



Decent Work and Social Sustainability: A Conceptual Model

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Abstract

Numerous prior researchers have utilized various variables to substantiate their findings, given the inconsistent conceptualization of decent work across various dimensions. This paper seeks to introduce a conceptual framework for examining the correlation between the pillars of decent work and social sustainability. Employing the lens of PWT, the study uncovers that the four pillars of decent work (employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue) significantly impact social sustainability. Future research is recommended to delve into the interplay of the psychology of working, as these factors are anticipated to affect decent work.

Keywords: Decent Work; Sustainable Development Goals; Social Sustainability; Employment

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1.0 Introduction

Decent work means that everyone has the opportunity to find productive work, receive a fair wage, experience job security, and benefit from social protection for families. It also provides better opportunities for self-development and social integration. The vision for decent work is to promote economic growth, productive employment, and fair work for everyone, as highlighted in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The United Nations established 17 interlinked SDG goals in 2015 that need to be protected and completed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the year 2030. However, progress toward this agenda was slow even before the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO, 2020). The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, exposed weaknesses in social, political, economic, and ecological systems, and intensified its effects (ILO, 2020).

In Malaysia, the Economic Growth Cluster comprises goals 8, 9, and 17, focusing on encouraging internal and international collaboration to promote social sustainability among industry players and achieve full employment for long-term economic growth. SDG 8 contains decent work and economic growth, emphasizing both gender rights and preventing individuals from falling into poverty. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure fall under SDG 9, which aims to implement a sustainable environment, provide universal access to the Internet, electricity, and quality education. SDG 10 focuses on partnerships for the goals that support organizations and people in achieving fair trading conditions for producers and workers (DOSM, 2019). These goals are expected to bring about full and productive employment and decent work for both women and men worldwide by 2030. In the meantime, the world agreed with 195 nations on Sustainable Development Goals in 2012 to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) initiated in 2000, which helped reduce

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people in poverty. However, the United Nations set up 17 interlinked goals (known as SDG) in 2015 that need to be protected and completed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by 2030.

In relation to this, Stuart et al. (2016) explained in their study that decent work comprises five dimensions: pay, health and safety, work-life balance, terms of employment, and the intrinsic characteristics of work/satisfaction. In the following year, Duffy et al. (2017) highlighted that decent work includes five components: a safe work environment, access to health care, adequate earnings, hours that allow for free time and rest, and organizational values congruent with family and social values. In contrast, Mark et al. (2018) used a unique set of decent work principles such as pay, conditions, contracts, management, and representation in their study. As evident in a study by Duffy et al. (2016), many studies in the past used different variables to support outcomes. This inconsistency in conceptualizing decent work arises because the study of decent work is relatively new, with most studies still exploring and at the theory-building stage. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to conceptualize the variables related to decent work. The findings of this study are anticipated to represent the variables that constitute the pillars for decent work and its impact on social sustainability.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Social Sustainability

Nowadays, sustainable development is considered a comprehensive approach, not relying solely on environmental protection but also encompassing socioeconomic variables that contribute to improving the life quality of society (Yumashev, 2020). Abbas et al. (2022) define social sustainability as a derivation of the idea of sustainability that encompasses the principles of human development, quality of life, and subjective well-being for the entire human population. From a sustainable development approach, decent work refers to those working conditions that respect the fundamental rights of workers in terms of health and safety, remuneration, physical and mental integrity, personal growth and social integration, empowerment, and equal opportunity (Navajas, 2019).

While sustainability was initially concerned with environmental matters, the concept of sustainable development has expanded to include the social dimension as a crucial part of development (Sheehy and Farneti, 2021). This extension of the concept to emphasize the economic and social dimensions is reflected in the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the UN (ILO, 2020). Social sustainability involves understanding and managing both positive and negative corporate impacts on people. In this case, social capital has a direct impact on human capital (Ali et al., 2012). The quality of a company's relationships and interaction with its stakeholders is crucial (Pfajfar et al., 2022). Companies have direct or indirect consequences on employees, workers in the value chain, customers, and local communities, and it is essential to manage these impacts proactively (Shekarian et al., 2022). Additionally, Allam et al. (2022) highlighted that initiatives to attain social sustainability may open up new markets, aid in retaining and attracting business partners, or be the source of innovation for new product and service lines. Moreover, employee morale and involvement may increase, while productivity, risk management, and company-community interaction may improve. Several study in the past have discovered the factors that influenced social sustainability which includes diversity practices and safety and health practices (Shaharudin et al., 2022) and decent work (Santos, 2023).

2.2 Decent Work

Decent work is a multi-dimensional concept encompassing various perspectives such as psychological factors like work motivation, as well as considerations for physical and mental health. It entails fundamental individual rights, human needs, and social justice. Despite its multi-faceted nature, previous studies, including those by Duffy and Bluestein (2019), have often utilized the four pillars of decent work. In assessing the appropriateness of these pillars, this study proposes employment creation, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogues as the primary variables to represent the construct of decent work. According to Zammiti et al. (2021), the International Labour Organization (ILO) identifies workers' rights, employment, social protection, and social dialogue as integral components of promoting employment, ensuring labor rights, providing social protection, and fostering social dialogue. The ILO adopted the Declaration on Fair Globalization in 2008, establishing the Decent Work Agenda and its four pillars as the foundational framework for all ILO initiatives (Kaufmann, 2008). Consequently, the ILO stands as the leading global authority on the concept of full employment and decent work, a principle embraced by various UN organizations, programs, and funding bodies (MacNaughton, & Frey, 2011).

2.2.1 Employment Creation

Employment creation is a component of the broader construct of decent work, with employment opportunities (EO) serving as a specific dimension. Employment opportunities focus on the availability of alternative jobs, providing workers with choices for personal and professional enhancement. This advancement presents both possibilities for improved remuneration and professional development, whether as an employee or entrepreneur. As highlighted by Lerche (2012), employee creation is concerned with ensuring employment while considering the quality and variety of work. According to Reddy et al. (2021), companies have demonstrated efforts to offer opportunities for individuals seeking employment in both formal and informal sectors, encompassing self-employment, unpaid family work, and wage employment. Khaskheli, et al. (2023) emphasize that the sustainability and growth of the sector are crucial for economic development and the ongoing employment of workers.

2.2.2 Social Protection

Social protection refers to workers' and families' perceptions of being socially protected in the case of illness or unemployment through a system of social security and the prospect of a decent retirement (Kaiser, 2021; Ferraro et al., 2015). In other words, ensuring safe

workplaces and preserving workers' health, livelihoods, and pensions must be prioritized. Workers and their families should be provided with sufficient financial and other protections in the event of health emergencies and other contingencies (Tessier et al., 2022). This dimension reflects workers' expectations regarding what society can or should do in the long term to acknowledge or reciprocate the effort committed at work (Ferraro et al., 2015). It also recognizes the necessity for measures that reduce insecurity associated with potential job and livelihood losses, including precarious employment, pension issues, and termination of employment (ILO, 2015).

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (2020) focuses on preventing, managing, and overcoming problems that seriously affect individuals' well-being. Beland et al. (2022) emphasize policies and programs designed to minimize inequality and vulnerability, enabling individuals to manage economic and social risks more effectively, such as unemployment. In agreement with Kolot et al. (2020) and Fields (2003), social protection is related to individuals' social, safety, occupational health, and economic well-being.

2.2.3 Rights at Work

Pereira et al. (2019) emphasized that rights at work constitute a dimension that gauges the extent to which decent work embodies values such as dignity, participation, freedom, non-discrimination, trust, and procedural and interactional justice within the work context. As supported by Roessler et al. (2012), these rights are grounded in basic human rights outlined by ILO conventions. It is imperative that women and men are afforded equal opportunities and fair treatment at work, encompassing the prevention of discrimination and ensuring access to work, along with the ability to balance work with family life (Riguer, 2008). Nevertheless, Runtunuwu (2023) agreed with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) declares that rights at work extend to the right of everyone to secure opportunities for a livelihood through freely chosen or accepted work. It further asserts that appropriate measures should be taken to safeguard this work, as human rights are protected by the law, and employers are obligated to adhere to these principles (Mantouvalou, 2022).

2.2.4 Social Dialogue

Social dialogue encompasses any negotiations, discussions, or decision-making processes where employees are not only given the opportunity to participate but also encouraged to voice their opinions on various work and organizational issues (De Stefano, 2023). Similarly, as noted by Parreira (2022), social dialogue refers to agreements, debates, or decision-making within the workplace, providing staff with the chance to contribute and express their opinions on relevant work and organizational matters.

Many business owners and managers have identified renegotiating employment contracts for workers as an alternative method of engaging in social dialogue (Kramer, 2022). As advocated by Riguer (2008), employees should be treated with respect at work, have the freedom to express their concerns, and be able to participate in decision-making processes regarding their terms and conditions of work. The ILO reported that social dialogue involves the processes through which employers and employees address work-related issues, ensuring equity, including the right to join trade unions and engage in collective bargaining. Employees should have the freedom to join organizations that collectively represent their interests and express their concerns (Singh et al., 2022; Riguer, 2008). Involving strong and independent organizations of workers and employers is crucial to avoiding disputes at work and enhancing the negotiating power of workers (Levin and Pucket, 2022). The practice of social dialogue is linked to the freedom of association and the protection of employees' entitlements (Zimmer, 2022).

3.0 Methodology

In general, a literature review is often perceived as a methodical approach to compiling and analyzing earlier studies (Synder, 2019). This study employs an integrated literature review approach to evaluate prior literature, consistent with the approach used by Shaharudin et al. (2022). An integrated review typically aims to assess a research issue in a manner that fosters the emergence of new theoretical frameworks and perspectives (Torraco, 2005). The method applied in this study follows the five-stage integrative review method (Russell, 2005), encompassing conceptual problem identification, literature search, assessment, analysis, and the development of a model based on the interpreted results.

4.0 Development of Conceptual Framework

The underpinning theory for this study is derived from the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT). Blustein (2016, 2006) initially presented this theory as a critique of prevailing discourses in vocational psychology that valued the lives of individuals with individual control over their professional decisions. As the critique progressed, a viewpoint was created that offered a detailed analysis of the psychological nature of current working experiences (Blustein, 2006, 2013).

In alignment with the decent work agenda, the PWT incorporates an activist, social justice point of view that aims to connect individual analyses of work-related issues to broader social and economic factors. These factors play a crucial role in understanding the distribution of resources and access to decent work (Blustein, 2006, 2013). However, Duffy et al. (2016) have developed an innovation theory of the Psychology of Working (PWT), seeking to identify the most important antecedents and outcomes of decent work. The PWT proposes an experimentally verified model based on the PWT's concepts, placing decent work at the core of all individuals' work experiences to achieve the goals of social sustainability.

As shown in Figure 1, the study advances the proposition that the multifaceted dynamics of employment creation, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogues collectively wield a significant impact on the overarching concept of social sustainability. This

assertion is examined and elucidated through the insightful lens of the PWT, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate interplay between these essential pillars and their implications for fostering sustainable social structures. This conceptual framework emerges from the underpinning theory aligned with this study, corroborated by the suggestions of the International Labour Organization in 2020, thereby contributing to the discourse on the intersection of decent work and social sustainability.

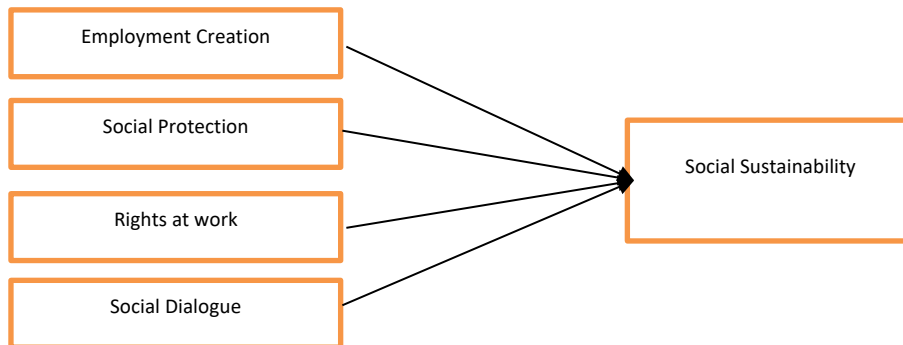


Fig. 1: The Conceptual Model

5.0 Proposition Development

Specifically, higher levels of employment opportunities are anticipated to lead to increased community well-being, reduced income inequality, improved access to social services, and heightened overall societal resilience. This expectation is grounded in the premise that a robust job market not only ensures economic stability for individuals but also fosters social cohesion, thereby playing a pivotal role in advancing sustainable social structures. Hence, this study proposes the following:

Proposition 1: The extent of employment creation positively correlates with and significantly contributes to enhanced social sustainability.

A higher level of social protection measures is anticipated to result in improved overall well-being within communities, reduced social disparities, increased resilience to economic shocks, and enhanced access to essential services. This expectation is grounded in the premise that a robust social protection framework acts as a buffer against vulnerability, fostering a more equitable and sustainable social environment. Accordingly, this study puts forth the following proposition:

Proposition 2: Comprehensive social protection positively correlates with and significantly contributes to the advancement of social sustainability.

Furthermore, a higher emphasis on and implementation of rights at work is expected to lead to increased social justice, improved labor conditions, reduced inequalities, and heightened overall societal well-being. This expectation is based on the premise that recognizing and safeguarding rights at work contributes to the creation of a fair and just social framework, fostering sustainable and harmonious societal structures. Hence, this leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 3: The protection and promotion of rights at work are positively associated with and significantly contribute to the enhancement of social sustainability.

Finally, a higher emphasis on engagement in social dialogue is expected to lead to increased community involvement, strengthened social cohesion, reduced conflicts, and heightened overall societal resilience. This is based on the premise that fostering open and inclusive social dialogue contributes to the development of a more cooperative and interconnected social fabric, thereby promoting sustainable and harmonious societal structures. Hence, this leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 4: Active facilitation of social dialogue is positively correlated with and significantly contributes to the advancement of social sustainability.

6.0 Conclusion

This paper proposes the four pillars of decent work based on the ILO suggestion: employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue, which collectively impact social sustainability. These pillars, widely employed in previous studies, have the potential to gain increased relevance across various research concepts. In this case, the study proposes a conceptual model of decent work and social sustainability for a better and more precise explanation of the linkage within the SDG 8 principles. The proposed conceptual framework is supported by the PWT, elucidating the underlying impact of employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue. Additionally, since decent work lacks concrete variables for testing in past studies, this study introduces the four pillars

to conceptualize these variables. In terms of future research, the study suggests exploring the interplay of the psychology of working, as these factors are expected to influence decent work.

Paper Contribution to Field of Study

The study makes several key contributions to the field of decent work. It synthesizes and integrates findings from previous research, identifying core dimensions such as pay, health and safety, work-life balance, and organizational values. Through the lens of PWT, the study addresses inconsistencies in the conceptualization of decent work, aiming to provide a more standardized framework. Additionally, the study recognizes the field's early stage in theory-building and proposes a set of variables to advance theoretical development. Lastly, the research anticipates the impact of decent work on social sustainability, emphasizing its broader societal implications.

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