



## **SUSTAINABILITY-ORIENTED EMPLOYEE MINDSETS AS A FOUNDATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH IN THE PALM OIL SECTOR**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores employee mindsets and their influence on sustainable agriculture within PTPN III (Persero), a state-owned enterprise in Indonesia's palm oil sector. Using a qualitative case study design, thirty employees from field, supervisory, and administrative levels participated in semi-structured interviews conducted between January and June 2025. Thematic analysis identified six dominant mindsets: profit-oriented, compliance, growth, innovation, collaborative, and infinite. These represent a continuum from short-term productivity and regulatory adherence to long-term, visionary, and intergenerational commitments to sustainability. The analysis further revealed six traits influencing sustainability behavior: environmental awareness, social responsibility, ethical consciousness, innovation orientation, collaborative spirit, and advancement drive. Employees with higher levels of these traits actively engaged in environmentally responsible practices, while those with lower awareness demonstrated compliance-based behavior. The findings suggest that a sustainability-oriented mindset, characterized by long-term vision, accountability to nature and society, and adaptability to global challenges, is essential for advancing sustainable agriculture in PTPN III. Theoretically, this study contributes to organizational behavior and sustainability research by illustrating how employee mindsets shape sustainability implementation in agribusiness organizations.

**Keywords:** *organizational behavior, environmental awareness, social responsibility, palm oil sector.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Sustainability outcomes in agriculture are shaped not only by policies and technologies but also by the everyday judgments, habits, and initiatives of employees who translate organizational commitments into action [1, 2]. Over the past decade, scholarship has increasingly focused on the psychological and behavioral foundations of workplace sustainability, mapping the antecedents of employee pro-environmental behavior (PEB) and the organizational mechanisms that foster it [3, 4]. Recent empirical work also demonstrates that environmental transformational leadership and green human resource management significantly predict employee pro-environmental behavior within organizations [5].

This behavioral turn highlights that employees' mindsets, including beliefs, values, identities, and perceived control regarding sustainability, mediate how policies are enacted at the operational level [1, 6]. A growing body of research defines the sustainability mindset as an integrated cognitive-affective orientation that guides environmentally and socially responsible choices at work, emerging from the alignment of organizational culture, leadership, and human resource systems [7, 8]. Studies in agricultural or workplace settings further underscore that psychological orientations toward sustainability shape the adoption of eco-friendly practices and innovation readiness [9].

In organizational contexts, this mindset is manifested through PEB such as resource conservation, waste reduction, and eco-initiative behaviors that collectively enhance environmental performance [2, 10]. Evidence shows that green human resource management (GHRM), which includes green training, empowerment, and performance systems, cultivates these behaviors by shaping a pro-environmental psychological climate [11]. Recent reviews also indicate that structured behavioral supports, such as prompts, nudges, and sustainability monitoring systems, strengthen the alignment between employee actions and organizational sustainability objectives [4, 12]. The integration of behavioral science with sustainability practice highlights the growing importance of accounting for everyday judgments, cognitive patterns, and social norms in sustainable agriculture [13].

The palm oil sector provides a crucial test case for translating sustainability from policy into practice due to persistent challenges of deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate impacts [14]. International certification regimes have sought to address these risks, with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) promoting continuous improvement in environmental and social standards through regular audits and impact monitoring [13, 14]. Empirical

findings show mixed but informative outcomes. Some studies document reductions in deforestation within specific contexts, while others identify unintended trade-offs in production efficiency as firms adjust to certification demands—underscoring the importance of organizational capabilities and workforce engagement for meaningful outcomes [15, 12].

Indonesia complements private voluntary schemes with its mandatory national standard, the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO), strengthened under Presidential Regulation No. 44/2020. This policy aims to improve governance, strengthen international market acceptance, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions [16, 17]. Policy briefs and technical notes further emphasize ongoing initiatives to enhance traceability, expand certification coverage, and empower smallholders—areas that depend heavily on employee competence and compliance behaviors within companies and cooperatives [18]. The workforce's sustainability mindset becomes a strategic asset for achieving compliance and continuous improvement [19].

From a behavioral theory perspective, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) remains a dominant framework for explaining employee PEB by linking attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control to intentions and actual behaviors [6, 20]. Recent applications confirm that TPB constructs, sometimes extended with emotional, identity, or value-based variables, robustly predict sustainability-oriented actions [1, 21, 22]. Complementary studies also demonstrate the enabling roles of leadership and GHRM practices in reinforcing environmental awareness and converting intentions into consistent green behaviors [11].

Despite these advances, limited evidence exists on which mindsets are most influential within large, multi-site palm oil enterprises and how these mindsets translate into specific sustainability practices, particularly in the overlapping context of mandatory and voluntary certification [14, 19]. Addressing this gap is critical, as employees' beliefs about efficacy, norms, ethics, and innovation determine whether sustainability protocols are treated as compliance requirements or as opportunities for organizational learning and improvement [10].

PT. Perkebunan Nusantara III (PTPN III), a state-owned subholding consolidating major Indonesian palm operations, operates under high sustainability expectations and must comply with both ISPO and RSPO standards [13, 16]. Understanding the prevailing employee mindsets, identifying the mindset characteristics that most strongly predict sustainability-oriented behavior, and determining the ideal mindset profile to support PTPN III's mission are therefore timely and strategic inquiries.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions: (R1) What types of mindsets are prevalent among employees in PTPN III regarding sustainable agriculture? (R2) Which mindset characteristics most influence employee behavior toward sustainability? (R3) What kind of employee mindset is most appropriate to support sustainable agriculture in PTPN III? These research questions integrate behavioral theory with sustainability certification and governance literature to provide actionable insights for organizational design and capacity development within Indonesia's palm oil industry [13, 16, 19].

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach, which is well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life context [24, 25]. The case study method allows researchers to investigate employee mindsets toward sustainability in depth, capturing individual perceptions, cultural dynamics, and contextual influences that shape pro-environmental behaviors in organizational settings. Qualitative case study designs are particularly effective for examining workplace culture and behavioral change processes where multiple social, institutional, and psychological factors interact [26]. Such designs provide the flexibility needed to explore emerging patterns and generate theory grounded in the field context [27]. The approach follows qualitative research principles emphasizing methodological rigor through contextual immersion and reflexive interpretation [27].

By focusing on PTPN III, a state-owned enterprise in Indonesia's palm oil sector, the study aimed to generate rich, context-specific insights that cannot be obtained through purely quantitative methods. The qualitative case study design was chosen to enable flexibility in data collection, inductive exploration of emerging themes, and triangulation of multiple perspectives, thereby enhancing the validity and credibility of findings [28].

The research subjects consisted of employees directly engaged in palm oil plantation operations across different departments. From a pool of 60 potential participants identified through purposive sampling, 30 employees agreed to participate, representing three key groups: field workers, supervisors, and administrative staff. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. The fieldwork was conducted between January and June 2025, allowing sufficient time to establish trust, conduct multiple interviews, and ensure data saturation.

The study relied primarily on semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method. Semi-structured interviews are

particularly effective for qualitative organizational research because they combine structure with flexibility, enabling the researcher to explore predefined themes while probing emergent issues [27]. Qualitative interviewing is widely recognized in work and organizational research to capture complex interpersonal dynamics and sense-making processes within professional environments [25].

Data management and transcription were handled systematically. All recordings were transcribed verbatim, anonymized to protect participant confidentiality, and stored securely in password-protected files. Transcriptions were subsequently imported into NVivo 12 software, a qualitative data analysis tool that supports systematic coding, thematic categorization, and retrieval of data segments across cases [28].

The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis, which includes familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report [29]. Initial coding was conducted line by line, assigning descriptive labels to text segments.

To enhance trustworthiness, multiple strategies were adopted in line with Lincoln and Guba's criteria for qualitative research. Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement in the field and member checking, where participants were invited to review and validate preliminary interpretations [30]. Transferability was strengthened by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participant characteristics. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of coding and analytical decisions, while confirmability was reinforced through reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias. The evaluation of methodological rigor and trustworthiness followed recent refinements and applications of Guba and Lincoln's criteria in social and sustainability research [25]. These measures collectively ensured that findings were both rigorous and ethically sound.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis was conducted by linking the research questions (RQs) with specific interview questions and the emerging codes. This procedure ensured methodological alignment and analytical transparency throughout the thematic analysis. The design followed Braun and Clarke's approach to data familiarization, coding, and theme development, ensuring each research question was systematically addressed through the analytic framework [29].

The analysis identified six dominant orientations that reflect how sustainability is perceived, internalized, and enacted across organizational levels. For RQ1, the coexistence of

profit-oriented and compliance mindsets with growth, innovation, and collaborative mindsets illustrates a spectrum from transactional adherence to proactive improvement. These orientations are consistent with evidence that management controls and leadership systems shape whether sustainability is treated as minimum compliance or opportunity for improvement [11, 33]. The infinite mindset aligns with research on paradoxical time orientations in sustainability and with empirical findings linking infinite thinking to innovation and resilience in agribusiness contexts [31, 34].

For RQ2, traits such as environmental awareness, ethical responsibility, openness to change, and long-term vision emerged as core predictors of behavior. This pattern is in line with reviews showing that values, perceived responsibility, and enabling HR systems underpin PEB in organizations [2, 11].

For RQ3, the convergence on infinite, growth, collaborative, and innovation mindsets indicates that sustainable performance depends on long-term orientation coupled with learning and coordinated action—an interpretation supported by leadership and supply-chain mindset literature [33] and by workplace studies positioning green behavior as central to environmental performance [2]. Altogether, the mapping of codes to RQs reflects a clear methodological chain of evidence, strengthening internal validity and theoretical generalization [29, 30].

The interviews revealed the presence of five dominant types of employee mindsets in PTPN III: 1) Profit-oriented mindset – characterized by prioritization of short-term productivity and cost efficiency, often resulting in neglect of long-term sustainability considerations. 2) Compliance mindset – marked by the tendency to follow sustainability practices only when mandated by regulations or company policy, without deeper personal conviction. 3) Growth mindset – reflected in openness to learning and adopting new sustainable techniques, such as eco-friendly farming or efficient resource use. 4) Innovation mindset – expressed through proactive efforts to experiment with environmentally friendly solutions and technological improvements. 5) Collaborative mindset – demonstrated by the emphasis on teamwork and cooperation with colleagues, local communities, and stakeholders in achieving sustainability objectives. 6) Infinite mindset – focuses on long-term vision, intergenerational sustainability, and the courage to adapt in the face of global uncertainties. This mindset emphasizes that a company’s success is not merely about short-term profits, but rather about making a lasting contribution to the ecosystem, society, and the future of the palm oil industry

These findings suggest heterogeneity in how employees construe sustainability, ranging from

compliance-driven behavior to proactive innovation, consistent with organizational evidence on how controls, leadership, and capability building steer green behavior [2, 11, 33].



**Figure 1.** Employee mindsets in PTPN III

Further thematic analysis identified six key traits that significantly influence employee behavior toward sustainability: 1) Environmental awareness – a conscious recognition of ecological impacts associated with daily agricultural practices. 2) Social responsibility – the sense of accountability to communities surrounding plantation operations. 3) Ethical consciousness – adherence to moral principles, such as fairness, transparency, and environmental justice. 4) Innovation orientation – willingness to experiment, adopt, and scale sustainable practices beyond traditional routines. 5) Collaborative spirit – a preference for cooperative efforts, both internally and with external stakeholders, to achieve sustainable outcomes. 6) Advancement – the drive to continuously improve skills, processes, and technologies in order to achieve higher standards of sustainability performance, ensuring that the organization remains progressive and competitive in a rapidly changing global context.

These traits were found to act as behavioral drivers that either reinforce or hinder sustainability implementation at the operational level. Employees with high levels of these traits tended to exhibit proactive engagement in eco-friendly practices, while those with limited awareness or responsibility leaned more toward compliance-only actions.

The study concludes that the most appropriate mindset to support sustainable agriculture in PTPN III is an infinite mindset. This mindset integrates long-term vision, responsibility toward nature and society, and commitment to advancement. Unlike compliance or profit-driven orientations, an infinite mindset reframes sustainability from corporate obligation into a shared value system, aligning with paradoxical time-orientation research in corporate sustainability [31] and with empirical links between infinite thinking, innovation, and business sustainability in local agribusiness settings [34].

To cultivate this mindset among employees, several recommendations were identified: 1) Internal training programs focused

on sustainability values, environmental ethics, and long-term agricultural resilience. 2) Employee empowerment mechanisms through participatory decision-making, enabling workers to take ownership of sustainability initiatives. 3) Recognition and reward systems designed to appreciate employees who consistently demonstrate advancement practices. 4) Continuous communication campaigns within the organization to strengthen awareness of sustainability and reinforce ethical responsibility.

These interventions embed sustainability within daily practices and psychological orientations. Interpreted through TPB, attitudes (e.g., environmental awareness), norms (e.g., collaborative spirit), and perceived control (e.g., innovation orientation) shape intentions and actions [20–22]. Comparative evidence from palm oil contexts connects social–environmental stewardship with worker well-being and affective commitment [32], while leadership and supply-chain mindset work supports the role of infinite/growth orientations for resilient, purpose-driven organizations [33]. Leadership styles foregrounding empathy and values are likewise associated with sustained performance in palm oil organizations [35].

These recommendations highlight the importance of embedding sustainability not only at the policy and management level but also within the psychological orientations and daily practices of employees. Interpreting these results through the lens of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) helps explain how underlying attitudes (e.g., environmental awareness), norms (e.g., collaborative spirit), and perceived behavioral control (e.g., innovation orientation) shape employee intentions and actions toward sustainable practices. Additionally, the concept of an “infinite mindset”—referencing long-term vision and adaptability—aligns with contemporary leadership paradigms that underscore sustainability beyond short-term gains, suggesting a theoretical expansion of mindset frameworks in sustainability contexts [30, 31]

Comparison with prior studies reinforces the relevance of these findings. For instance, empirical research in Malaysia’s palm oil plantations linked affective organizational commitment to greater worker well-being in response to social and environmental stewardship [32]. This echoes our observation that traits like social responsibility and ethical consciousness drive proactive engagement. Moreover, broader leadership literature argues for the value of infinite mindsets in fostering resilient, purpose-driven organizations—supporting our identification of an infinite mindset as critical for sustainability [33]. In these cases, innovation and learning ability mediate the relationship between mindset and sustainability outcomes, reinforcing that

sustainability is not an automatic consequence of intention, but rather of iterative capability development [34].

Complementing these insights, evidence from the palm oil plantation sector highlights the significance of heart-centered and ethical leadership in sustaining agricultural organizations operating under social and environmental pressures. Leadership styles that emphasize empathy, conscience, and values-based decision-making, rather than extractive or purely results-driven behavior are more effective in building trust, intrinsic motivation, and organizational commitment. These traits correspond directly to our concept of infinite mindset, which privileges mission continuity, stakeholder wellbeing, and stewardship across generations [35].

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that employees in PTPN III demonstrate a diverse spectrum of mindsets toward sustainability, reflecting the complex interplay between economic, cultural, and ethical motivations within the organization. These mindsets range from profit-oriented and compliance-driven orientations to more progressive growth, innovation, collaborative, and infinite mindsets. The findings reveal that sustainability is not merely a technical agenda but a cognitive and cultural process embedded in everyday behavior and decision-making. Among the identified orientations, traits such as environmental awareness, social responsibility, ethical consciousness, innovation orientation, collaborative spirit, and advancement emerged as the most critical factors influencing how sustainability is perceived and practiced in the workplace. Employees who internalize these values tend to engage more proactively in eco-friendly practices, participate in collective problem-solving, and view sustainability as an extension of personal and organizational integrity rather than a regulatory demand.

The study provides empirical evidence that employee mindset acts as a mediating bridge between institutional sustainability frameworks and real-world implementation. It demonstrates that the success of sustainability programs in plantation enterprises depends not only on policies and certifications but also on the psychological and cultural readiness of employees to embrace change, innovation, and long-term thinking. The research therefore extends behavioral theory, particularly the Theory of Planned Behavior, by illustrating that attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioral control are deeply influenced by underlying cognitive orientations, or what this paper defines as mindsets. In this context, the infinite mindset stands out as the most strategic and future-oriented mindset for advancing sustainable agriculture. This mindset integrates

long-term vision, ethical stewardship, adaptability, and a sense of responsibility that transcends short-term performance goals. It redefines success not in terms of quarterly profits, but in the ability of the organization to sustain ecological, economic, and social wellbeing over generations.

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