



Forming Alliance for Greener Palm Oil: Example from Japan

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Abstract. Sustainability has been the current main focus for the global development. With the Sustainability Development Goals declared in 2015, all countries under United Nations are putting their best effort to achieve the goals. The natural resource that gained much attention for the past decade is palm oil where it has caused complex environmental and social problems. The Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil founded in 2004 provides a global certification system for certified sustainable palm oil (CSPO) and palm kernel oil (CSPK). There are two type of certification system, one is designed for palm oil growers (smallholders and private plantations) and the other one is for processors/manufacturers. In this study, three companies are selected based on its reputation in the sustainable palm oil initiative in Japan, seen from the active involvement in RSPO and awards received regarding their sustainable practices. Based on the interviews and documents review, it is understood that their motivations in joining RSPO include maintaining their reputation to the stakeholders (*legitimacy-oriented*), exchanging knowledge (*competency-oriented*), getting connected with international NGOs (*resource-oriented*), and engaging in local communities to address critical issues (*society-oriented*). Through the Roundtable Meeting which presents different topics every year, members learned about the best practices from fellow members and generated new important issues that had not been touched. The sustainability partnerships both under and outside RSPO scheme may be based on different motivations, but they generate similar desirable outcome to solve the social and environmental problems by promoting sustainable palm oil.

Keywords: Sustainable Palm Oil · Roundtable Sustainable Palm Oil · palm oil · sustainability

1 Introduction

Sustainability has been the current main focus for the global development. With the Sustainability Development Goals declared in 2015, all countries under United Nations are putting their best effort to achieve the goals. The natural resource that gained much attention for the past decade is palm oil where it has caused complex environmental and social problems. Palm oil is used in many of the products in our daily life, from margarine and chocolate to ice cream, soaps, cosmetics, and fuel for cars and power

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plants. Its natural preservative effect and high-yielding feature make palm oil the least expensive vegetable oil in the world. Global palm oil production has reached 79.16 million Metric Tonnes (MT) in 2022, growing more than 500% from 1995 (15.2 MT). On the other hand, global consumption is recorded at 73.86 million tonnes in 2021/2022. The European Union was reckoned to be the third largest consuming market for palm oil in 2021 by far the largest consumer of sustainable palm oil in the world, accounting for 45% of total global use of certified sustainable palm oil. EU comes after Indonesia and India, with China in fourth place. The three countries other than Indonesia do not produce crude palm oil and their demand is entirely met by imports [1].

The existing studies mainly explore the possibility of palm oil as renewable energy and take focus in producing countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Regarding the palm oil as commodity, European countries have been leading in paying attention as they are one of the three largest importers of palm oil along with China and India. While this commodity is consumed globally and involved very complex supply chain spread in many countries, more study is needed to exhibit the development and diffusion of the sustainable palm oil promotion around the world beside Europe.

The global initiative to tackle these problems caused by palm oil plantation was started when the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was formally established under Article 60 of the Swiss Civil Code on 8 April 2004 as a multi-stakeholder not-for-profit organisation that works to advance the production and use of sustainable oil palm products. As of 31 December 2019, there are 4,577 members registered in 94 countries/territories and 4.16 million hectares of total RSPO certified area globally. Following the global initiatives, Japan has also stepped in to involve and spread the sustainable palm oil practice domestically. This country in particular consumed 843,000 MT of palm oil in 2018/2019, contribute to more than a quarter of total oil consumption (second highest after rapeseed oil) [2].

As of end of December 2019, there are 177 members of RSPO from Japan and mainly they are companies in food and oleo-chemical industries. These companies are mostly in the downstream of the supply chain, for example as processors, manufacturers, and retailers. Similar to the condition globally, many international and Japanese NGOs are also paying attention to sustainable palm oil issue. Two big events were held, RSPO Japan Day event by WWF Japan in September 2016 and Japan Sustainable Palm Oil Conference in November 2017, where over 300 stakeholders such as businesses, government agencies, private organizations participated in each event. These stakeholders might have the same ambition but also might have different experience in terms of the implementation of their sustainable palm oil initiatives. Consequently, their responses through the implementation of the initiative in their internal organizations vary based on their respective fields and their roles in the Japanese palm oil industry.

This paper aims to explore the sustainability initiatives by Japanese companies involved in palm oil industry in their internal organization, then to analyze the degree of those initiatives from the motivation behind sustainability partnership, particularly under RSPO and whether they also engage with other stakeholders outside RSPO for the goals beyond. This paper consists of six chapters beginning with introduction. In Sect. 2, the background study including overview of palm oil supply chain network in Japan, RSPO certification scheme, and literature review of previous researches in

RSPO. Section 3 accounts for the theoretical frameworks that are used to address the research questions and how data is collected. Meanwhile, Sect. 4 consists of the case study of three companies that actively promoting sustainable palm oil initiative. Section 5 presents the discussion based on the theoretical framework. Lastly, Sect. 6 concludes the study results.

2 Background Study of Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)

2.1 Palm Oil Supply Chain Network

The palm oil supply chain networks is very dynamic and complex as it has multi tiers as presented in Fig. 1 adopted from Choong and McKay [3]. The whole five tiers show the link from suppliers in the upstream until consumers in the last part of the downstream. Upstream network includes plantations and mills. By the end of 2019, plantations covering a total of 4.16 million hectares (ha) are RSPO certified globally in 17 countries, seeing 9% increase from the previous year. The RSPO Smallholder Support Fund (RSSF) has provided financial support for 43 smallholder projects in 11 countries since November 2013, benefitting 28,542 individual smallholders [4].

Downstream part is started from palm oil refineries, palm kernel crushing plant, and different manufacturers of palm-based products such as bio-fuel, detergent and cosmetics, chemicals, food, feeds, and other value-added products and then goes to retailers to be then distributed to consumers (end-users) [3].

Regarding Japanese palm oil industry, most companies are in the downstream where they sourced palm oil and its derivatives as raw ingredients for the manufacturing process. The companies in the field of chemical products are increasingly engaged in purchasing certified palm oil. However, efforts are delayed in the food industry, which is the major supplier that accounts for 80% of the domestic market. Some companies were remarkable to be the pioneer in the sustainable palm oil initiative.

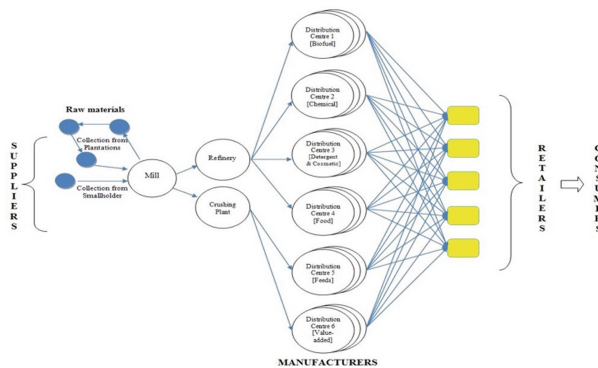


Fig. 1. Palm oil supply chain network from [3]

2.2 Literature Review on RSPO

Since its establishment in 2004, RSPO has engaged multiple stakeholders to gather opinions and develop various standards in sustainable palm oil. The decision making process that is based on consensus are crucial for the legality of the Roundtable. However, multi-stakeholder regimes can be fragile, requiring a great deal of internal accommodation and trade-offs to work. In order to reach the consensus, different compromises are made and these compromises lead to a less strict standard. Small or weak actors including NGOs or local communities are effectively excluded from the development of partnered governance, though they may be recruited into the organization [5, 6]. As the result, legitimacy is reduced because some stakeholders' interest cannot be fully accommodated [7].

It is also mentioned that NGOs hold significant influence on the RSPO [6–8]. The knowledge inside RSPO come mostly from NGOs, particularly about field condition and this is utilized as base for policy discussion [9]. Some NGOs decided to participate in the RSPO in order to use this platform to tackle the issue of land conflicts with local communities. Some important clauses were successfully made into RSPO standard but in practice, auditors rarely recognize as valid evidence the forms of proof put forward by local communities [10].

Apart from the issue of stakeholders' representation, the weaknesses in standard implementation are also pointed out. Laurance, et al., [11] argued that an effective system to monitor and enforce compliance does not exist at the micro level. Therefore RSPO has weak influence in the upstream production network where human right violation and environmental destruction mostly happened. Another looseness is found on the downstream network. Reed and Reed [8] states that membership of the RSPO has emerged as a primary form of transnational regulation and a badge of corporate responsibility. When a company became a member of the RSPO, it does not automatically lead to a commitment to sustainable palm oil. It is because members have few obligations and these obligations are hardly enforced [7]. Some of the members do not submit the Annual Communication on Progress (ACOP) report that should be published every year in their page at RSPO website.

Research by Ruysschaert and Salles [12] pointed that RSPO effectiveness in safeguarding biodiversity was found to be limited due to a host of deficiencies in the scheme, with effectiveness in conserving species such as the Sumatran orangutan that need large forested areas found to be "almost zero". Conservation NGOs found that growers did not properly execute the RSPO guidance from conservation perspective because they cleared conservation areas in order to maximize profits.

The lack of concern in biodiversity conservation from RSPO also found in the study by Moreno-Peñaranda, et al., [13] that investigated the perception from different stakeholders on the topic of palm oil supply chains. Survey was done to members the RSPO and local communities not involved in the RSPO process, but located in areas of palm oil expansion in Indonesia. The results suggest that RSPO stakeholders' perceptions about enhancing palm oil sustainability are highly varied, particularly polarized for two key environmental impacts, GHG emissions and biodiversity loss. However there seemed to be an underlying common optimism among some RSPO stakeholders and local communities about the feasibility of a technical fix to some environmental problems associated

with intensive monoculture practices such as soil fertility/erosion and pollution due to agrochemical use.

3 Methods

3.1 Theoretical Framework

There are considerable variety of theories used to describe partnerships for sustainability, including institutional theory, resource dependence theory, and stakeholder theory. Contradictively, there is limited use of theory in making the arguments that appeared in most of the existing studies. This study aims to exhibit and analyze the sustainable initiatives by Japanese companies involved in palm oil industry. While each company started their initiatives at different time, the degree and variety of activities are also different. To better understand the gap and the motivation for the companies joining partnership under and beyond RSPO, this study adopts framework by Gray and Stites [14] in sustainability partnership between business organization and NGO. They systematically reviewed books and articles published from 2000 to 2012 and generated Summary Model of Factors Affecting Outcomes in the sustainability partnership. Inside this model, drivers, motivations, partnership characteristics, and process influence the outcome.

Organizations engage in different ways with stakeholders depending on their motivation and capacity. Among the broad range of stakeholders, NGO has been considered to hold significant role in the sustainability issue [15]. Gray and Stites [14] classified the motivations both for business organizations and NGO to form partnerships into four main categories: legitimacy-oriented, competency-oriented, resource-oriented and society-oriented motivations. The first motivation, legitimacy-oriented departs from the theory that organization needs legitimacy or social acceptance, otherwise it will have difficulty acquiring critical resources needed for long-term, sustained success. To gain legitimacy, organization has to conform with societal norms and expectations. If a corporation has lost its legitimacy or wants to gain a higher degree of legitimacy, engaging in partnership with a high degree of legitimacy can be an alternative way. Reputation and brand value enhancement are also seen as the business outcome from partnership [16].

The second motivation, competency-oriented, explains how the two type of organizations possess very different knowledge, skills and capabilities, thus sharing these competencies is an important motivator for both business organizations and NGO. Austin and Seitanidi [17] argued that one of the key impacts of cross-sector partnerships is the co-creation of resources by participating organizations through processes of engagement, knowledge exchange, and inter-organizational learning. NGO can provide expertise and general awareness on issues that are relevant to the common goal of the partnership [18]. The third motivation is resource-oriented. Resource refers to an organization's assets, including financial and social capital. Business organizations can offer financial capital to help the NGOs better address social and environmental issues. While businesses can gain social capital by partnering with NGOs, NGOs can also gain access to other businesses and political networks through their partners' contacts [14]. By forming an

alliance with NGOs, business organization may be able to create new business models or conquering new markets [16].

The fourth motivation, society-oriented, is when the organization has broader society-oriented motivations for partnering. These motivations are designed to make changes to how society deals with issues of sustainability. Some societal outcomes from business-NGO partnership are raising awareness and enabling the local communities to access new opportunities [16]. While the four categories of motivations above are applicable to both business organizations and NGOs, in this paper we will only discuss from the business organizations' perspective.

3.2 Data Sample and Collection

Unit of analysis in this study is the palm oil industry in the Japanese market in which several companies are selected as case study. Data collected from the samples are qualitative and quantitative data, such as concerns/issues in palm oil industry, their important stakeholders, and their strategies and activities. Primary and secondary data and information for the study are collected. Primary data are gathered through two means: semi-structured interviews with respondents (i.e., face-to-face interviews), and through the question guides distributed to the respondents via email for those who could not be interviewed directly. In order to get a detailed and accurate record of the primary data, direct interviews with respondents are recorded, transcribed, and summarized. Three companies were selected based on its reputation in the sustainable palm oil initiative in Japan, seen from the active involvement in RSPO and awards received regarding their sustainable practices. To avoid bias, the companies name will be regarded as Company X, Company Y and Company Z. Face-to-face interview was done with Company X and Y representatives while email correspondence was done with Company Z representative. Both the interview and email correspondence used same question guideline.

Meanwhile, secondary data are collected through various sources of information such as from the company's sustainability reports, statistical databases, published research reports, articles, and other sources that are relevant to the study's idea. Furthermore, a data triangulation approach is used to help cross-validate and corroborate findings and increase the reliability of the collected data.

4 Case Study

4.1 Company X

This company was founded in 1952 and headquartered in Kansai region of Japan. Company X has been known throughout Japan with its natural choice in hygiene and sanitation products. It is one of the first companies in Japan who started to promote about sustainability palm oil. They were interviewed by TV program regarding one of its products that created controversy. At that time, their board of managers realized that no one in the company knew how palm oil was produced in fact. Then they invited a specialist of environmental problems to the company. Through many discussions, this company had enlightenment about this issue and began to understand the fact, which made them aware of the serious situation in the ground.

Company X itself started using palm oil (*Elaeis*) after the 1980s due to the unstable supply of coconut palm oil (*Cocos nucifera*). Because of the increasing demand of this palm oil, large scale development and expansion of the plantation were made, mainly in Borneo island's rainforest. The impact on rainforests in the downstream basin of the Kinabatangan River which flows in the north-east Borneo started to get attention. Isolation of orangutans in this area became a serious concern, because their habitat was divided due to the expanding plantation. In addition, expanding plantation resulted in kicking out the wild animals from the original habitat.

This company is the first consumer goods manufacturer from Japan who joined RSPO on January 2005. Company X organized three symposiums in Japan to promote the use of sustainable palm oil in Japan. Through a discussion with then JICA staff about a project that aims to contribute to the local communities, this company also commits to support the establishment of Borneo Conservation Trust (BCT) in 2006 in the form land donation and six bridges to allow the orangutan population to migrate freely across river tributaries.

In May 2007, Company X announced to contribute 1% of the sales of their leading product to the trust and started the awareness raising campaign for consumers which still continues today. After the campaign launch in 2007, the sales of this leading product continues to increase 106–108% on a year-to-year comparison and the company started to realize that the era of “eco-friendly” has come. In May 2012, Company X released its first RSPO certified oil based products, only two years after the certification process began. To date, only a limited number of products by Japanese manufacturers have RSPO trademark, and some of them are owned by this company.

On the approach to educate consumers, Company X also started a study tour program to the island of Borneo by inviting their end-users in cooperation with Borneo Conservation Trust to persuade them in understanding the problem and spread this awareness. Besides that they also involved in the promotion of a pictorial storybook that told a story about the elephants living in Borneo forest where its habitat has been reduced to narrow strips along the rivers to be changed into palm oil plantations. This storybook is distributed to most elementary schools' library all around Japan and there is reading contest for it annually as well.

4.2 Company Y

Company Y is the parent company of a group of companies that spends throughout Europe and Asia. This company was founded in 1950 and headquartered in Kansai region. Unlike Company X, this company is palm oil processor. It is a member of RSPO since 2004 and seven companies inside the group companies have been certified.

The motivation/background for Company Y to join RSPO is a form of their corporate social responsibility activity. The CEO thinks that CSR is the reason for the organization's existence. It is also incorporated in their mission statement. As a palm oil processor, they seek to contribute to the happiness and well-being of people by offering delicious and healthy ingredients. Using advanced technologies in the oils, fats and soy processing, Company Y offers ingredients that differ from its competitors. From their group survey in 2017, the company holds biggest share in Japan (fourth globally) of industrial use chocolate.

The other reason for Company Y to involve in the sustainable palm oil initiative is to fulfill the demand from European market. Company Y is the supplier for many international companies that are also members of RSPO. These companies have declared to source 100% of its palm oil from RSPO certified palm oil (either SG/MB/BC or combination among them).

In addition, Company Y has set its own regulations and policies to have better sustainability practices. Similar with most of other companies, they choose to focus on the traceability in order to ensure their palm oil can be traced back to mill. Traceability is a very important yet complicated process because the number of mills and plantations are considerably a lot. To work on this, they have been working with expert NGO in this area which is The Forest Trust (TFT) since July 2016. The pilot project started in October 2016, when Company Y group company in Malaysia is chosen as the pilot company.

Company Y is also taking action in supporting smallholders. Beginning in January 2016, they have been participating in the smallholders support project called the Wild Asia Group Scheme (WAGS), which has been implemented by Wild Asia (NGO) and suppliers. This project aims to contribute to the improvement of productivity, the working environment, and traceability by providing training to smallholders (part of the supply chain of Company Y) to help them achieve sustainable and efficient farm management.

4.3 Company Z

Company Z is the parent company of food group companies that is headquartered in Tokyo. This company was established in 1909 and has become the leading name in food industry not only in Japan but also in other 30 countries where the Group operates. Some of the Company Z main products are seasonings, processed foods and amino acids. It joined the RSPO in August 2012 after its customers from subsidiary company in Europe demanded for sustainable practice in palm oil. Company Z has been certified since 2015 and is the first to achieve supply chain certification system (SCCS) among the Group for its specialty chemicals business as well as processed foods business in Japan. From their sustainability report in 2021, it is known that their sustainable procurement ratio of palm oil has increased almost 400% from only 25% in 2018 to 93% in 2021. Company Z Group used a total of 43,015 t of palm oil and palm kernel oil during 2019 fiscal year. Palm kernel oil-derived materials, which are particularly difficult to procure in certified form, account for roughly 60%. In 2019, their certified palm oil and palm oil products uptake is 24.51%.

Company Z realized that along with paper and pulp, palm oil plantation is one of the biggest contributors to deforestation. Therefore this company wants to commit for zero net deforestation efforts by procuring sustainable palm oil. At the beginning of 2017, the company aimed to 100% procurement of certified or traceable palm oil by 2020 and create sustainable procurement standards and framework with its suppliers. These standards and framework are established to develop a clear way of ensuring that the procured products do not cause any environmental or social damage.

The representative from Company Z commented that being certified by third-party and exchanging knowledge with the related organizations such as WWF, are some of the advantages of being RSPO member. While the issue of deforestation has been addressed in RSPO principles, the issue in human right is still considered to gain little attention.

In the near future, to gain more attention from the market and encourage collaborative action between various stakeholders, a type of green marketing is needed in the palm oil products [19].

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Sustainable Initiatives Under RSPO Scheme and the Motivation

All three companies taken as case study in this paper are first members of RSPO from Japan. Company X particularly has been joining this multi-stakeholder partnership in the same year of and it only took one year for the company to get certified. By becoming a member of RSPO, these business organizations have to comply with the members' rules such as ACOP report submission annually.

As previously presented in Sect. 3, organizations choose to join a cross-sector partnership with different motivations. From the interview with the three companies, it was revealed that the motivations for joining the RSPO related to all four types of motivations. By being involved in the RSPO, it shows that these companies are committed to promote sustainable palm oil. Thus their motivations include maintaining their reputation to the stakeholders (legitimacy-oriented). The other aspect that was agreed by all three respondents about the benefit of joining the RSPO is for knowledge exchange (competency-oriented). RSPO has enabled them to see the global movement in sustainable palm oil industry and get into connection with international NGOs including WWF and Greenpeace (resource-oriented). Through the Roundtable Meeting which presents different topics every year, members learned about the best practices from fellow members and generated new important issues that had not been touched. With limitation of activities and lack of focus on some issues pointed out by previous studies [7, 10, 12], the members of RSPO are also seeking partnership outside RSPO to complement their sustainable practices.

For the case of Company X, it encountered the environmental problem related to palm oil after being exposed by national media in 2004. Here we can see that they were facing legitimacy problem where the social expectation differs from social perspectives. Their product that was advertised to be eco-friendly, was accused to harm the natural habitat of local elephants where its ingredients were purchased. To repair its reputation and prevent further misaccusation, Company X then invited environmentalist expert to better learn about the issue. Therefore, their motivation to engage with cross-sector stakeholder can be categorized in legitimacy-oriented and competency-oriented. One of Company X's products that is manufactured using segregated type of CSPO is the innovative product generated from resource-oriented motivation. Company X is also pursuing active approaches both in plantation area abroad and to general consumers in Japan. After gaining knowledge about actual field condition in Borneo, Company X decided to help the biodiversity conservation and establishing partnership with Borneo Conservation Trust. These activities of Company X can be classified as society-oriented ones.

Company Y as the palm oil processor do not related directly with the end-users (consumers) so the consumers education is not its first priority in the sustainable activities. Being a supplier for well-known domestic and international brands, Company Y has

responsibility to provide ingredients that met with their business customers' requirements. One of their customer which is headquartered in Europe has declared its commitment to sustainable ingredients procurement. Therefore they need to ensure that the ingredients they offer are procured sustainably and this includes the traceability aspects. Company Y to choose TFT was from past experience of their customer's collaboration with TFT, so it can be suggested too that this approach is competency-oriented. Other than that, Company Y is engaging with Malaysian NGO, Wild Asia, to support independent smallholders who are mostly still lacking knowledge of growing palm oil sustainably, without any labor nor child workforce abuse. This activity is motivated from the reality that there are still many human-rights problem exist in the field and Company Y wants to remove those unsustainable practices (society-oriented motivation).

6 Conclusion

With the increasing interest and debate about sustainable palm oil issue in the business industry globally, many companies have been taking initiatives to respond to the stakeholders' demand. RSPO was established as a platform for multi-stakeholders involve in the palm oil supply chain to promote the sustainable way both in production and consumption. As one of the consuming country, Japan can not stay passive and be merely an observant. Eventhough Japan may not be considered as the leading example country in sustainable palm oil initiatives, there are Japanese companies who have been actively pursuing sustainable practices. Three companies were discussed in this paper to demonstrate those sustainability initiatives, especially from the partnership aspect. Having broad range of stakeholders with different demand, each company is taking appropriate actions to respond. Different motivations have also led them to engage with NGOs and complement the activities under RSPO scheme. It has been argued that there are four categories of why business organizations establish partnership with NGOs. From the interview with each representatives, the three companies joined RSPO with all these four type of motivations, which are to build reputation, leverage knowledge, risk sharing along supply chain, and shape policy development.

To conclude this paper, the sustainability partnerships both under and outside RSPO scheme may be based on different motivations, but they generate similar desirable outcome to solve the social and environmental problems by promoting sustainable palm oil. Regardless their distinctive stages in sustainable palm oil initiatives, Japanese companies and the government have started taking actions. It is not too late for the other organizations especially companies along the palm oil supply chain in Japan or other countries to follow the first movers' steps and even generate new initiatives to spread the promotion broader. In the near future it may also be expected that an organization or association to integrate the management of sustainable palm oil supply chain from the side of importing countries is established in Asia region.

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