

External Mechanism of Change in Stakeholder Engagement

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Abstract

This study examines how Sime Darby Berhad (SDB); a company involved in palm oil industry do engagement with its external stakeholders when dominant stakeholders continuously give accumulated pressures. It is an in-depth case study where data is analysed from annual/sustainability reports, its official website and also other relevant secondary source documents from publicly available information such as reports, news media, websites, blogs, social media and YouTube. Bourdieu's concept of field, habitus and capital are employed to examine the engagement made by SDB. This study looks into sustainability field of palm oil industry to see how SDB positions their capital in fulfilling its own interest through multiple views engagement with its external stakeholders. It addresses the way SDB structure its position of valued capital and plan possible actions in accordance to own interest. SDB is argued just do the engagement in order to compete for legitimacy in operating its activities and engages with its external stakeholders just for their blessing and to secure its social contract. Thus, the existence of its stakeholder engagement with external stakeholders is seen as its strategies to legitimise its actions in behaving in its (un)sustainability activities. It seems that SDB designs these strategies by framing them through the deployment of specific resources, tactics and dispositions of its own interest in the field of sustainability.

Keywords: stakeholder engagement, sustainability, Bourdieu, habitus, field, capital, sustainable development

1. INTRODUCTION

The publication of social, environmental and sustainability reports has been employed by most companies in the world and has gone through for more than 20 years. In producing and publishing this social, environmental and sustainability reports, the companies voluntarily report their social, environment and sustainability issues to their stakeholders (Bellucci, Simoni, Acuti, & Manetti, 2019; Clarkson, Overell, & Chapple, 2011; Guziana & Dobers, 2013; Thorne, Mahoney, & Manetti, 2014) and as a mean of discharging external accountability through disclosure. In a way, it is a stakeholder engagement made through disclosing the sustainability issues to their stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement has become a crucial concern as stakeholders are not merely the recipients of the sustainability information but also play important role in the accounting and reporting process (Bellucci et al., 2019; Gao & Zhang, 2006; Rinaldi, 2013; Unerman, 2007). Stakeholder engagement as defined by AccountAbility (2015, p. 5) is:

“the process used by an organisation to engage relevant stakeholders for a clear purpose to achieve agreed outcomes. It is now also recognised as a fundamental accountability mechanism, since it obliges an organisation to involve stakeholders in identifying, understanding and responding to sustainability issues and concerns, and to report, explain and answer to stakeholders for decisions, actions and performance”.

The palm oil industry faces many pressures exerted by stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations (NGO) on issues of social and environment inside and outside of the country which force the companies in this

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industry to delve into sustainable development. With the increasing stakeholder demands for increased accountability on sustainability issues, more palm oil companies are not only disclosing their sustainability performance but also engage stakeholders in the sustainability accounting and reporting process. Considering that stakeholder engagement is critical to sustainability accounting and reporting in palm oil industry, the primary objective of this research is to examine the engagement with the external stakeholders in the sustainability accounting and reporting practice of palm oil companies. The scope of study in stakeholder engagement that befall in the sustainability accounting and reporting process also still remains under research (Kaur & Lodhia, 2018). Thus, this study is conducted to address these issues.

This study examines the external mechanism of change in stakeholder engagement in the sustainability accounting and reporting process of Sime Darby Berhad (SDB); a palm oil company in Malaysia. The theoretical frameworks used to analyze the findings of this case study is Bourdieu's social praxeology of habitus, field and capitals. Stakeholder engagement can take place in different forms according to the way SDB structure its position of valued capital and plan possible actions in accordance to own interest. The determination of the extent of engagement enables SDB to define the nature of the relationship they want to have with their stakeholders (AccountAbility, 2011); therefore, it can be useful to understand SDB's commitment to engage with its external stakeholder.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, we give a brief explanation of the Bourdieusian theoretical concepts of habitus, field and capitals. The paper then turns to the research methods used for this study. Follow by the result of the case study on how SDB made its stakeholder engagement. Finally, the paper writes on the discussion and conclusion.

2. BOURDIEU'S THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

This section explains the Bourdieu's theoretical concepts called habitus, field and capital where each concept is explained in relation to each other to make sense of its application. Bourdieu's theory is rich and unified to describe how actors operate in relation to each other, and within and in relation to a particular social space.

2.1 Habitus, capital and field

According to Bourdieu, habitus is created and reproduced unconsciously throughout our routine lives. Habitus refers to the physical embodiment of cultural capital that a person possess throughout the life experiences with deeply ingrained habits, skills and dispositions. In short, habitus is the DNA of a person's life which internalised part of thinking and dispositions towards behaviours. Habitus is incorporated in minds, bodies and acts accordingly to the structure which then it tends to reproduce. Habitus is seen to be produced over time through the upbringing, education and position in the fields which social agents inhabit (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 11-12; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 18-19, p.126).

Bourdieu argued that his second important concept; capital formed the foundation of social life and dictated one's position within the social order. There are several forms of capital that existed in Bourdieu's work, but the fundamental capitals are cultural, social and economic. Cultural capital involves various kinds of cultural knowledge, competencies and dispositions acquired either through formally examined or less formal means of education. Cultural capital as a type of capital is less obvious and it appears in many forms, such as books and works of art (objectified cultural capital), educational qualifications and professional credentials (institutionalised cultural capital), and linguistic competence, nature appreciation, and other "senses of distinction" (embodied cultural capital) (Everett, 2003, p. 88). Social capital refers to resources acquired through social networks and connections. Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Economic capital is immediately and directly converted into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights. Economic capital simply refers to the accumulation of money or other financial resources that can be used to purchase power, positions and people, as well as goods, services and other forms of capital (Andon, Free, & Sivabalan, 2014, p. 78).

Bourdieu believed that the social world as being divided up into a variety of distinct fields such as art, education, religion and law; for example. Field acts as structure of the social world in which the habitus operates. Habitus cannot operate and practise on its own, but in a set of social contexts or social spaces conceptualised as field; as they function fully only in relation to one another (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 19). In a field, not only is the agent's dispositions relevant, but their position in the field is also dependent on the varying forms of capital.

Bourdieu argued that a capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 101; Wacquant, 1989, p. 39). In Bourdieu's words, a field is a field of forces occupied by the agents in their own positioning to conserve or change the structure that is constitute of the field (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 30).

The relation between habitus and field can be viewed in two ways – one as relation of conditioning where the field structures the habitus, and two as cognitive construction where habitus contributes to constituting the field (Wacquant, 1989, p. 44). Field is a network of social relations among the agents or institutions within structured systems of social positions, in which they struggle over the resources, stakes and access. The field is a social space; a mediating context where structure is affected by the relations among positions held by the social agents who exist in it. The agent's dispositions originate from historical conscious and unconscious struggles. In this field, there are dominant and dominated actors who struggle for usurpation and exclusion over the mechanism of the field's reproduction (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Within that context, it can be said that a field is full of conflict and competition among participants to take control over the effective capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17). Bourdieu contends that agents are distributed in the field with these capitals: economic capital (in its different forms), cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital, according to the overall volume of capital they possess and according to the structure of their capital (Haugaard, 2002, pp. 233-234).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The SDB was selected on the basis of its operating activities; palm oil plantation is regarded as one of the most environmentally and socially sensitive issues in the country. While having substantial sustainability issues, SDB are currently among the leaders in sustainability accounting and reporting. All the information regarding those controversial sustainability issues were gathered through online newspapers, NGO's websites, social networks like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn and social connections. Data were collected from publicly available sources: documents from company's website and web disclosures. The main data sources were derived from annual and sustainability reports and other related information that provided useful insights into stakeholder engagement activities and strategies. These public sources were basic documents on which a company discloses its sustainability activities and which are publicly available. Web disclosures were also analyzed to gain insights into on-going sustainability and stakeholder engagement activities of the company.

The website and blogs of environmentalists, NGOs and others were also viewed to have an overview of the information regarding any support and appreciation of, or retaliation or protest against those activities carried out by the companies. We analysed these archival sources, back and forth, to trace events and issues regarding the companies, palm oil industry and search for laws related to the industry. This enabled us to understand the interests of the key actors and how the application of written rules in the industry lead to achieve sustainability.

This study used case study research strategy (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2009). Case study research is an empirical investigation undertaken to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon (Yin, 2009). To provide an in-depth and contextual understanding of an existing phenomenon, the case study method relies on multiple sources of documents analysis such as annual and sustainability reports, website, webpage, online press release and some NGOs websites (Gillham, 2000; Woodside, 2010; Yin, 2009). In this study, data were collected through main documents of annual/sustainability reports from year 2007 until 2019 (thirteen years period).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Association with palm oil industry

As a producer of sustainable palm oil, SDB actively subscribes to all Principles and Criteria laid by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) as the palm oil industry standard setting board. RSPO is a comprehensive standard body that involved multi-stakeholders throughout the palm oil value chain. SDB achieved RSPO certification in 2008 and it is now the largest sustainable palm oil producer.

“As one of the founding members of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), we are now the largest producer of sustainable palm oil worldwide, a testament to our belief in sustainable practices.”

(Sime Darby, 2014b, p. 9)

As a founding member of RSPO and a leading certified sustainable palm oil producer in the world, SDB has the advantage of gaining access to the international sustainable palm oil market (social capital). RSPO certification is one of the ways the company exercises its sustainability practices in palm oil industry. Unilever, SDB's major customer, believes that the company produces sustainable products under the RSPO membership. The senior vice president of sustainability at Unilever said:

“Palm oil can be six to ten times more productive than sunflower oil, and if it is cultivated correctly it can be a sustainable crop. That is what we, and our partners in the RSPO, are working towards.”

(Food Navigator-USA, 2010)

At the same time, SDB has an active participation as a working group and it attends meetings in other industry related organisations such as Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil Standard (MSPO), Malaysian Palm Oil Association (MPOA), Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB) and Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC) – in building social capital in the palm oil sector. SDB achieved 100% Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) certification for its 124 estates and 33 mills in 2018 made SDB the largest producer of MSPO certified palm oil to date with a total annual crude palm oil production capacity of approximately 1.2 million MT (Lim, 2018; Sime Darby, 2018).

4.2 Collaboration with researchers, environmentalist and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

From the annual report it seems that SDB has had collaboration with various researchers, government agency departments, NGOs and environmentalist throughout the years. These collaborations are a form of engagement that SDB has had with their various stakeholders (social and cultural capital). Among the projects are environmental, wildlife and biodiversity projects under environment, and philanthropy efforts in education, sport and the community in general. All these projects were seen as an additional effort from the company to show that it cares about the environment, wildlife and biodiversity.

4.3 Responses to sustainability issues such as High Carbon Stock (HCS) and Hot Spot Dashboard

SDB had signed the Sustainable Palm Oil Manifesto, to clearly define what constitutes a HCS forest, and establish HCS thresholds that takes into account not only environmental concerns but also socio-economic and political factors in developing and emerging economies. SDB had consulted with multiple stakeholders to get opinion on the study before it was release. HCS+ was proposed to be a guide for oil palm planters to develop plantations that are carbon neutral, conflict-free, transparent and equitable to all stakeholders (CarbonStockStudy.com, 2015; Climate Adviser, 2014; Sime Darby, 2019b). SDB practised a zero burning policy since 1985, and was recognised by the United Nations (Environment Programme's Global 500 Roll of Honour) for Environmental Achievement in 1992. In 2014, SDB set up Hot Spot Dashboard (Sime Darby, 2014a, 2015b, 2015d; The Star Online, 2015) for live reporting on any undetected fire on peat soil so that immediate respond to contain and put out the fire can be conducted. Detailed reports on a case by case basis is prepared for each of the hotspot incidence.

4.4 Sustainability related award winning

SDB pioneered the zero burning replanting technique in 1985 and it was now recognised as an industry standard. It won an award from the United Nations in 1992 for this environmental achievements. SDB won the Bronze award for Sustainability, under the Energy & Sustainability category of the 2017 Edison Awards in recognition of its achievement in developing the Genome Select oil palm (Sime Darby, 2017a, 2017b).

“To be chosen for this prestigious award among the best from 400 nominations received from around the world, by 3,000 panelists comprising the world's top senior business executives, academics and innovation professionals, is a testament of our passion and pursuit of continuous improvement in sustainable plantation practices. Essentially, this has been one of the raisons d'être of our foray into the oil palm genome research, which made the Genome Select Oil Palm planting material a reality in 2016”

(Datuk Franki, 2017b)

Most recent awards won by SDB were Most Innovative Approach to Driving Culture Change awarded by OPEX Business Transformation World Summit 2019, Best Land & Biodiversity and Special Recognition in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals category awarded by Global Initiative and Best Innovation in Sustainability awarded by EU-Malaysia Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Sime Darby, 2019a).

4.5 Habitus and disposition of capital in SDB's sustainability field

SDB has been in the palm oil plantation industry since its founded year 1910 which gives SDB a strong position in the industry. With all the capitals such as knowledge, collaboration and association with its external stakeholders, it has actually structured the habitus of SDB in the field of sustainability. This has been part of SDB's practice, created and reproduced unconsciously, "*without any deliberate pursuit of coherence... without any conscious concentration*" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). By continuously complying with Principles and Criteria of RSPO certification, collaborating with researchers, environmentalists, NGOs and government agencies and making a manifesto, SDB holds a strong position in the sustainability field. SDB made it possible to act in "*a constant invention, an improvisation that is absolutely necessary in order for one to adapt to situations that are infinitely varied*" (Lamaison, 1986). With these capital positioned in the field of sustainability, it creates good reputation, prestige and honour among the consumers, global supply chain, state and agency in the industry. Then gives SDB the power that can be exercised while engaging its stakeholders in seeing it as a legitimate sustainable palm oil producer.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was set out to examine the engagement made by SDB with its external stakeholders in the sustainability field of palm oil industry. This social practice has been viewed from the lens of Bourdieu's the inter-related notion of habitus, capitals and field. It seems that SDB put its effort in laying out its strategies by positioning its valued capital such as knowledge on sustainability (cultural capital) and social networks (social capital) with its principal external key stakeholders.

SDB made an effort for the appointment of an environmentalist as its sustainability advisor and indicated that this expert in sustainability would be able to disseminate his knowledge on sustainability practices and direct the company to do the right thing for the planet and the people. The sustainability committee in the board was also chaired by a staunch conservation activist who could advise on the decision making in relation to the sustainability actions. This made SDB the leading producer of palm oil which also follows sustainability practices as characterised by both the external and internal advisors. With such knowledgeable on sustainability issues experts SDB actually exhibits cultural capital in Bourdieu's concept. However, to what extent does SDB actually practise sustainability and is willing to forego economic profit?

With all this expertise on the board, SDB is now seen to response to those negative allegations against the palm oil industry by challenging their claims. SDB prefers not to answer to their allegations but to do research on the subject matter of their claim, as was done for example in the case of the claim on the High Carbon Stock by Greenpeace (Mongabay.com, 2014). In that case, SDB with other key players in the industry funded an independent study by the Steering Committee chaired by the former Chief Research Scientist from Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) (CarbonStockStudy.com 2015). The draft report was available for second public consultation from 5th to 19th October 2015 for public accountability and transparency; the study is also observed by some key stakeholders (CarbonStockStudy.com 2015). The report finally out in December 2015 and can be accessed in SDB website (Sime Darby, 2015a, 2015c)

This is how SDB responded to the High Carbon Stock issue that was first developed in collaboration with the TFT, Greenpeace, Nestle and the major palm oil producer Golden Agri Resources (GAR) in 2010 (Greenpeace, 2014). SDB believes that by funding research on and, as a result, developing High Carbon Stock, the company will gain more knowledge on this issue and any allegation made by NGOs can be denied and proved wrong with this study result, by using that is scientific fact. In this study SDB is viewed as engaging with its stakeholders through improving and advancing their cultural capital in sustainability by strengthening its internal governance structure and improving its scientific knowledge on the issues regarding which it has been attacked by the international NGOs.

With this knowledge, the representative of SDB and Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC) could respond to the questions and concerns of the delegates (supply chain) who have attended the overseas exhibitions held by the company or MPOC. The cultural capital(knowledge on the issue related to palm oil industry) is the 'trump card' in the field of sustainability in palm oil sector as it is reflected in the increasingly large amount of the economic profit that the company can earn. With the value of cultural capital and as an experienced palm oil producer, SDB has earned trust and prestige from the global supply chain agents.

The social capital generated through direct engagement with the all level of staff in SDB, also gives a signal to the external stakeholders that the company really cares about sustainability and that sustainability is embedded within its day-to-day operations; as part of the DNA of the company in other words. In addition to that, the collaborations with the local and international researchers, NGOs and environmentalists show that SDB is really serious in regard to the sustainability issues. At the same time, it shows that SDB tries to gain the trust of the agents of the supply chain and convince them on its sustainability actions. As one of the earliest producers of palm oil, SDB has taken a great care of its relationship with the global supply chain. Some of the supply chains are the co-founders of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), which is the palm oil industry standard setting board. Thus, as one of the members of RSPO, SDB has a very reputable image and this good reputation has awarded it the trust, honour and prestige from the global supply chain.

SDB is seen as handling the stakeholder engagement with different stakes and influence, contesting over the resources (knowledge and association/collaboration with expertise/regulator/industry's key players) in the field of sustainability, "with differentiated means and ends according to their position in the structure of the field of forces, thus contributing to conserving or transforming its structure" (Reed-Danahay, 2005, p. 134).

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