



Advancing Sarawak's Environmental Sustainability Initiatives through Isomorphism Perspective: Evidence from Online News

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how isomorphism, derived from organizational theory, plays a pivotal role in understanding the Sarawak government's commitment to environmental sustainability, aligning with global trends and meeting the demands for environmental stewardship. The analysis includes the examination of online news which was captured from a Google search from a period 2016 till present. There were 24 online news captured during the period. The coercive isomorphism resulted from the commitment to the international environment commitment and the influence of trade and industry. The mimetic isomorphism came from emulating global environmental best practices. The normative isomorphism is evident in the rise in environmental activism, sustainability leadership, and organizing sustainability-related conferences. The implications and limitations are provided in the paper.

Keywords: *environment sustainability; isomorphism; online news*



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INTRODUCTION

Sustainability was first defined by the United Nations Brundtland Commission in 1987 as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Commission, 1987). This concept served as the cornerstone for a comprehensive understanding of sustainability that takes into account its three key facets: economic, social, and environmental. A core tenet of the sustainability concept, environmental sustainability centers on the notion that human consumption should not exceed nature's capacity for replenishment. Responsible resource management, the development of renewable energy sources, and a decrease in greenhouse gas emissions are among the steps that can be taken to attain environmental sustainability.

Social sustainability places a strong emphasis on the value of equality and societal well-being. Healthcare, education, and transportation are a few examples of the aspects of human life categorized under this domain. Communities that respect individual, labor, and cultural rights and aggressively resist discrimination are acknowledged to be healthy communities. Social sustainability strives to build an inclusive and equal society where everyone has the chance to live comfortably. Economic sustainability highlights the importance for all communities to be able to remain independent and acquire the resources to meet their demands. Economic sustainability envisions a society in which economic systems do not endanger the welfare of current and future generations or exhaust resources to the point of scarcity. Responsible resource management, ethical employment standards, and a dedication to cutting back on waste and wasteful consumption are all components of sustainable economic practices. Consequently, circular economies and moral corporate conduct could be promoted to ensure economic sustainability.

One practical framework for incorporating sustainability into daily actions is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 global goals, unanimously adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, aim to guide efforts towards a greener, more prosperous, and equitable world by 2030 (United Nations, n.d.). The SDGs provide a comprehensive plan of action, consisting of 169 specific targets and 231 measurable indicators, covering a wide range of issues, including poverty eradication, climate action, gender equality, and access to quality education and

healthcare. Malaysia is one of the signatories to this important global action plan. Malaysia carries on to position huge importance on actions to alleviate and adjust to global warming Malaysia is dedicated to reducing GHG emissions amount to gross domestic product (GDP) by 45% by 2030 compared with the level in 2005 with the endorsement of the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Kementerian Ekonomi, n.d.). The government of Sarawak, a Malaysian state known for its rich biodiversity and natural beauty, has actively embraced the call for environmental sustainability. This can be seen in the speech by the Premier of Sarawak:

‘The Sarawak government has always prioritised sustainable development and is committed to striking a balance between the need for development and safeguarding the wellbeing of its people. ... As the government continues its transformation agenda towards turning Sarawak into a developed state with a high-income economy by 2030, we must be mindful of our moral and social responsibility to safeguard our environment and to sustainably manage and conserve our natural resources’ (Pei-Pei, 2021).

According to the Premier of Sarawak, placing more emphasis on environmental sustainability would open Sarawak up to more investment that would help the state co-create solutions and create more green jobs and business possibilities that would help the state's economy grow sustainably. In another speech, the Premier emphasized that environmental sustainability is incorporated in recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic and in long-term economic growth (Chua, 2023). The Premier’s speech in the online news is one of the examples of coercive forces, one of the isomorphism conceptions under the institutional theory. Online news or press visibility is one of the media that are regarded as an example of coercive pressure in disclosure studies (Abang Ahmad et al, 2022). The concept of isomorphism, which is founded in organisational theory, refers to organisations adopting comparable structures, practices, and aims in response to external influences, which is what drives this embrace. In this paper, similar to organizations, the Sarawak government is subjected to scrutiny from various authorities such as the Federal government, international organizations or frameworks, and others. This paper aims to provide an online news analysis of how the Sarawak government has harnessed isomorphism, particularly through coercive, mimetic, and

normative forms, to align itself with global trends and meet the demands for environmental stewardship. This paper is important as it provides a general overview of environmental sustainability initiatives in a state government which needs to be regularly evaluated in addition to providing support to the national data (Mohd Yusof & Ariffin, 2020). The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents a literature review and theoretical framework. In Section 3, the methodology is explained, followed by the results and discussions in Section 4. Concluding comments are presented in Section 5.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A literature search is carried out using the search query “government environmental sustainability initiative”. Nevertheless, most literature focused on the corporates or firms as the unit of analysis and not the state government. Hence, only articles related to sustainable development initiative implementation, environmental governance, issues in environmental sustainability, and sustainability leadership are reviewed. Through a review of the literature and content analysis, Mohd Yusof and Ariffin (2020) analyse the sustainability efforts by identifying the themes of the development, the government's attention to sustainability, its various policies, the involvement of actors, and the challenges throughout its implementation. Overall, Malaysia's comprehensive development plans, inclusion of multiple parties, and cooperation with various stakeholders all contributed to the success of sustainable development. It was established that Malaysia's sustainable growth was successful because of the long-term planning, which was reflected in the five-year Malaysian Plan developed since the independence. Nevertheless, a lot of effort has to be made, and the policies must be consistently cohesive and focused on the needs of the people i.e. the intended audience for the final products.

According to Howes et al. (2017), inadequate policy implementation is a major challenge of the environmental sustainability issue. A thorough study of the literature demonstrates that the inability to achieve environmental sustainability is largely due to the conflict between the goals of environmental policies and those that are concerned with economic development, a lack of incentives to put environmental policies into action, and a failure to communicate goals to important stakeholders.

Environmental governance is an important aspect of achieving environmental sustainability. Coenen et al. (2021) explore how China is actively and quickly creating an institutional framework for its "green Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," taking into account the important players, regulations, and projects associated with the BRI's environmental governance. It is discovered that the "green BRI"'s current institutional structure is dependent on a variety of global and transnational sustainability programs as well as voluntary corporate self-governance. In addition to China's aims and commitments, the effectiveness of the BRI's environmental governance also depends on the political will and ability of the participating nations to uphold, implement, and enforce strict environmental laws and regulations.

A leadership approach with sustainable leadership will incorporate sustainability practices and ideals into business decision-making processes. Leaders who value sustainability are more likely to make choices that are consistent with sustainability ideals. Sustainable leadership may assist organisations in embracing sustainable buying practices by fostering the growth of a sustainable culture within the organisation. This can entail establishing sustainability objectives, putting sustainable purchasing practices into practice, and giving staff members resources and training. By establishing sustainability goals, supporting sustainability ideals, and providing resources to support sustainable practices, leaders can foster a culture of sustainability inside their organisations (Nsiah-Sarfo et. al., 2023).

According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), and Joseph et al. (2023), isomorphism is the situation in which organizations in the same industry tend to become more similar in their structure and practices. Institutional isomorphism is concerned with the organizational fight for political power, social fitness, and legitimacy. This argument is closely related to the role of the government as a funding provider and regulator of business activities. As one form of government in the public sector, the state government is subject to other types of pressure that need to be experienced to achieve or maintain legitimacy. Three main institutional pressures have an impact on this process:

Coercive isomorphism results from external influences, such as rules imposed by regulatory bodies, governmental authorities, or other

organisations on which an organisation depends. An organization's legitimacy is increased and its existence is ensured by adhering to these external demands. In this paper, the sources of coercive isomorphism are such as from the international agreement and global environmental standards.

Mimetic Isomorphism takes place when businesses replicate the methods and frameworks of other businesses that are respected and successful in their field. This frequently occurs when organizations confront uncertainties or difficulties implementing specific practices and instead decide to copy what appears to be successful for others. In this paper, mimetic isomorphism exists when the Sarawak government emulates environmental sustainability best practices initiatives from within or outside the country.

Professional and occupational groups are the driving forces behind normative isomorphism. It entails the exchange of cultural values, conventions, and beliefs regarding organisational practices within a specific profession or field. Professionals in the same field interact with one another and create a common set of behaviours and expectations. In order to adhere to these norms, organisations within the same professional community frequently adopt similar practices. In this paper, normative isomorphism exists as a result of the sharing of norms, beliefs, and values relating to environmental sustainability initiatives. This could be achieved via the dissemination of information relating to environmental sustainability by a champion or leader in any sharing sessions such as conferences or organization's websites.

METHODOLOGY

The data collected in this study were based on a content analysis of the inclusion or exclusion of environmental sustainability initiatives in the state of Sarawak online self-reported release and media news exposure. In line with Joseph and Michael (2023), firstly, search queries via Google search were made using the "Sarawak government environmental sustainability SDG". Secondly, the timeframe was refined from 2016 till the present. This was justified to account for the introduction of 17 global goals in 2015. The search generated 127 articles. Thirdly, the selected articles were carefully

read to extract and review relevant information regarding Sarawak's efforts in environmental sustainability and SDGs. In line with the objective of this paper i.e. to explore how isomorphism, derived from organizational theory, plays a pivotal role in understanding the Sarawak government's commitment to environmental sustainability, only articles that highlight the isomorphism conception are chosen. This generated the 14 relevant articles.

Next, the second search query was expanded using the keywords “Sarawak government environmental sustainability SDG Paris Agreement.” The search generated 140 items. An additional 10 articles were found after eliminating the redundant articles from the first search. Finally, 24 online news articles were analyzed in this paper (see Appendix 1). The collected data were analyzed to identify key government initiatives related to environmental sustainability and the SDGs in Sarawak in line with the isomorphism conception.

FINDINGS

In line with the objective of this paper, the content of online news articles is linked with the isomorphism pressures under the institutional theory.

Coercive Isomorphism

a. International environmental obligations

The pressure applied to organisations, or in this paper, the government, to comply with the external requirements and specifications is acknowledged as coercive isomorphism. As a state of Malaysia, Sarawak is subjected to a number of international agreements and commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Climate Agreement. As a signatory to the Paris Agreement, Sarawak is dedicated to lowering carbon emissions. This commitment supports the urgent need to address climate change on a global scale. With the intention to achieve international standards, the state is required to create and put into effect policies that enable carbon reduction, invest in renewable energy sources, and advance energy efficiency. Sarawak's commitment recognizes the state's major contribution to the fight against global climate change in addition to being a response to international pressure. Non-compliance may

lead to trade restrictions, a decline in one's standing abroad, and negative economic effects. As a response to coercive isomorphism, Sarawak is effectively reflecting the global agenda through its commitment to sustainable development goals and climate targets. The commitment is supported by a statement made by the Utilities Minister:

“Sarawak remains fully committed to supporting and contributing towards Malaysia’s targets under the Paris Agreement by helping the country meet its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to reduce carbon emission... Sarawak’s large hydro resources are now included as part of the Renewable Energy (RE) definition for Malaysia” (New Sarawak Tribune, 2021).

In another statement, the Premier of Sarawak emphasized the commitment to Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG):

“Today, everyone, including governments, is wholly preoccupied with environmental, social, and governance considerations or ESG. ESG is a macro spin-off of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” (Cheng & Sim, 2022).

b. Sustainability in trade and industry

Beyond international climate commitments, Sarawak is under increasing pressure to align with global sustainability standards in trade and industry. Aspects of environmental sustainability are especially important in the forestry industry, in which Sarawak aims to gain recognition for its environmentally friendly forest management practices and commitment to biodiversity preservation while also fostering the expansion of its timber business. According to the Premier of Sarawak:

“Forest management practices and stewardship will focus on balancing the rate of deforestation and growth, increasing product yield, and enhancing services obtained from forests. In addition, sustainable approaches to monetise Sarawak’s rich resources will be implemented to provide economic opportunities for the rural communities” (Smart Sarawak, 2021).

Mimetic Isomorphism

The second form of tenet that explains Sarawak's journey towards environmental sustainability is a mimetic isomorphism. Using this type of isomorphism, the government emulates the successful strategies used in other regions and learns from their best practices.

a. Emulating global environmental best practices

Mimicry practices include learning from successful organizations at various levels: international, national, and local (Joseph & Taplin, 2012). Sweden is recognized for its efficient garbage management and recycling programs. Sarawak has researched Swedish methods and aims to use them in its pursuit of sustainable waste management, as part of the environmental sustainability initiatives. Sarawak desires to encourage recycling and minimise waste by using effective Swedish waste management techniques, in line with current global sustainability trends. This can be acknowledged from the Premier's speech during his visit to Sweden's Energy Agency in Stockholm.

“I am interested in Sweden's capability in the WtE industry, and since Sarawak has almost similar resources, we can emulate its solid waste management method... it was time for Sarawak to strengthen its solid management system through WtE to ensure the well-being of its people in the future” (Bernama, 2023).

Normative Isomorphism

The third type of isomorphism i.e. Normative isomorphism is the process through which organisational norms and values are promoted. This could be normally developed by professional and occupational groups (Rahaman et al., 2004).

a. The Rise of Environmental Activism

Environmental activism and public demands for sustainable practices have increased in Sarawak, especially in sectors such as logging, agriculture, and biodiversity. The administration has reviewed its environmental rules and procedures in response to frequent protests and

calls for change. This indicates the existence of normative isomorphism i.e. sharing of norms and values relating to environmental sustainability. The health and prosperity of Sarawak's residents depend on its biodiversity. The Sarawakian government recognises the value of biodiversity and is working to uphold its obligation to safeguard the state's biological diversity and its interconnectedness with nature. Sarawak's dedication to striking a balance between economic expansion and the preservation of its priceless biodiversity is highlighted by environmental sustainability. In realizing this objective, UNDP Malaysia is working with the Sarawak government to create the Sarawak Biodiversity Master Plan. Currently, the master plan is being created with input from relevant parties, primarily from government organisations active in the biodiversity and economic sectors. The master plan will strengthen and supplement current conservation efforts rather than replace current regulations. The master plan will act as a guide on how to include biodiversity issues in decision-making processes and serve as Sarawak's primary tool for developing biodiversity-specific policies. With the help of this mainstreaming strategy, Sarawak gets a step closer to realizing its goal of sustainable development while preserving its natural heritage (Ming, 2023). At the same time, the sharing of values and norms of environmental sustainability among environmental activists would promote normative isomorphism, which, in turn, develops the culture of sustainability.

b. Structural Reforms

The government itself engages in normative isomorphism. Environmental conservation departments are manned by people who are enthusiastic about their jobs. These professionals embody normative isomorphism since their personal and professional goals are in line with environmental sustainability. Government staff and officials are spearheading sustainability projects within their own departments. The government has been promoting an internal culture that prioritizes environmental sustainability. This can be seen by the setup of the new Energy and Environmental Sustainability Ministry in 2022. The Premier in his remarks:

"With this ministry, we hope to coordinate and give direction to the development of green, renewable energy and participate in the world issue of climate change. This is a pertinent issue and we hope

to contribute to the needs of the world and mitigate carbon emissions" (Bursa Malaysia, 2022).

The establishment of the Sarawak Climate Change Centre, which will monitor and manage all topics relating to climate change and carbon trading programmes, is another structural reform. The practices and rules for carbon trading are in line with Sarawak's sustainability goals. Sarawak is the first state to implement the framework in Malaysia. Various stakeholder mechanisms and conversations, including those involving international parties. the dedication of the government to tackling environmental issues and coordinating with national and international norms is evidence of normative isomorphism. These adjustments enable the government to mobilise resources, create legislation, and plan projects centred on sustainability and mitigating climate change (Hui & Bong, 2023).

c. Sustainability leadership

According to Nsiah-Sarfo et al. (2023), leaders who prioritise sustainability are aware of the connections between social, environmental, and economic problems and work to make progress. Sustainable leaders are able to find creative solutions to difficult societal and environmental problems and advance long-term sustainability for both their businesses and society at large by adopting a holistic viewpoint. Environmental value systems may be motivated both internally and externally (Nsiah-Sarfo et al., 2023), thus promoting normative isomorphism. The Premier of Sarawak is an example of a sustainability champion. He has excellent knowledge of environmental sustainability and continuously emphasized its importance as informed in his speech:

“We need the leadership, expertise, and resources to ensure the realisation of the plan’s ambitious goals, positioning Sarawak as a leader in climate change and sustainable economic growth” (Aubrey, 2023).

c. Organizing international conferences

Sarawak's decision to take the lead in the international dialogue on environmental sustainability is demonstrated through the organization of international conferences on the SDGs and sustainability. The state shows

its dedication to these objectives and to the global discussion by hosting such conferences. This reflects normative isomorphism by adhering to the social norm of increased international collaboration and information exchange, and it is in line with mimetic isomorphism by taking inspiration from global best practices in holding conferences on sustainable development. Among the 2023 conferences related to sustainability that was held in Sarawak were: 1) Malaysian SDG Summit Sarawak Region 2023; 2) Sustainability and Renewable Energy Forum (SAREF3.0); 3) Green Energy Symposium and Exhibition 2023; 4) Shape the World Summit 2023; 5) Asia Carbon Conference 2023 (ACC2023) and 6) International Digital Economy Conference Sarawak (IDECS). The upcoming conference related to environmental sustainability is the Asia Pacific Green Hydrogen Conference and Exhibition (APGH) 2024. Normative isomorphism would be promoted via the sharing of beliefs, norms, and values relating to the use of hydrogen in promoting environmental sustainability. According to Sarawak Deputy Minister for Energy and Environmental Sustainability, Dr Hazland Abang Hipni:

“Through APGH 2024, we will bring together leading experts from around the world to discuss the latest developments in green hydrogen, especially in the technology, policy, regulation, and infrastructure development space. APGH 2024 will also provide a platform for businesses to network and explore opportunities.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores how isomorphism, derived from organizational theory, plays a pivotal role in understanding the Sarawak government's commitment to environmental sustainability, aligning with global trends and meeting the demands for environmental stewardship. The coercive isomorphism results from the commitment to the international environment commitment and the influence of trade and industry. The mimetic isomorphism came from emulating global environmental best practices. The normative isomorphism is evident in the rise in environmental activism, sustainability leadership, and organizing sustainability-related conferences.

There are several implications from this paper. Firstly, the three isomorphism mechanisms have wide-ranging effects that go beyond policy

agreement. They serve as the foundation for the establishment of specialised divisions, structural changes, stakeholder collaboration, and the planning of international conferences on sustainability and the SDGs. Secondly, the Sarawak government is exhibiting its dedication to environmental sustainability and its leadership in the national and international environmental spheres through isomorphism. Thirdly, the government is actively influencing the future of environmental sustainability in Sarawak and helping the world respond to urgent environmental concerns by embracing various types of isomorphism, and not merely complying with external constraints.

This paper is not without any limitations. This paper only analyzes online news to understand the relationship between isomorphism and the environmental sustainability initiatives undertaken by the Sarawak government. Online news is frequently impacted by the prejudices of media sources. The same event may be covered differently by several news outlets, which might produce an inaccurate or incomplete picture of the situation. The way that media organisations report on events may be influenced by political sentiments or commercial goals. Future research could combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies to strengthen the validity of the analysis. Conducting surveys, interviews, or focus groups with different stakeholders, such as government officials, environmental organisations, and the general public, in addition to analysing the substance of news items could be considered as future research. This would give a more thorough understanding of the factors affecting isomorphism and its effects on environmental sustainability.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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APPENDIX 1

Following are the links of 24 online news articles analyzed in this paper:

1	2021	https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/03/29/sarawak-to-develop-blueprint-on-sustainable-development-says-abang-jo/
2	2021	https://www.theborneopost.com/2022/09/08/dr-sim-sarawak-committed-to-environmental-sustainability/
3	2023	https://recoda.gov.my/sarawak-a-beacon-of-sustainable-development-leadership/
4	2023	https://premier.sarawak.gov.my/web/subpage/news_view/5474
5	2022	https://nreb.gov.my/pages.php?mod=news&sub=news_view&nid=309
6	2022	https://dayakdaily.com/sarawaks-natural-resources-forests-key-to-helping-malaysia-fight-climate-change/
7	2023	https://www.rakansarawak.com/v3/2023/02/08/mbkss-long-term-approach-in-environmental-sustainability/
8	2023	https://www.mida.gov.my/mida-news/wgss-2023-premier-to-share-how-sarawak-attracts-green-investments/
9	2021	https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/12/754515/sarawak-election-campaign-lacks-focus-environmental-conservation-says-wwf
10	2019	https://www.scmp.com/presented/news/asia/topics/renewable-hydropower/article/3043405/how-borneo-state-plans-lead
11	2023	https://revonmedia.com/2023/01/30/sarawak-energy-aspires-to-plant-and-protect-500000-trees-by-2030/
12	2023	https://www.newsarawaktribune.com.my/sarawak-at-forefront-of-mitigating-climate-change/
13	2023	https://smc.gov.my/web/subpage/news_view/926
14	2023	https://thethaiger.com/world/news/555861/
15	2023	https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2231202
16	2023	https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/10/04/swak-ahead-in-dealing-with-climate-change
17	2022	https://premier.sarawak.gov.my/web/subpage/speeches_view/152
18	2023	https://dayakdaily.com/premier-sarawak-ahead-of-malaysian-states-southeast-asia-regions-in-addressing-climate-change/
19	2022	https://dayakdaily.com/sarawak-first-state-to-allow-carbon-nature-venture-businesses-shows-commitment-to-climate-change-mitigation/
20	2023	https://www.undp.org/malaysia/blog/mainstreaming-biodiversity-malaysia-through-undp-and-sarawaks-collaboration

21	2023	https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/10/03/abang-johari-sarawak-to-keep-up-green-economy-agenda/94210
22	2023	https://www.rakansarawak.com/v3/2023/08/26/saref-3-0-driving-the-transition-towards-a-sustainable-energy-future/
23	2019	https://www.theborneopost.com/2019/12/11/renewable-energy-energy-efficiency-crucial-for-improving-health-living-standards/
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