Towards a Sustainable Future: Reflections

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Abstract

Sustainability came as a very vital issue in front of all of us and this paper is about sustainability presenting some managerial reflections in addition to some of the vital sustainability research findings from world studies done by recognized international organizations. Sustainability has to be considered as a mandatory requirement due to the reason of avoidance of numerous detrimental effects of operations of business organizations and the dangers of narrowly pursuing maximization of profits. If one does a careful examination of the barriers to sustainability and sustainability issues and practices it does reveal that HRM plays and will have to play a critical role in making an organization sustainable. Based on the Triple Bottom Line that is the most popular one among the several sustainability-related paradigms, it is possible to integrate sustainability into HRM resulting in three dimensions such as Green HRM, Social HRM and Strategic HRM.

Key Words: Sustainability, Green HRM, Social HRM, Strategic HRM, Green Behaviour

Introduction

We are now in the present. Generally a future refers to a period of time which will take place after the present. A future that lasts for a prolonged time, ideally forever is a sustainable future. As per the Buddhism there is nothing that lasts forever. Secularly and relatively it is possible to think of a sustainable future. Here the relevant concept is sustainability. I wrote this paper deriving from the two keynote speeches I delivered at two international research conferences held by Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka and University of Peradeniya in this year.

Meaning of Sustainability

It is possible to observe that the terms 'sustainable development', 'sustainability', 'corporate sustainability' and 'corporate social responsibility (CSR)' have been utilized interchangeably. According to the report titled "Our Common Future" prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987, as in Rompa, 2011), *sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. This is the widely used definition and the Commission highlighted three fundamental components of sustainable development, i.e. the economic growth, the environmental protection, and social equity. Hence sustainable future needs to be economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially equitable. A business definition of sustainable development was given by the international Institute for Sustainable Development in its report, in 1992. The definition is "*adopting business strategies and activities that meet the needs of the enterprise and its stakeholders today while protecting, sustaining and enhancing the human and natural resources that will be needed in the future.*" Accordingly it is indispensable that the needs of a business enterprise and its stakeholders (shareholders, customers, employees, suppliers, lenders, and communities) are met. According to Dyllick and Hockerts (2002),

corporate sustainability is *meeting the needs of a firm's direct and indirect stakeholders without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well*. Strandberg (2009) observes that the Corporate Social Responsibility terminology is the most salient to Canadian organizations, and defines CSR as *the balanced integration of social and environmental considerations into business decisions and operations*. Sustainability became an umbrella term for all of the aims and norms that encourage corporations, organizations, and society at large to more effectively address the adverse social and environmental effects of commerce and the dangers of narrowly pursuing maximization of profits regardless of the larger costs (American Management Association (AMA), 2007).

We are human beings and we should not forget that there are non-human beings living in this planet, and the non-human beings also have a right to live in this planet. Non-human beings include living creatures such as animals, birds, fish, reptiles, insects etc. As a matter of fact these non-humans are supposed to live and therefore, the term *sustainability* needs to be applicable to them also.

It is possible to observe that sustainability has a very wide focus on environmental, social, and economic performance of organizations. Hence, it is a **broad view** of environmental, social, and economic results which are favourable for the world including us. Also it takes into account the needs of people today and needs of future generations and, therefore it is a **long-term perspective**. It is an **umbrella term** covering a lot of ideas and actions towards minimizing or avoiding adverse environmental and social effects of operations of business organizations. It is an **ultimate goal** to be achieved for the betterment of humans and non-humans.

In this paper having mainly my reflections I would like to present a broad definition of sustainability that is given below:

"Deliberate constant endeavour to utilize human and other resources, and natural environment to meet needs of current human beings as well as non-human beings while maintaining and if possible enhancing human and other resources, and natural environment to meet needs of future human beings and non-human beings."

Importance of Sustainability

Consideration of environmental and social aspects into business decisions and operations and engaging in certain sustainable actions and programs require additional and considerable effort, time, and money on the part of the organization. One must ascertain that survival of the organization and its stakeholders depends on the survival of the environment. According to a research done in 2010 by the Economist Intelligence Unit, the most important motivation for promoting sustainability policies is "*do the right thing ethically*". Other motivations in terms of the order of importance are: comply with laws and regulations, upgrade the company's image, improve the bottom line, meet demands of customers, discover new markets, support recruitment and retention of employees, respond to pressure from NGOs and citizen lobby groups, and respond to criticism in the media. American Management Association (2007) summarizes that the modern concept of sustainability has evolved from mostly separate streams of parallel conversations into a holistic notion that rejects the premise that social-environmental and economic issues are competing interests; and this, new, integrative perspective contends that

social, environmental, and economic performance can and must be optimized simultaneously for both short-and long-term success.

Environmental issues are some of the most complex and significant managerial challenges of twenty-first century (Rugman and Verbeke, 1998). They include climate change, natural resources depletion, and reduction of biodiversity and ecosystem integrity (unity). There are many detrimental effects on the environment owing to the use of fossil fuels. Fournier and Westervelt (2005, as in AMA, 2007) report that fuel combustion affects the global climate with the production of greenhouse gases and localized production of acid rain, low-lying ozone, and smog; mining and production of fuels destroy ecosystems and biodiversity; the loss of habitat is leading to localized extinction of species; and the reduction of biodiversity results in greater vulnerability of the planet to ecological stresses. It is a must to avoid or minimize these detrimental effects. Otherwise it is not possible to ensure survival of humans and business organizations for a prolonged period of time.

Sustainability-Related Paradigms

The most popular one is the concept of the "**Triple Bottom Line**", or TBL (People, Planet, and Profits) introduced by Elkington (1994, as in Johnston, 2006). This has gained widespread recognition as a framework for viewing and measuring business performance (American Management Association, 2007) and it is simple and relatively non-controversial (Johnston, 2006). For a sustainable future, it is imperative to have a balance among people, planet, and profits. Traditional bottom line, i.e. profit is not sufficient to measure a firm's success. The firm must have the ability to excel not only in its environmental (planet) performance but also societal and ethical (people) performance. **The Five Capital Model** is another paradigm relating to sustainability. This model maintains that any government or organization has five capitals or stocks to manage: natural, social, human, financial and manufactured (Porritt, 2005 as in Johnston, 2006). Exhibit 1 presents the five capital model of the economy. According to this paradigm, sustainability is not achievable, if eroding the stocks occurs.

Exhibit 1: Five Capital Model of the Economy

Capital/Resource	Stock	Flow
Natural	Land, sea, air, vegetation, ecological systems	Food, water, energy, waste, disposal, climate
Human	Knowledge, skills, health, motivation, spiritual ease	Happiness, creativity, innovation, work, energy, participation
Social	Families, communities, organizations, governance systems, schools	Security, shared goods (e.g. culture, education), inclusion, justice
Manufactured	Infrastructure, roads, buildings, tools, fixed assets	Living/working space, access, distribution
Financial	Money, stocks, bonds, banknotes	Means of valuing, owing or exchanging other four capitals

Source: Johnston, 2006

The Three Es is another paradigm proposed by R. Edwards (2006, as in American Management Association, 2007). Ecology/environment, Economy/employment, and Equity/equality are those three Es. A fourth E that stands for education was added by Edwards and that is a powerful force in helping to drive the sustainability movement.

Barriers to Sustainability

Barriers to sustainability can come from outside forces of the environment as well as from within the organization. One major barrier is **cynicism** which is an attitude towards people believing that individuals are expected to act selfishly. A cynic believes that an organization is a formal group of people and these people always behave in a selfish way. Hence there is no need to think of others, planet etc. Another major barrier is **skepticism** which is doubt one has about something. A skeptic disbelieves that sustainability is useful or truly indispensable. Skeptics say that the goal of business is profit, and sustainability has no place in corporate life (Savitz and Weber, 2006, as in AMA, 2007). It is indeed a surprise to hear that a resistance to the sustainability movement exists and it is a kind of **anti-environmentalism**. The anti-environmentalism challenges the wisdom and usefulness of laws that protect the environment and that promote government intervention (Boston, 1999, as in AMA, 2007).

The 2007 AMA/Human Resource Institute (HRI) Sustainability Survey reveals 12 potential barriers to sustainability or factors that can hinder the movement toward sustainability practices and they include lack of demand from consumers and customers (ranked as 1), lack of demand from managers and employees (ranked as 2), lack of awareness and understanding (as 3), lack of standardized metrics or performance benchmarks (as 4), lack of specific ideas on what to do and when to do it (as 5), lack of demand from shareholders and investors (as 6), lack of demand from suppliers (as 7), unclear or weak business case (as 8), lack of demand from the community (as 9), lack of support from senior leaders (as 10), general risk aversion (as 11), and fear of competitor's taking advantage of us (as 12). As per the Economist Intelligence Unit (2010), there are 07 main internal obstacles to incorporating sustainability principles into the company's strategies and practices, and they include (in the order of importance) immediate financial goals more urgent, lack of consensus on ultimate goals of a sustainability programme, insufficient clarity concerning locus of responsibility internally, lack of funding, absence of a compelling business case for sustainability, lack of clarity on legal or regulatory obligations to meet sustainability standards, and lack of transparency in operations or practices. Further the unit suggests that the poor economic environment means that sustainability has taken a back seat. In a study done by Rompa (2011), the most often reported three barriers were a lack of knowledge and capacity for sustainable policies, no support from leader within the organization and the fact that practices associated with sustainability are not mainstream and therefore will not lead to competitive advantage.

It implies that all the relevant stakeholders and the top managers need to be made aware of the importance of sustainability and all employees need to be trained on applying sustainability principles.

Sustainability Areas or Issues and Practices

What are the sustainability issues to be dealt with by an organization? This is a very important question a good answer for which can be found from the research done by the Economist

Intelligence Unit (2010) according to which, there are nine specific sustainability areas in which an enterprise can be active. They include (in the order of magnitude as % of respondents) code of ethics/anticorruption system-51, climate change/environment protection-50, alternative energy sources-40, green IT-37, gender diversity-36, socially responsible investing-33, workers' rights-30, stakeholder engagement-30, and carbon trading-23. The 2007 AMA/HRI Sustainability Survey reveals 18 sustainability-related issues including (mentioned in the order of importance) business ethics and integrity (4.77 out of 5), safe and healthy work environment (4.68), affordable quality health care (4.66), well-being of employees (4.64), clean water (4.43), corruption in all its forms (4.43), worker job security (4.40), safe and reliable food sources (4.36), human rights abuses (4.22), affordable clean energy (4.13), assistance after natural disasters (4.10), poverty and homelessness (3.94), climate change (3.90), epidemics (3.82), diverse ecosystem (3.81), open immigration (3.37), world population growth (3.36), and right to collective bargaining (3.23). Also the survey revealed that environmental issues do not yet have the same prominence and importance in business as issues with regard to financial or managerial performance.

What are the common sustainability practices being followed by current organizations in the world? Top 12 most commonly used sustainability related practices were identified by the AMA and HRI from their international research and they are in the order of importance (ranked according to the mean response): (1) Ensure the health and safety of employees (4.02), (2) Ensure accountability for ethics at all levels (3.95), (3) Engage collaboratively with community and nongovernment groups (3.47), (4) Support employees in balancing work and life activities (3.35), (5) Encourage employee volunteerism (3.29), (6) Involve employees in decisions that affect them (3.28), (7) Provide employee training and development related to sustainability (3.26), (8) Reduce waste materials (3.14), (9) To highlight our commitment to sustainability in our brand (3.12), (10) To improve energy efficiency (3.06), (11) Work with suppliers to strengthen sustainability practices (2.95), and (12) Get groups across organization that are working on sustainability-related initiatives to work more closed together (2.85). Other surveyed practices (five) are: Use sustainability-related criteria in recruiting and selection (2.81), Establish indicators to determine if the organization is meeting sustainability goals (2.75), Use sustainability-related criteria in promotion and career advancement (2.75), Reduce greenhouse gas emissions (2.64), and Link sustainability-related criteria to compensation (2.53). Strong statement from top management, developing products and services that reduce or prevent environmental damage, incentives to business partners to adopt sustainable business practices, including sustainability performance indicators in employee evaluations, and positioning the company as a low-carbon user or as a provider of products that help others to reduce their carbon use are other practices found in the research done by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2010). <u>A careful examination of the above mentioned practices reveals that Human Resource Management (HRM) plays and will have to play a critical role in making an organization sustainable. HRM is critical for embedding sustainability across the enterprise.</u>

Integration of Sustainability into HRM

HRM is the efficient and effective utilization of employees in order to achieve goals of the organization. It is about managing people at work, being the human side of Business Administration having policies, procedures, rules, and systems influencing employees of the organization (Opatha, 2009). It generally attempts to serve for the organization where it is

practiced, employees working for it and society at large. Major fields of HRM include human resource planning, staffing, human resource development, rewards management, and employee & labour relations. Integration of sustainability into HRM results in creating a new branch called Sustainable HRM. Sustainable HRM is the contribution HRM can make to sustainable development (Strandberg, 2009). Based on the concept of the TBL, It is possible to envisage that sustainable HRM has three dimensions, i.e. planet-related, people-related and profit related. These dimensions may be labeled as branches or fields of sustainable HRM (sub-branches from the point of HRM). Planet-related dimension includes environmental aspects or contributions that HRM can make to environmental excellence. People-related dimension includes employee and societal aspects or contributions that HRM can make to societal equity. Profit-related dimension includes profitability aspects or contributions that HRM can make to financial performance or economic growth of the organization. First part is labeled as Green HRM while Social HRM and Strategic HRM are utilized for dimension two and dimension three respectively. Refer to the following Figure.

Figure 1: Dimensions of Sustainable HRM
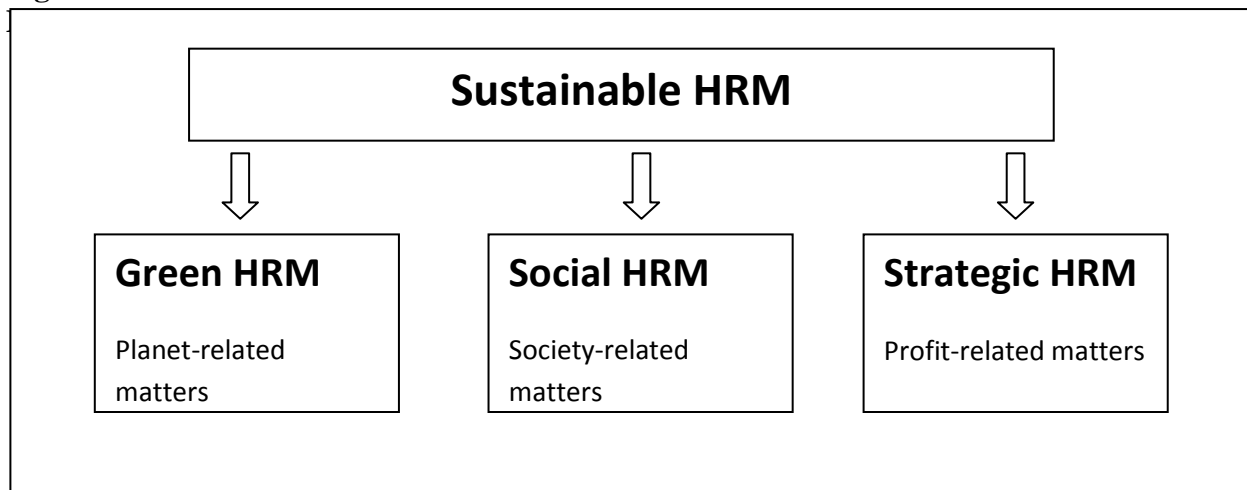
Green HRM

Out of the three Ps, the most important one is Planet and therefore, the rest of my paper is about Green HRM. 'Green' or 'greening' has at least four meanings in the context of managing people at work (Opatha, 2013, Opatha and Arulrajah, 2014): 1. *Preservation of the natural environment*: to keep all the things in the world which are neither caused nor controlled by human beings including land, forests, plants, animals, and other natural phenomena in its original form and protect them from harm, loss, or negative change; 2. *Conservation of the natural environment*: to be very careful in the way of using it in order to let it last as long as possible, to use it at the minimum level so that future generations will be able to utilize it; 3. *Avoidance or minimization of environmental pollution*: to stop contaminating the water, air, atmosphere, etc. through unpleasant and poisonous substances and wastes. To guard against outcomes that will ultimately endanger the planet/earth where humans and non-humans are living; and 4. *Generation of gardens and looking-like natural places:* to create parks and places which have plants, trees, and grass. Thus, every employee (may be a manager or a non-manager) needs to be a green employee and is supposed to perform four roles for the purpose of becoming a *green employee*. They are

preservationist, conservationist, non-polluter, and maker. A composite term, i.e., *nature-lover* or *eco-activist* can be used in order to cover the four roles which need to be performed by an employee to become green. Figure 2 shows the four roles of a green employee who is a nature-lover or an eco-activist.

Opatha and Arulrajah (2014, p. 104) define Green HRM: *"... It is the side of HRM that is concerned with transforming normal employees into green employees so as to achieve environmental goals of the organization and finally to make a significant contribution to environmental sustainability. It refers to the policies, practices and systems that make employees of the organization green for the benefit of the individual, society, natural environment, and the business. The purpose of green HRM is to create, enhance and retain greening within each employee of the organization so that he or she gives a maximum individual contribution on each of the four roles, i.e., preservationist, conservationist, non-polluter, and maker."*

Figure 2: The Four Roles of a Green Employee
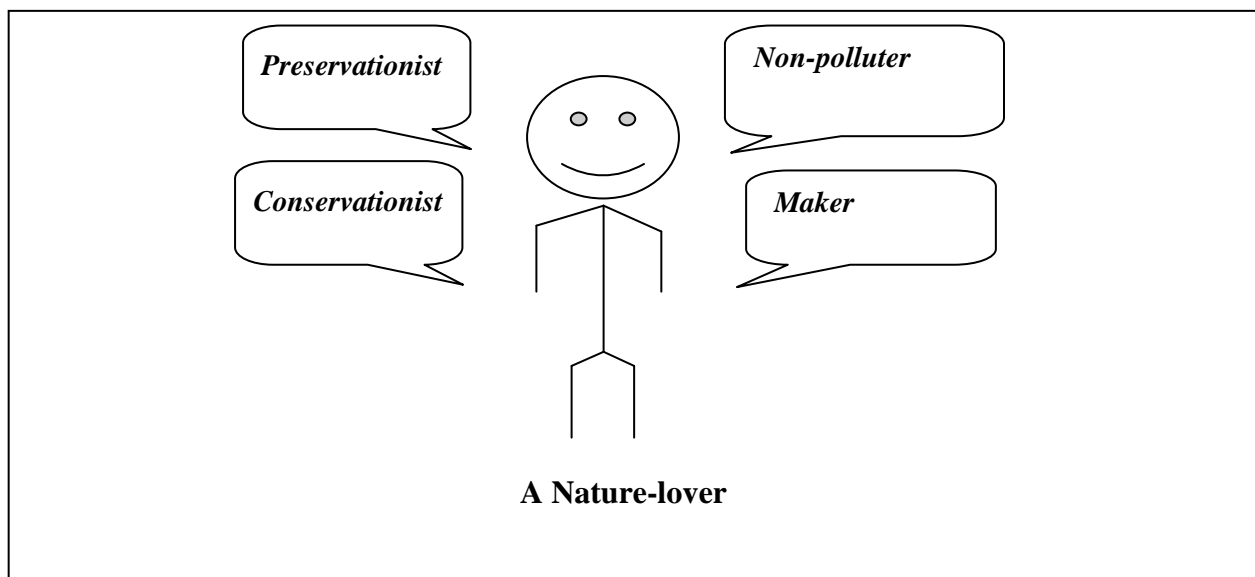
Source: Opatha and Arulrajah (2014)

For the purpose of achieving greening, making traditional HRM functions green is a must. Ideally it is possible to make greening of all the HRM functions from job analysis to labour relations. Refer to Exhibit 2 for HRM functions and specific green HRM practices. Successful performance of green HRM functions will lead to create green employee inputs (such as green attitudes and green competencies) and employee green performance of job (green behaviour and green results). Green attitudes, green competencies, green behaviour, and green results can alternatively be viewed as green HR requirements which are needed to achieve corporate environmental objectives.

Exhibit 2: HRM Functions and Specific Green Practices

HRM Function	*Green Practices*
Job Design	• To incorporate environmental related tasks, duties and responsibilities in each job and put them into effect. • To use teamwork and cross-functional teams as job design techniques to successfully manage the environmental issues of the organization.
Job Analysis	• To include environmental dimension as a duty in job description. • To include green competencies as a special component in job specification.
Human Resource Planning	• To engage in forecasting number of employees and types of employees needed to implement the corporate environmental management programmes (e.g. ISO 14001, cleaner production, responsibility care etc). • To engage in deciding strategies to meet the forecasted demand for environmental works (e.g. appointing consultants/experts to perform energy or environmental audits etc).
Recruitment	• To include environmental criteria in the recruitment messages. • To communicate the employer's concern about greening through recruitment efforts.
Selection	• To select applicants who are sufficiently aware of greening to fill job vacancies. • To select applicants who have been engaging in greening as consumers under their private life domain.
Induction	• To make new employees familiar with greening efforts of the organization. • To develop induction programs showing green citizenship behaviour of current employees.
Training	• To impart right knowledge and skills about greening to each employee through a training program exclusively designed for greening. • To apply job rotation to train green managers of the future. • To do training needs analyses to identify green training needs of employees.
Performance Evaluation	• To evaluate employee's job performance according to green-related criteria. • To include a separate component for progress on greening in the performance feedback interview.
Rewards Management	• To give financial incentives to employees for their good green performance of job. • To introduce rewards for innovative environmental initiatives. • To give non-financial rewards such as praises and recognitions to employees for their greening.
Discipline Management	• To formulate and publish rules of conduct relating to greening. • To develop a progressive disciplinary system to punish employees who violate the rules of green conduct.
Health and Safety Management	• To create various environmental related initiatives to reduce employee stress and occupational diseases caused by hazardous work environment. • To formulate and implement strategies (e.g. green factory/green zone) to maintain a conductive environment to prevent various health problems.
Labour Relations	• To provide opportunities to the trade union and its members to participate in greening. • To introduce green whistle-blowing and help-lines. • To provide training to the union representatives about environmental management. • To recognize union as a key stakeholder for environmental management.

Source: Based on Material by Arulrajah, Opatha, and Nawaratne (2015)

Green Behaviour

In this context, green behaviour is perceived as a construct consisting of three dimensions, i.e. green organizational citizenship behaviour, green interpersonal behaviour, and green official behaviour. Green organizational citizenship behaviour is defined as the extent to which the employee engages in positive actions aimed at helping the organization as a whole to achieve

greening (Opatha, 2013, Opatha and Arulrajah, 2014). These actions do not become a part of formal job requirements and they primarily represent voluntary green actions. Green interpersonal citizenship behaviour is defined as the extent to which the employee engages in positive actions aimed at helping specific co-employees to do their green work (Opatha, 2013, Opatha and Arulrajah, 2014). These actions are also not a part of formal job requirements and represent voluntary helps given by the employee to other employees at the similar level (peers) to become them green or perform their green work. Green helps given by the employee can be extended not only to peers but also to non-peers. Green official behaviour is the third dimension of green behaviour and it is defined as the extent to which the employee engages in official duties assigned by the superior with regard to greening (Opatha, 2013, Opatha and Arulrajah, 2014). This engagement is not a voluntary one as the employee is officially required to perform certain duties in relation to greening. First and second dimensions are non-official while the third one is official. As a matter of fact, first and second types of green behaviour are indispensable not only at work but also at non-work life.

In this paper two instruments developed by me have been given in Appendix I and Appendix II. The reader can use them in order to assess his or her levels with regard to the relevant types of green behaviour. In order to develop the first instrument that is for measuring the construct of green citizenship behaviour, five dimensions such as 1. Electricity usage, 2. Water usage, 3. Travelling and vehicle usage, 4. Re-usage of various items, and 5. Reporting of wastes were utilized. The second instrument is for measuring the construct of green interpersonal citizenship behaviour which was developed by utilizing four dimensions such as 1. Teaching others, 2. Motivating others, 3. Assisting others, and 4. Punishing others. Under the rational approach for validating, there are two types of validity, i.e. face validity and content validity (Werther and Davis, 1889). Both face validity and content validity of the instruments are assured. However, construct validity, convergent validity, and divergent validity which are three types of validity (Sekaran, 1992) are yet to be tested and assured. In order to ensure that the developed instruments produce consistent results across the question items and over the different times both internal aspect and external aspect of reliability need to be tested.

Conclusion

Sustainability is a serious issue in front of any human being living today, and it is about adopting business strategies and activities that meet the needs of the organization and its stakeholders today while preserving, conserving, protecting, and improving the natural environment, and human and other resources. In fact environmental and social issues and economic issues are not competing interests, and they can and must be optimized simultaneously for both short-and-long-term success. Sustainability is indispensable owing to avoidance of numerous detrimental effects of commerce and the dangers of narrowly pursuing maximization of profits. The TBL is the most popular one among the several sustainability-related paradigms. A careful examination of the barriers to sustainability and sustainability issues and practices reveals that HRM plays and will have to play a critical role in making an organization sustainable. It is critical for embedding sustainability across the organization. Integration of sustainability into HRM results in three dimensions such as Green HRM, Social HRM and Strategic HRM, out of which green HRM is the most important as the Planet is the most important out of the three Ps. Activating on sustainability is a responsibility of every human being and it needs to be a reality rather than a rhetoric.

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Appendix I: Self Assessment (Green Citizenship Behaviour)

Following is an instrument developed by the author of this paper to measure Green Citizenship Behaviour (GCB). Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement. After doing this activity, you will be able to know your own level of GCB and how this important construct is measured.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Indifferent	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I have a habit of using natural water rather than refrigerated water for drinking.					
2. I do not use both sides of the paper when writing or printing or photo-copying because the relevant cost is negligible and it is difficult to do.					
3. I use my own vehicle to come to work instead of walking or bus or train.					
4. Normally I do hibernating the computer when not working as shutting down and opening are troublesome.					
5. I use natural light as much as possible when working.					
6. I have put plants in the working and living cubicles.					
7. Whenever possible I buy organic food for parties.					
8. I have a serious habit of working with all the bulbs on (switching on all the bulbs available in the room/place) as I need a high level of light.					
9. I don't do re-using many items such as jugs, envelops, cans, bottles, bags, etc at the office and at home as well because I think such use is not healthy.					
10. I was not used to report a relevant officer regarding damages, possible harms etc to the environment whenever noticed because it is troublesome, not my business, or there are appointed people being paid and responsible.					
11. I make sure that switching off the air-conditioners is done before the ending time of daily work (before 30/15 minutes early).					
12. I was used to sleep without using any bulb on (after switching off all the bulbs).					

Interpretation: Number of Points   **Level of GCB**

12 -21.6	Very Low
21.7 -31.2	Low
31.3 -40.8	Moderate
40.9 -50.4	High
50.5 -60	Very High

Appendix II: Self Assessment (Green Interpersonal Citizenship Behaviour)

Following is an instrument developed by the author of this paper to measure Green Interpersonal Citizenship Behaviour (GICB). Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement. After doing this activity, you will be able to know your own level of GICB and how this important construct is measured.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Indifferent	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I don't stimulate others to become green because others should change so by themselves.					
2. I answer questions asked by others about greening positively.					
3. I have a habit of teaching others about how to become green.					
4. Spending my time and effort to influence others to become green is not done because I am not rewarded by anyone for doing this.					
5. I have performed some green works which were supposed to be performed by others.					
6. Whenever possible, I discuss the importance of greening with others.					
7. I have personally appreciated green works done by others.					
8. I don't finger into green works which others have to do or which others have done.					
9. I have personally criticized non-performance of green works by others.					
10. I try to be an excellent example to others on greening.					

Interpretation: Number of Points   **Level of GICB**

   10 - 18   Very Low

   19 - 26   Low

   27 - 34   Moderate

   35 - 42   High

   43 - 50   Very High