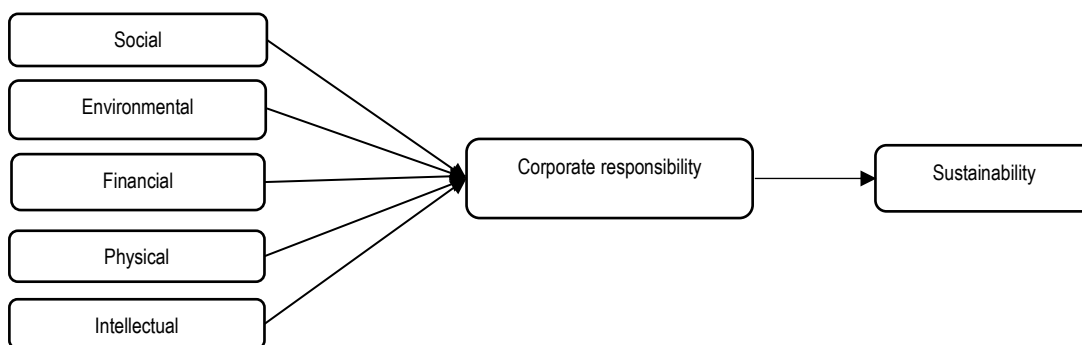


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

4.0 Methodology

A quantitative approach with preliminary data 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, physical, intellectual, corporate responsibility, 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. In order to get a higher power and for better accuracy, researchers decided to set it at 204 respondents.

4.1 Respondents Demographic

The demographic profiling, as per Table 1, includes gender, age, service length (years), income per month, and the number of households. Of the 204 responses, 55.9% are male, and 44.1% percent are female. Then, 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%. Next, 61.8% of the settlers have served more than ten years, 29.4% are 6 – 10 years old, and only 8.8% have served between 1 – 5 years. Then, the highest category of income 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 higher monthly income of RM5,500 – RM7,499. Finally, 64.7% of settlers have 1 – 3 people per household. Their children are married or have left their homes 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

5.0 Analysis and Results

Researchers used partial least squares (PLS) modelling using the SmartPLS 4.0 version (Ringle et al., 2022) 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 suggestion of Kock (2015) by testing the full collinearity. In this method as per Table 2, all the variables will be regressed against a common variable, and if the VIF ≤ 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	Intellectual	Physical	Social
1.041	1.12	1.185	1.104	1.062

5.1 Measurement model

Researchers tested the model developed using a 2-step approach, the measurement model to assess the instruments' validity and reliability, and the structural model to examine the hypothesis developed. First, researchers measured the loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and the composite reliability (CR) for the measurement model. The loadings values should be ≥

0.5, the AVE should be ≥ 0.5 , and the CR should be ≥ 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 after removing 20% of low loading items, with only five 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 ≤ 0.90 ; as such, researchers can conclude that the respondents understood the seven 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 Responsibility	CR1	0.642	0.516	0.804
	CR2	0.835		
	CR3	0.828		
	CR4	0.519		
Environmental	Env1	0.728	0.553	0.783
	Env2	0.579		
	Env3	0.891		
Financial	Fin1	0.747	0.533	0.82
	Fin3	0.779		
	Fin4	0.699		
	Fin5	0.691		
	Fin2	0.728		
Intellectual	Int1	0.73	0.543	0.824
	Int2	0.589		
	Int3	0.771		
	Int4	0.835		
Physical	Phy1	0.926	0.72	0.836
	Phy4	0.764		
Social	Soc1	0.806	0.58	0.803
	Soc3	0.641		
	Soc5	0.824		
Sustainability	Sus1	0.755	0.535	0.819
	Sus2	0.743		
	Sus3	0.827		
	Sus4	0.578		

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

Table 4. Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

	Corporate Responsibility	Environmental	Financial	Intellectual	Physical	Social	Sustainability
Corporate Responsibility							
Environmental	0.316						
Financial	0.441	0.127					
Intellectual	0.315	0.338	0.297				
Physical	0.331	0.125	0.39	0.304			
Social	0.274	0.171	0.228	0.269	0.199		
Sustainability	0.374	0.305	0.372	0.392	0.139	0.215	

5.2 Structural model

As Jammalamadaka et al. (2020) recommended, 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. (2022), 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. Table 5 shows the summary of the criteria for hypotheses testing, and researchers also assessed the model's predictive power, that is $PLS_{predict}(Q^2)$ of 0.157 (moderate) for corporate responsibility and 0.086 (weak) for sustainability degree of predictive power, respectively. To test the mediation hypotheses, researchers followed the procedures by bootstrapping the indirect effect. Since the confidence interval does not straddle a 0, it can be concluded that there is significant mediation, as shown in Table 5, for Social Wellbeing \rightarrow CR \rightarrow Sustainability ($\beta = 0.047, p < 0.05$) and Financial Wellbeing \rightarrow CR \rightarrow Sustainability ($\beta = 0.085, p < 0.05$). Additionally, the confidence intervals bias was corrected by 95% and did not show any intervals straddling a 0 for the direct relationship of CR \rightarrow Sustainability ($\beta = 0.305, p < 0.05$), thus confirming the findings. Therefore, H1, H3 and H6 were supported. However, Environmental Wellbeing \rightarrow CR \rightarrow Sustainability ($\beta = 0.045, p > 0.05$), Physical Wellbeing \rightarrow CR \rightarrow Sustainability ($\beta = 0.033, p > 0.05$), Intellectual Wellbeing \rightarrow CR \rightarrow Sustainability ($\beta = 0.037, p > 0.05$) of H2, H4 and H5 were not supported.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Indirect Effects

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-values	p-values	BCI LL	BCI UL
H1	Social -> CR -> Sustainability	0.047	0.022	2.133	0.033	0.004	0.088
H2	Environmental -> CR -> Sustainability	0.045	0.024	1.86	0.063	-0.002	0.086
H3	Financial -> CR -> Sustainability	0.085	0.027	3.145	0.002	0.034	0.134
H4	Physical -> CR -> Sustainability	0.033	0.022	1.482	0.138	-0.013	0.075
H5	Intellectual -> CR -> Sustainability	0.037	0.021	1.76	0.078	-0.001	0.078

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

Table 6 Hypothesis Testing Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-values	p-values	BCI LL	BCI UL	f ²	VIF
H6	CR -> Sustainability	0.305	0.058	5.266	0.000	0.165	0.399	0.105	1.000

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

6.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The new business model introduced by Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) in 2019 requires urgent attention and action to eradicate the settlers' poverty and improve their wellbeing. FELDA, as a rural development agency, has the mandate and objectives to elevate the socio-economic wellbeing of the poor and landless, including now FELDA's younger generation through the land development scheme. However, the scheme's efficacy, success, and sustainability could be threatened by a number of demographic factors, including aging settlers burdened with burgeoning debts, urban migration, and the influx of foreign workers. Nevertheless, the FELDA settler's long overdue quality of life improvement is prolonged by the unsettled mismanagement of bureaucracy (Abdullah et al., 2022).

For the business model's continued viability and sustainability, it is imperative and timely for the leadership and management of FELDA to revisit and formulate its strategic action plan and to be able to realistically carry its corporate role to enhance the industry attractiveness, including providing fairer, rewarding and more competitive employment and remuneration packages to attract the younger generation (Johan & Nasir, 2021; Johan et al., 2022). The hypothesis testing postulated that corporate responsibility (CR) mediates between FELDA settlers' social and financial wellbeing for indirect effects. Accordingly, CR is significant towards sustainability indirect effects. It is crucial to highlight that CR has the highest t-value of 5.266, followed by financial of 3.145 and social of 2.133, which indicates corporate responsibility is the strongest predictor in this study (Liang & Renneboog, 2020). Consequently, PLS_{predict} (Q2) of 0.157 is moderate and indicates the model has a moderate predictive power for corporate responsibility. However, the environmental, physical, and intellectual wellbeing are not supported as there might be less awareness of the importance of protecting the environment; that is, land clearing for replanting purposes. Likewise, health and physical fitness may not be a priority among the settlers, and intellectual wellbeing could be a short-term need instead of acquiring skills and knowledge for lifelong learning among the settlers in FELDA Moakil.

Since the research work is purely quantitative and only focused on one settlers area, which is FELDA Moakil, researchers propose a holistic approach for future research of both qualitative and quantitative studies starting with observation at selected FELDA locations, semi-structured interviews with the aging, second and third generation settlers to further understand the issues and challenges faced by settlers and whether the new business model is effective and efficient in its implementation.

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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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