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Determining the Quality of Industrial Relations through ESG Practices in the Palm Oil Industry

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Abstract:

This study examines the effect of the social dimension of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), proxied by Employment, Training, and Supplier Social, on industrial relations in the palm oil industry.

This study employs a quantitative approach using panel data regression. The sample consists of 11 palm oil companies listed on the Indonesia Stock Exchange during 2022–2024. The Random Effects Model (REM) with Estimated Generalized Least Squares (EGLS) is applied.

Supplier Social has a positive and significant effect on industrial relations, while Employment and Training are not significant. However, all variables are jointly significant.

The study is limited by a small sample size and short observation period, which may affect generalizability.

Firms should strengthen supply chain ESG practices to improve industrial relations.

This study extends ESG research by focusing on industrial relations using disaggregated social variables in the palm oil industry.

Keywords: ESG social dimension; industrial relations; supply chain responsibility; palm oil industry; sustainable HRM

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concept of Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) has become a key paradigm in global business practices. Companies are no longer expected merely to generate financial profits but also to ensure social and environmental sustainability, including in human resource management. The social dimension of ESG specifically emphasizes the importance of fair, safe, and inclusive labor practices, which ultimately contribute to organizational stability (Njideka Phina Onyekwelu et al., 2024).

In line with this, attention to industrial relations has been growing as harmonious relations between companies and their workforce are a key factor in maintaining productivity, reducing conflicts, and enhancing the company's sustainability (Wang, 2024). The palm oil industry is one of Indonesia's strategic sectors, characterized by being labor-intensive and highly prone to labor conflicts. Issues such as uncertain employment status, poor training quality, and labor practices within the supply chain are frequently highlighted, both at the national and international levels.

In addition, global pressure for sustainable practices in the palm oil industry is increasing, particularly regarding ESG standards. However, the implementation of ESG in this sector still tends to focus on environmental aspects, while the social dimension, specifically regarding the quality of industrial relations, has not yet been extensively studied empirically (Naidu & Moorthy, 2021).

This research is also closely linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda, specifically:

1. SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, which emphasizes the importance of decent work, labor protection, and increased productivity through skills development. Variables such as Employment and Training directly reflect companies' efforts to create decent and sustainable working conditions (Santos, 2023).
2. SDG 5: Gender Equality, which relates to diversity and inclusion practices in the workplace. Although not explicitly a primary variable, the social dimension of ESG still reflects a commitment to equality in the workplace (Omenihu, Abdrakhmanova, & Koufopoulos, 2025).
3. SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, particularly in the context of corporate responsibility toward the supply chain. The Supplier Social variable indicates how companies ensure responsible labor practices not only internally but also among partners in the supply chain (Macchion, 2024).

This study contributes not only to the development of ESG and human resource management literature but also provides practical implications for achieving SDG targets, particularly in fostering harmonious and sustainable industrial relations within the palm oil industry.

Previous studies have widely examined the impact of ESG on corporate performance, particularly financial performance indicators such as ROA, ROE, and firm value (Chouaibi, Chouaibi, & Rossi, 2022; Tamasiga, Onyeaka, Bakwena, & Ouassou, 2024). Other research highlights that ESG contributes to employee well-being, corporate reputation, and risk reduction (Handoyo & Anas, 2024). However, most of these studies rely on aggregated ESG indices and focus primarily on financial outcomes (Alsayegh, Abdul Rahman, & Homayoun, 2020; Piao, Xie, & Managi, 2022).

In contrast, limited attention has been given to the social dimension of ESG from a human resource perspective, particularly its relationship with industrial relations. Furthermore, existing studies rarely employ disaggregated ESG variables, such as employment practices, training, and supply chain responsibility, which are essential in understanding internal organizational dynamics.

Despite the growing body of ESG literature, several gaps remain. First, most studies focus on financial performance rather than internal organizational outcomes such as industrial relations (Moreira, Rodrigues, & Ferreira, 2025). Second, there is limited research examining ESG from a human resource perspective (Salles, Ramos, Barros, & Veloso, 2023). Third, previous studies tend to use aggregated ESG indices, which may obscure the specific effects of individual ESG components (Crace & Gehman, 2023). Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by focusing on disaggregated ESG social variables and their impact on industrial relations in the palm oil sector.

Building upon the identified research gaps, this study offers several key contributions to the existing literature. First, it shifts the focus of ESG research from financial performance to internal social performance, particularly industrial relations. Second, this study employs a disaggregated ESG approach by examining specific social indicators: Employment, Training, and Supplier Social, rather than relying on aggregated ESG indices. Third, it integrates ESG and industrial relations perspectives into a unified empirical framework. Finally, this study provides empirical evidence from the Indonesian palm oil industry, which remains relatively underexplored in sustainability and human resource management research.

In line with these contributions, this study seeks to address several key research questions concerning the role of ESG social dimensions in shaping industrial relations. Specifically, it investigates whether Employment influences the quality of industrial relations, whether Training contributes to improving industrial relations, and whether Supplier Social affects industrial relations. Furthermore, this study also examines whether these variables simultaneously influence the quality of industrial relations.

Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to analyze the effect of Employment, Training, and Supplier Social on industrial relations in the palm oil industry. More specifically, this study aims to examine both the individual (partial) effects of each variable as well as their combined (simultaneous) influence on the quality of industrial relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grand Theory

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory asserts that companies are not only accountable to shareholders but also to all stakeholders, including employees, the community, and partners in the supply chain. In the context of ESG, the social dimension reflects a company's responsibility toward the well-being of its workforce and harmonious labor relations (Panwar, Kardam, Narayan, & Kamble, 2024; Snell, Wu, & Lei, 2022).

Consequently, practices such as: Improving workforce quality (Employment); Skill development (Training); Social responsibility in the supply chain (Supplier Social) will strengthen trust and relationships between the company and its workers, thereby enhancing the quality of industrial relations.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory explains that the relationship between individuals and organizations is based on the principle of reciprocity. When a company provides fair treatment, training, and protection for its workforce, employees will respond with loyalty, commitment, and reduced conflict. In this context, ESG practices serve as a form of social investment by the company, which will be rewarded with improved industrial relations (Abd-El-Salam, 2023).

Supporting Theories

Human Capital Theory

This theory states that investment in human capital development, such as training and skill enhancement, will increase productivity and improve workforce quality. The variable training serves as the primary representation of such investment (Rahman & Akhter, 2021).

Industrial Relations Theory

Industrial relations theory emphasizes the importance of balancing the interests of workers and the company (Wardani, Dwiyantri, & Supriyanto, 2022). Good industrial relations are characterized by:

- a. Minimal conflict
- b. Effective communication
- c. Fairness in labor relations

The variable Labor Relations reflects the quality of these relations.

Sustainability & ESG Theory

According to Wardani et al. (2022) the ESG concept emphasizes the integration of social aspects into business strategy. The social dimension of ESG plays a role in:

1. Improving worker well-being
2. Strengthening internal organizational relations
3. Maintaining social legitimacy

Conceptual Framework

Harmonious industrial relations are the result of sound human resource management practices. In the ESG context, the social dimension provides a framework for companies to improve the quality of their relationships with the workforce.

Good employment practices (Employment) foster a sense of security and fairness among workers. Furthermore, competency development through Training enhances workforce capacity and reduces the potential for conflicts arising from skill mismatches. On the other hand, social responsibility in the supply chain (Supplier Social) ensures that labor standards are comprehensively applied, thereby strengthening the company's legitimacy.

Based on stakeholder theory and social exchange theory, these practices will generate positive reciprocal relationships, reflected in improved industrial relations (Labor Relations).

Conceptually, the relationships among the variables can be illustrated as follows:

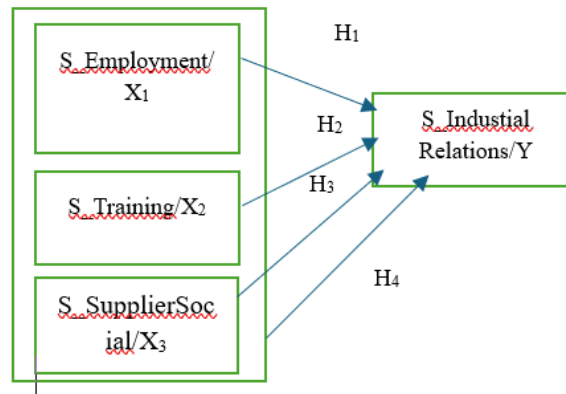


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: (developed by the authors, 2026)

Notes:

- a. Independent variables: Employment, Training, Supplier Social
- b. Dependent variable: Labor Relations

Hypothesis Development

1. The Effect of Employment on Labor Relations

Good employment practices enhance a sense of fairness and job security, which ultimately strengthens the relationship between workers and the company.

H1: Employment has a positive effect on Labor Relations

2. The Effect of Training on Labor Relations

Training improves workers' competence and self-confidence, thereby reducing conflicts and improving the quality of industrial relations.

H2: Training has a positive effect on Labor Relations

3. The Effect of Supplier Social on Labor Relations

Social responsibility in the supply chain fosters fair working standards across the board, which contributes to the stability of industrial relations.

H3: Supplier Social has a positive effect on Labor Relations

4. The Simultaneous Effect of ESG Variables on Industrial Relations

Collectively, ESG practices in the social dimension will strengthen industrial relations by improving the well-being, competence, and fairness of the workforce.

H4: Employment, Training, and Supplier Social simultaneously influence Labor Relations

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design, aiming to test the causal relationship between independent and dependent variables in the context of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices, specifically the social dimension on the quality of industrial relations in the palm oil industry. A quantitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on

hypothesis testing using numeric data processed statistically, thereby providing conclusions that are objective and generalizable.

The population in this study consists of 11 companies in the palm oil industry listed on the Indonesia Stock Exchange. This sector was selected based on the industry's labor-intensive nature and the high complexity of its industrial relations, making it relevant to the study's objectives. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, which involves selecting samples based on specific criteria tailored to the research needs. The criteria used include companies that were consistently listed during the observation period, published annual reports or sustainability reports, and had complete ESG data, particularly in social dimensions such as Employment, Training, Supplier Social, and Labor Relations.

The variables in this study are measured using a content analysis approach based on ESG disclosures reported in annual reports and sustainability reports. Each indicator is evaluated using a binary scoring method. Specifically, a score of **1** is assigned if the company discloses information related to a particular ESG indicator, and **0** if the information is not disclosed. This approach allows for a standardized and objective assessment of ESG practices across companies.

The total score for each variable is calculated by summing the disclosed indicators and, if necessary, normalizing the score to ensure comparability across firms and periods. This binary measurement method is widely used in ESG and sustainability research to capture the presence or absence of specific practices.

This study uses panel data combining time-series and cross-sectional observations for the period 2022–2024. The variables in this study consist of independent variables and dependent variables. The independent variables include Employment, which describes the quality of employment practices; Training, which reflects the level of workforce competency development; and Supplier Social, which indicates corporate social responsibility within the supply chain. Meanwhile, the dependent variable in this study is Labor Relations, which represents the quality of industrial relations between the company and the workforce. The “S” notation in each variable indicates that the variable is part of the Social dimension within the ESG framework.

The data analysis technique used in this study is panel data regression using EViews software. The regression model was formulated to test the effects of Employment, Training, and Supplier Social on Labor Relations. Model estimation was conducted using several approaches, namely the Common Effect Model, Fixed Effect Model, and Random Effect Model. To determine the most appropriate model, a series of tests were conducted, namely the Chow test to compare the Common Effect Model and the Fixed Effect Model, the Hausman test to choose between the Fixed Effect Model and the Random Effect Model, and the Lagrange Multiplier test to determine the choice between the Common Effect Model and the Random Effect Model.

Next, to ensure that the model used meets sound statistical assumptions, classical assumption tests were conducted, including tests for normality, multicollinearity, heteroscedasticity, and autocorrelation. These tests aim to ensure that the regression estimation results are unbiased and can be validly interpreted.

Hypothesis testing in this study was conducted using the t-test to determine the partial effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable, as well as the F-test to examine the simultaneous effect of the independent variables. Additionally, the coefficient of determination (R²) was used to measure the extent to which the independent variables explain the variation in the dependent variable. All tests were conducted at a 5% significance level.

By employing this methodological approach, this study is expected to provide empirical evidence regarding the influence of ESG practices in the social dimension on the quality of industrial relations in the palm oil industry, as well as contribute to the development of sustainability-based human resource management literature.

Conceptual definitions of variables can be described as follows:

1. Employment can be described as the quality of employment practices, including workforce stability, worker protection, and decent working conditions (Nzira, Parlasca, & Qaim, 2025; Price et al., 2021).
2. Training measures the level of a company’s investment in training and workforce competency development (Ryu, Park, Park, Park, & Lee, 2021).
3. Supplier Social describes a company’s social responsibility toward workers in the supply chain, including compliance with labor standards (Ishaya, Paraskevadakis, Bury, & Bryde, 2025; Oluwafunmilayo Esan, Funmilayo Aribidesi Ajayi, & Olufunke Olawale, 2024)
4. Industrial Relations (Labor Relations) represents the quality of industrial relations between the company and workers, including communication, conflict, and relations with labor unions (Ishaya et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Model Selection Results

Table 1. Multicollinearity Test

| | x1 | x2 | x3 |
|----|----------|----------|----------|
| x1 | 1.000000 | 0.207279 | 0.396412 |
| x2 | 0.207279 | 1.000000 | 0.431382 |
| x3 | 0.396412 | 0.431382 | 1.000000 |

Source: (EViews output data, 2026)

The results of the multicollinearity test indicate that all independent variables have correlation values below 0.8; therefore, it can be concluded that there is no multicollinearity issue in the research model. Furthermore, based on the test results, heteroscedasticity is indicated; therefore, this study employs the Estimated Generalized Least Squares (EGLS) approach with cross-section weights to produce more robust estimates. The Durbin-Watson statistic indicates no significant autocorrelation in the model, so the regression model used can be deemed suitable for further analysis.

Table 2. Panel Data Model Tests

| Test Type | Conditions | Conclusion |
|-----------|--|-------------------|
| Chow Test | H0: CEM is appropriate (prob. Value > 0.05) H1: FEM is appropriate (prob. Value < 0.05) | 0.0032 < 0.05 FEM |

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|-------------------|
| Hausman Test | H0: REM is appropriate (prob. Value > 0.05) H1: FEM is appropriate (prob. Value < 0.05) | 0.3123 > REM |
| Lagrange Multiplier Test | H0: CEM is appropriate (prob. Value > 0.05) H1: REM is appropriate (prob. Value < 0.05) | 0.0173 < 0.05 REM |

Source: (EViews output data, 2026)

Based on the results of the panel data model testing, it was found that the most appropriate model for this study is the Random Effects Model (REM). This conclusion is based on the results of the Hausman test, which yielded a p-value of 0.3123 (> 0.05), indicating that the Random Effects Model is more suitable than the Fixed Effects Model. These findings are further supported by the Lagrange Multiplier test, which showed that the Random Effects Model outperforms the Common Effects Model.

Furthermore, since heteroscedasticity was indicated, estimation was performed using the Estimated Generalized Least Squares (EGLS) method with a cross-sectional weights approach. The use of this method aims to produce estimates that are more efficient and robust against violations of classical assumptions.

Regression Estimation Results

Based on the results of data analysis using EViews with the EGLS method, the following results were obtained:

1. The constant of 1.505242 indicates that when all independent variables are assumed to be zero, the value of industrial relations remains positive.
2. The coefficient of Employment (X1) is -0.039512 with a probability of 0.7499, indicating that this variable does not have a significant effect on industrial relations.
3. The coefficient of Training (X2) is -0.040513 with a p-value of 0.6668, indicating that this variable also has no significant effect.
4. The Supplier Social coefficient (X3) is 0.403814 with a p-value of 0.0042, indicating that this variable has a positive and significant effect on industrial relations.
5. The results of the simultaneous test show a Prob(F-statistic) value of 0.021120 (< 0.05), indicating that the variables Employment, Training, and Supplier Social have a significant effect on industrial relations

The R-squared value of 0.280833 indicates that approximately 28.08% of the variation in industrial relations is explained by the independent variables in the model, while the remainder is influenced by other variables outside the scope of this study. The relatively moderate R-squared value indicates that industrial relations are influenced not only by ESG social variables but also by other factors such as organizational culture, leadership, and regulatory frameworks, which are not included in this model.

Discussion

The Effect of Employment on Industrial Relations

The results of the study indicate that Employment does not have a significant effect on industrial relations. This suggests that general employment practices, such as workforce stability or workforce size, do not necessarily directly influence the quality of industrial relations.

This finding aligns with research stating that the social dimension of ESG does not always have a direct impact on organizational performance or internal company aspects without the support of other factors such as regulations or governance (Handoyo & Anas, 2024). In other words, the existence of labor policies alone is insufficient to create harmonious industrial relations without effective implementation.

The Effect of Training on Industrial Relations

The Training variable also did not show a significant influence on industrial relations. This indicates that the training provided by the company does not necessarily improve the quality of the relationship between workers and management.

This finding can be explained by the fact that training focuses more on improving individual competencies rather than on relational aspects or social relationships among parties within the organization. Nevertheless, theoretically, training remains important in improving the quality of human resources, as explained in Human Capital Theory.

These findings differ from several studies that have found that ESG practices, including training, can improve employee engagement and well-being (Aishwarya R Shetty & Dr. Neethu Suraj, 2024). This discrepancy is likely due to the context of the palm oil industry, which features jobs that are more operational and less knowledge-based.

Overall, the findings suggest that ESG practices in the social dimension should be implemented in an integrated manner, as their collective impact is more substantial than their individual effects.

The Effect of Supplier Social on Industrial Relations

The results of the study indicate that Supplier Social has a positive and significant effect on industrial relations. This means that the better a company's social responsibility practices within the supply chain, the better the quality of industrial relations.

This finding is highly significant as it demonstrates that industrial relations are influenced not only by internal company factors but also by external practices, particularly within the supply chain. This aligns with stakeholder theory, which emphasizes the importance of relationships with all stakeholders.

Previous research has also shown that ESG practices can improve a company's relationships with stakeholders and strengthen access to resources as well as operational stability. In addition, ESG standards also cover working conditions and labor protection in a broad sense, including within the supply chain (Aishwarya R Shetty & Dr. Neethu Suraj, 2024)

The Simultaneous Influence of ESG Variables on Industrial Relations

Simultaneously, the three ESG variables in the social dimension were found to have a significant influence on industrial relations. This indicates that while not all variables are significant

when analyzed individually, ESG practices collectively play a crucial role in shaping industrial relations.

This finding supports previous research stating that the overall integration of ESG can enhance corporate performance and sustainability. Thus, the ESG approach should be viewed as an integrated system, not as standalone variables (Ahmad, Yaqub, & Lee, 2024).

These findings highlight that ESG implementation, particularly in the social dimension, should be strategically aligned with organizational practices to effectively enhance industrial relations.

Research Implications

The results of this study imply that palm oil companies need to pay closer attention to social practices within the supply chain as a key factor in improving industrial relations. In addition, companies also need to ensure that their employment and training programs are not merely administrative in nature but are also capable of enhancing the quality of social relations within the organization.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the effect of the social dimension of ESG, proxied by Employment, Training, and Supplier Social, on industrial relations in the palm oil industry. The results show that Supplier Social has a positive and significant effect, while Employment and Training do not have significant effects. However, all variables are jointly significant, indicating that ESG practices should be viewed as an integrated system rather than as isolated components.

Based on these findings, companies are encouraged to strengthen ESG practices within the supply chain, adopt a more strategic approach to human resource management, and integrate ESG principles into organizational policies. Policymakers are also expected to enhance regulations related to ESG implementation, particularly in the social dimension. Future research is recommended to include additional variables, extend the observation period, and explore cross-industry comparisons.

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