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Good Practices to Ensuring the Sustainability of Trade Unions in Public Institute of Higher Learning in Malaysia

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Abstract

Trade union discussions about sustainable development invariably turn to current social and economic developments, and their implications for workers. Throughout history, workers and their communities have been amongst the first victims of unsustainable patterns of development, whether in the form of job dislocation, community upheaval, industrial disease, or death. In fact, the origins of the union movement itself can be traced to the collective action taken by workers against the atrocious working conditions we now associate with the First Industrial Revolution. Currently, there are 24 trade unions at local institutes of higher learning in Malaysia. Despite recent challenges to their political power in a number of countries, labor unions continue to play an important role in modern societies. It is undeniable that labor unions have retained enough power to be regarded as a determining force in the transition to more sustainable consumption and production patterns. Therefore, this study sought to identify the good practices to ensuring the sustainability of trade unions in public institute of higher learning in Malaysia. A total of 531 union members from 20 local institutes of higher learning in Malaysia involved in this study. Respondents were selected through systematic random sampling technique and the data were collected using online questionnaires. The study showed that the most prominent practices to ensuring the sustainability of trade unions is protecting the welfare and benefits of members, communication channels between employers and employees, and the efficient of union administration. However, respondents contributed the lowest perception in the effective membership management. An effective membership management indicates no significant relationship with practices to ensuring the sustainability of trade unions. In general, labor unions should become more involved in the formulation of sustainable development policies. Given the existing infrastructure, networks, and expertise, increased labor union participation in these processes could significantly contribute to easing potential tensions between competing objectives. Furthermore, a greater involvement of local expertise could help bridge the gap between international policymaking and local implementation.

Keywords: Trade Unions, Sustainability, Negotiation, Industrialization, Management

Introduction

Labor unions are a deciding factor in the transition to sustainable consumption and production (Johari & Ghazali, 2011). This assumption is based on the fact that unions represent a sizable proportion of the workforce and are involved in a variety of political activities. However, due to labor unions' dual role as a societal force and a lobbying organization, their activities have traditionally focused on issues that directly concern union members' interests, such as job security, wage levels, and working conditions. On a case-by-case basis, labor unions have only recently begun to broaden their agenda to include topics such as education, environmental protection, and sustainable development. The potential role of labor unions in this process is well recognized at the international policy level. Mackay & Mathoho (2001) state the growing debate on Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility forces unions to reconsider the relationship between societal and workplace issues. As business actors have begun to recognize that the traditional separation of business and societal interests cannot be maintained, labor unions are becoming aware that business today has a new, more integrated meaning.

As a result, the role of labor unions in global networks for enhancing sustainability, such as the Global Compact and the sustainable development debate, is expected to grow in importance. On a national scale, it is clear that labor union attitudes and activities in the field of sustainable consumption and production are heavily influenced by the historical context in which they operate and formulate their policies (Ganesan, 2016). Unions' societal roles, as well as their mandates, leverage, and functions, differ across countries and continents, making it difficult to discuss labor unions as a single actor. On the other hand, it gives labor unions a variety of ways to contribute to sustainable consumption and production via various channels and initiatives.

Despite differences in political power, member structure, and societal function, labor unions clearly represent a key factor in the transition to more sustainable production and consumption patterns. The purpose of measuring union commitment is to scrutinize immoral acts among union leaders after being appointed by union members (Tarumaraja et al., 2015). This is especially true because the successful implementation of changes in the workplace is heavily reliant on the knowledge, support, and acceptance of workers / employees. Labor unions have a unique infrastructure to facilitate workplace changes and are involved in initiatives and policy-making processes at the local, regional, national, and international levels. As a result of this multi-layered pattern of engagement, labor unions have a large number of organized workers, expertise, and communication channels, as well as a great potential for attracting additional participants and expertise into the process of transitioning to more sustainable consumption and production patterns.

In general, labor unions should become more involved in the formulation of sustainable development policies. Brem-Wilson (2015) stated given the existing infrastructure, networks, and expertise, increased labor union participation in these processes could significantly contribute to easing potential tensions between competing objectives. Furthermore, a greater involvement of local expertise could help bridge the gap between international policymaking and local implementation (Delputte & Williams, 2016). However, given the core interests of labor unions, it is important to note that participation in national or international policy-making does not always imply a positive attitude toward sustainable consumption and production.

In addition, labour unions' activities at the international, national and local level have not yet been sufficiently analysed (Cheyns & Riisgaard, 2014). A more coherent and systematic

approach to study labour unions' activities could support an adequate assessment of labour unions' actual and potential contribution to promoting sustainable consumption and production.

Trade unions of public higher education institutions in Malaysia can be divided into 5 zones. The first zone is the middle zone consisting of Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Pusat Perubatan Universiti Malaya terdiri daripada, Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Putra Malaysia (KEPERTAMA), Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kesatuan Kakitangan Sokongan Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (KESUPNA), Kesatuan Kakitangan Umum Universiti Universiti Teknologi Mara, Universiti Of Malaya General Staff Union (Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Malaysia) and Kesatuan Kakitangan Am International Islamic University Malaysia (KURNIA). The south zone refers to the Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (KEKUTEM), Kesatuan Kakitangan Pelaksana Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, and Kesatuan Kakitangan Sokongan Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (KUSIMA). Meanwhile, the North Zone consists of Kesatuan Kakitangan Pelaksana Universiti Malaysia Perlis, Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kesatuan Kakitangan Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), and Kesatuan Pegawai Am Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. Eastern zone refers to Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (KUAT), Kesatuan Kumpulan Pelaksana Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Kesatuan Staf Pelaksana Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, and Kesatuan Kakitangan Sokongan Universiti Malaysia Pahang. Trade union in Sabah Zone refers to the General Staff Union of Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Then, the Sarawak zone is Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Kesatuan Pegawai Pelaksana Universiti Putra Malaysia Kampus Bintulu Sarawak (KEPEKASA).

These unions move separately according to their respective regions in line with the requirements of the Trade Union Act 1959. As of January 2022, there are 24 trade unions with a total membership of 24,881 people in all IPTAs in Malaysia (Table 1). The number of these trade unions is more concentrated in the central zone of Peninsular Malaysia, which is as many as 10 trade unions with a membership of 17,311 people in line with the number of public high-paying institutes found in this zone. The rest are in Sabah with one trade union and Sarawak with two trade unions (Table 1)

Table 1

Number and IPTA Trade Unions Membership in Malaysia

| Zone | Number of Trade Union | Number of Membership |
|--------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Middle | 10 | 17,311 |
| South | 4 | 19,35 |
| East | 4 | 1,049 |
| North | 4 | 5,059 |
| Sabah | 1 | 693 |
| Sarawak | 1 | 769 |
| Total | 24 | 24,881 |

Source: Malaysian Trade Union Affairs Department, 2022

Methodology

Research Design

The present study was studied using a cross-sectional quantitative research method. Data from research participants were collected at a single point in time or over a relatively short period of time in cross-sectional research (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Thus, in this study, the researchers did not directly measure changes over time, but instead used descriptive statistics (percentage, average mean) to report the data analysis and findings. A cross-sectional design method was used to adapt an online self-administered questionnaire. In Malaysia, 22 trade unions at local institutes of higher learning were chosen with the majority population in mind. The president provided the name lists of union members several weeks before data collection. Members' samples were drawn from the list using systematic random sampling. The online self-administration questionnaire was used because it is more reliable because respondents are free to complete the task without the researcher's "interference."

Participants

This study's participants were union members from 20 Malaysian institutes of higher learning. This study included a total of 531 participants from 20 Malaysian institutes of higher learning. Males (n = 257, 48.4%) outnumbered females (n = 274, 51.6%). 36–40 years old (n=145, 27.3%), 41–45 years old (n=121, 22.8%), 46–50 years old (n=115, 21.7%), 31–35 years old (n=59, 11.1%), 51–55 years old (n=48, 9%), 26–30 years old (n=21, 4%), 56–60 years old (n=15, 2.8%), and 18–25 years old (n=7, 1.3%). The majority of respondents (n= 410, 77.2%) were Malay, with Bumiputera Sabah Sarawak (n= 95, 17.9%), Indian (n=19, 3.6%), and Chinese (n= 7, 1.3%) following. The average length of service among respondents was 11 to 15 years (n=158, 29.8%), followed by 16 to 20 years (n=143, 26.9%), 21 years and above (n= 130, 24.5%), 6 to 10 years (n= 69, 13%), and 1 to 5 years (n= 31, 5.8%). In the meantime, the longest historical membership is 16 to 20 years (n= 161, 30.3%), 11 to 15 years (n=140, 26.4%), 6 to 10 years (n= 122, 23%), 21 years and above (n= 75, 14.1%), and 1 to 5 years (n= 33, 6.2%).

Measures

Protecting the Welfare and Benefits of Members. Examples of the items are "Our union has succeeded in improving employment benefits", "Our union strives to defend the welfare of members in the workplace within a reasonable period", "Our union has been negotiating for a better working environment", and "Our union has protected members from unfair treatment". Respondents were asked to rate to the statement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability was $\alpha = .78$.

Creating communication channels between employers and employees. Examples of the items are "Our union has various channels in improving good relations between employers and employees", "Our union attended a formal meeting with the university management", "Our union regularly deals/meets with the university management", and "Our union actively shares information related to university policies and policies to members". Respondents were asked to rate to the statement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability was $\alpha = .80$.

An Efficient Administration of Union Institutions. Examples of the items are "Our union has meetings with members", "Our union has managed finances and maintained accounts according to rules and laws", "Our union operates in accordance with relevant laws and regulations", and "Our union is able to manage membership fees in an orderly manner".

Respondents were asked to rate to the statement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability was $\alpha = .77$.

Effective Membership Management. Examples of the items are “Our union regularly keeps, updates and maintains a register of members”, “Our union strives to attract new members”, “Our union strives to maintain existing membership”, and “Our union regularly holds activities and programs to improve the knowledge and skills of members”. Respondents were asked to rate to the statement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability was $\alpha = .81$.

Table 2

Reliability Assessment of the Final Instrument

| Variables | Cronbach's Alpha |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Protecting the Welfare and Benefits of Members | $\alpha = .78$ |
| Creating communication channels between employers and employees | $\alpha = .80$ |
| An Efficient Administration of Union Institutions | $\alpha = .77$ |
| Effective Membership Management | $\alpha = .81$ |

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed descriptively using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22. The descriptive analysis was designed to characterize the respondent's demographic background, variable distributions, and variable levels, which included frequencies and percentages. The information was statistically analyzed using frequency and mean. This study's data were gathered using a self-administered questionnaire, which was preferable because respondents were free to complete the task without interference from the researcher. Respondents in the study were given a brief explanation about the study's purpose and how to answer the questionnaire that was given to them during data collection. In addition, respondents were instructed to answer the questions as honestly as possible, and they were assured that the researcher would keep their personal information confidential and only use it for academic purposes. The questionnaire was then given to the respondents. The self-administered questionnaire was the best choice for this study because the respondents were free to complete the task without interference from the researcher. When the online questionnaire is available in Malay, data analysis will be much easier. As a result, the researcher, assisted by two enumerators, assisted the respondents in individually explaining certain details about the items.

Results and Discussion

Table 3 summarizes the findings for protecting the welfare and benefits of members. There are four questions stated in this item that were asked to the respondents. Generally, respondents gave the highest perception for the item of looking after the welfare and benefits of members with a mean score of 3.76 (75.2 %).

Table 3

Protecting the Welfare and Benefits of Members

| Item | Mean | % |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Our union has succeeded in improving employment benefits | 3.80 | 76 |
| 2. Our union strives to defend the welfare of members in the workplace within a reasonable period | 3.77 | 75.4 |
| 3. Our union has been negotiating for a better working environment | 3.70 | 74 |
| 4. Our union has protected members from unfair treatment | 3.79 | 75.8 |
| Score | 3.76 | 75.2 |

Table 4 summarizes the findings for the construct of creating communication channels between employers and employees. There are four questions stated in this item that were asked to the respondents. Overall, respondents gave the second highest perception for the item of creating communication channels between employers and employees with a mean score of 3.65 (73 %). Since unions are not formal entities with formal authority over their members, it is the union's responsibility to persuade them to be more committed and effective in the union (Johari & Ghazali, 2011).

Table 4

Creating communication channels between employers and employees

| Item | Mean | % |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| 1. Our union has various channels in improving good relations between employers and employees. | 3.61 | 72.2 |
| 2. Our union attended a formal meeting with the university management | 3.65 | 73 |
| 3. Our union regularly deals/meets with the university management | 3.70 | 74 |
| 4. Our union actively shares information related to university policies and policies to members | 3.62 | 72.4 |
| Score | 3.65 | 73 |

Table 5 summarizes the findings for the construct of efficient administration of union. There are four questions stated in this item that were asked to the respondents. Overall, the respondents recorded the item of efficient unitary institution administration with a mean score of 3.49 (69.8 %). This result is in line with Bryson (2003) that efficient administration is defined as the ability to improve seven areas in the workplace, namely the ability to increase workers' pay, protect workers from unfair treatment, promote equal opportunities, influence employers to provide decent working conditions, collaborate with management to improve working performance, help to increase management response in addressing employee concerns, and provide a better working environment.

Table 5
An Efficient Administration of Union Institutions

| Item | Mean | % |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Our union has meetings with members | 3.53 | 70.6 |
| 2. Our union has managed finances and maintained accounts according to rules and laws | 3.44 | 68.8 |
| 3. Our union operates in accordance with relevant laws and regulations. | 3.50 | 70 |
| 4. Our union is able to manage membership fees in an orderly manner | 3.49 | 69.8 |
| Score | 3.49 | 69.8 |

Table 6 summarizes the findings for the effective membership management. There are four questions stated in this item that were asked to the respondents. Overall, respondents noted the effective membership management item with the lowest mean score and percentage of 2.90 (58%).

Table 6
Effective Membership Management

| Item | Mean | % |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| 1. Our union regularly keeps, updates and maintains a register of members | 3.01 | 60.2 |
| 2. Our union strives to attract new members. | 2.89 | 57.8 |
| 3. Our union strives to maintain existing membership | 2.99 | 59.8 |
| 4. Our union regularly holds activities and programs to improve the knowledge and skills of members | 2.72 | 54.4 |
| Score | 2.90 | 58 |

Table 7
Comparison of Mean Values and Percentages of Trade Union Roles and Responsibilities

| Construct | Mean | % |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|
| Protecting the Welfare and Benefits of Members | 3.76 | 75.2 |
| Creating communication channels between employers and employees | 3.65 | 73 |
| An Efficient Administration of Union Institutions | 3.49 | 69.8 |
| Effective Membership Management | 2.90 | 58 |

Consequential, a comparison is made based on the constructs what is the good practice to ensuring the sustainability of trade unions. The three highest constructs were recorded, namely; protecting the welfare and benefits of members with a mean score of 3.76 (75.2%), communication channels between employers and employees with a mean score of 3.65 (73%), and efficient union institution administration with a mean score of 3.49 (69.8%). This situation illustrates that the respondents understand the role of establishing a union and in

line with the purpose of participating in the IPTA union. Protecting the welfare and benefits of union members shows the union's determination to fight for the rights and needs of members in the work environment. Respondents satisfied with the union's negotiation method in fighting for workers' rights. Awareness of being oppressed by employers is also at the highest level. In addition, respondents also have good communication channels between employers and employees. This situation shows a close and professional relationship with university management members in consulting. The results are consistent with the findings of Moeti-lysson & Ongori (2011) found that union commitment and union effectiveness have a strong and positive effect on the union's ability to represent its members based on their expectations.

In addition, the union actively involved in sharing information related policies to respondents. This situation is to ensure that members are clear and understand the management of effective communication channels in the union. The efficient administration of union institutions also got the highest score and this situation shows the union's effective management of financial aspects. Therefore, respondents have no worries about finances in the union because financial affairs are done transparently. Respondents also believed that the operation of the union was very much in line with the laws and regulations of the union and knew the prohibited things in the union's activities. When looking for ways to improve the communication of the union, the most feasible improvements can be found in network embeddedness and infrastructural resources. Strengthening ties with international organisations is a critical enabler of trade union participation. It would support the infrastructure of local unions (Alford et al., 2017). However, reliance on international alliances can become a trap if the need for improved internal union solidarity is ignored and the union relies solely on external support.

However, in this study, effective membership management recorded an unsatisfactory level with a mean score of 2.90 (58%). This situation shows a very large value gap between the three elements above. Respondents recorded the lowest mean and percentage values in the items 'Our association is able to attract new members', 'Our association regularly keeps, updates and maintains the list of members', 'Our association is able to maintain existing membership', and 'Our association regularly holds activities and programs to improve the knowledge and skills of members'. It is clear that the respondents do not believe that their union has effective membership management as long as they join the union at IPTA. This situation shows the union's failure to attract new members and retain old members. In addition, the union does not have an activity plan that can improve the respondents' self-development.

The researcher is cognizant of this issue and believes that this issue of effective membership management should be improved. The researcher believes that the issue of improving member management should be refined. The union needs to take on a huge responsibility to invite new members to join the union and have programs that can develop the soft aspects, health, education, attitude, and income of the respondents. Programs that can balance the standard of living, technological progress, quality of education and income of respondents should be continued, but efforts for improvement need to be considered to ensure that union members get the maximum benefit. This is also related to the rapid changes in the use of technology and the diversity of demands by employers. The more information a person obtains related to the chosen career, it will make the respondent's career planning better. In particular, making a career plan requires information about the job being considered from various relevant aspects such as knowledge, skills, training and others.

Conclusion and Future Recommendations

The results of this study provide an overview of the good practices to ensuring the sustainability of trade unions in public institute of higher learning in Malaysia. In the present study, researchers focusing on the four elements namely; protecting the welfare and benefits of members, creating communication channels between employers and employees, efficient administration of union institutions, and effective membership management. The three highest constructs were recorded, namely; protecting the welfare and benefits of members, communication channels between employers and employees, and the efficient of union administration. Overall, the majority of respondents had a positive perception of all three dimensions:

These findings suggest that unions provide a means for workers and employers to communicate, which helps to build trust and commitment among employees and ensures that problems are identified and resolved quickly and fairly. This provides significant productivity benefits to businesses. Recognizing a union also means that there is a single point of contact for negotiating worker terms and conditions, which is easier, more efficient for the employer, and more equitable than dealing with workers individually. Trade unions actively combat discrimination and promote equal employment opportunities. Union representatives are in a good position to identify instances of discrimination and work with employers to ensure that anti-discrimination policies are properly implemented. This contributes to making workplaces more appealing to employees, improving staff retention, absenteeism, and productivity, and reducing management time spent addressing grievances.

However, in this study, effective membership management recorded an unsatisfactory level. This issue refers to the what is the few social programme that able to attract other individuals to keep supporting unions ahead. For future recommendation, researchers suggested the criteria evaluated for the design and implementation of the social programme must focused on the collective communication and inclusiveness. The previous community programme possibly faced a number of challenges in terms of representativeness, procedural fairness, and consensual orientation, which helps to explain why trade union participation is so low overall. Power inequalities among its participants should be addressed by improving programme design in order to achieve a higher level of participation and deliberation. Our findings are used to generate recommendations for the design and implementation of social programme which are organized around each criterion. Then, the higher sustainability level would be achieved ahead. However, given the core interests of labor unions, it is important to note that participation in national or international policy-making does not always imply a positive attitude toward sustainable consumption and production.

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