

# Corporate-Community Engagement—The Case Study of Malaysian Palm Oil Companies in Indonesia

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**Submission date:** 09-Aug-2022 02:08AM (UTC-0500)

**Submission ID:** 1880578687

**File name:** Artikel\_Proceeding.pdf (115.63K)

**Word count:** 5328

**Character count:** 27233

# Corporate-Community Engagement—The Case Study of Malaysian Palm Oil Companies in Indonesia



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**Abstract** Corporate-community engagement is one of the integral components of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), this is especially challenging in international business endeavour where a company is considered a foreign entity and any negative encounter against a local community would easily backfire its existence as well as portrays negative image of its home country. By and large, any business' CSR initiatives in whatever forms and shapes would positively contribute to the triple-bottom-line of business, namely profit, people and planet. Apart from looking after its employees, engaging local community is inevitably included under the people bottom line. Malaysian Palm Oil Companies over the last three decades have expanded their activities in Indonesia to gain competitive edges by tapping attractive land's price and relatively cheaper labour resources. Notwithstanding of socio-economic contribution of Malaysian Palm Oil Companies in their host country through job opportunities, improvement in infrastructure as well as economic gains by Indonesian government through tax payment, not much has been studied about their benefits to local communities who live within the vicinity of the palm oil plantations. Against this academic lacuna, this study aims to investigate level of engagement of Malaysian Palm Oil Companies in Indonesia with local communities by using six companies as the case study. Utilising on qualitative method where interviews were conducted with the community leaders and palm oil companies' management in various provinces in Sumatra and Kalimantan. The results of the study found that majority of those companies hardly engage with their local communities. These findings are instructive where Malaysia Palm Oil Company needs to proactively embrace and engage community engagement through a deeper, meaningful and continuous collaboration

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B. Alareeni and A. Hamdan (eds.), *Sustainable Finance, Digitalization and the Role of Technology*, Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems 487,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08084-5\\_41](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08084-5_41)

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24 the local communities in order to gain minds and hearts of their existence which in  
25 turns can contribute to the sustainability of their companies and also the palm oil  
26 industry.

27 **Keywords** Corporate-community engagement · Sustainability · Malaysian Palm  
28 Oil Companies

## 29 1 Background of the Study

30 Since the introduction and scientifically propagation of oil palm plantations in the  
31 South East Asia in the late nineteenth century by Western colonials, palm oil produc-  
32 tion has increased exponentially and has been consistently outperformed all other  
33 edible oils. It has a huge range of uses in foods—particularly biscuits, margarine,  
34 frying oil, sauces, ice cream, mayonnaise, chips and chocolate. It is also used in  
35 other derivative products—including soaps, shampoo, cosmetics, paints, detergents,  
36 and grease in the metal and leather industries. Although Indonesia has overtaken  
37 Malaysia in terms land acreage of oil palm plantation and volume of production of  
38 crude oil palm, Malaysia palm oil industry (MPOI) has competitive advantages in  
39 terms of high crude oil productivity per hectare as well as development in palm oil  
40 industry due to the continuous R&D in both upstream and downstream sectors of the  
41 industry.

42 In general, the MPOI has undergone four developmental phases: first, during the  
43 colonial time when the crop was first introduced in the country, second, from the early  
44 independent in 1957 to the 1980s where oil palm plantation expanded leaps and bound  
45 in Peninsular Malaysia due to government scheme—FELDA. Third, in the 1990s  
46 where the expansion of large scale of oil palm plantations especially in Sabah and  
47 Sarawak by private sectors. Fourth phase, in the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s  
48 MPOI extended its upstream operations off-shore, particularly to Indonesia. The  
49 international expansion of the industry has been largely justified. In Indonesia, there  
50 is adequate supply of workers and availability of lands for plantation development  
51 and cost of production relatively lower than in Malaysia. But nevertheless, expanding  
52 overseas, has its own downside. Apart from complying with the nitty-gritty of the host  
53 country's laws and regulations, winning the minds and hearts of relevant stakeholders  
54 is also crucial to ensure its presence is positively welcomed and meaningfully felt.

55 Unlike in the past where the bottom line of business was always and solely about  
56 financial profit, nowadays it has expended to the welfare of staff and well-being of the  
57 local communities as well as looking after the natural environment through environ-  
58 mental conservation and preservation. In short, any businesses' sustainability relies  
59 on those 'triple bottom line'. While, financial profit is always on the top priority,  
60 no business will ignore it and would level its best to maintain its survival. Environ-  
61 mental and social issues are yet to be fully embraced by businesses especially when  
62 pressure exerted by stakeholders are not strong enough for them to do so. As far as  
63 literature is concerned, this also rings true for players in the palm oil industry. As

64 for MPOI, its existence in its neighbouring country, Indonesia represents the image  
65 of its own country Malaysia. Unlike, operating in the home country, any negative  
66 impacts associated with Malaysian Palm Oil Companies (MPOC) will have negative  
67 consequences to them as far-reaching impacts to Malaysia. Realising this, MPOC  
68 could not help but to comply with the laws and regulations of its host country. But  
69 complying with the laws and regulations is considered the least MPOC can do. It  
70 should go beyond compliance by doing something beyond its responsibility.

71 In this case proactively, continuously and meaningfully engages with local  
72 communities where their plantations are established is essential to say the least.  
73 In the era of IR4.0 where news spread 'like wildfire' where in just a click of a  
74 mouse, any good or bad deeds will be locally and internationally exposed. It has a  
75 far-reaching consequence to the MPOI and Malaysia's image. Indeed, the existence  
76 of MPOI in Indonesia is a litmus test of its international expansion, by being at a  
77 forefront and a champion in corporate engagement with local communities in the said  
78 industry ensure positive and favourable international reputation and in turns create  
79 competitive edge and sustainability.

80 Notwithstanding of socio-economic contribution of Malaysian Palm Oil Compa-  
81 nies in their host country through job opportunities, improvement in infrastructure as  
82 well as economic gains by Indonesian government through tax payment, not much  
83 has been studied about their benefits to local communities who live within the vicinity  
84 of the palm oil plantations. Against this academic lacuna, this study aims to investi-  
85 gate level of engagement of Malaysian Palm Oil Companies in Indonesia with local  
86 communities.

## 87 2 Issues Related with Palm Oil Industry

88 Many scholars and activists have widely expressed their concerns and dissatisfaction  
89 pertaining to the expansion of palm oil industry in the Southeast Asia, amongst others  
90 its association with deforestation of tropical rainforests, forest fire and haze, erosion  
91 and sedimentation, local climate change and also the extinction of many species of  
92 flora and fauna (Gunarso et al. 2013; UNEP 2007; World Bank Group 2011; Zahari  
93 et al. 2005). Consequently, affecting the quality of life of the communities who live  
94 in and surrounding the plantations and conflicts occur when local communities react  
95 against the players of the industry. While it cannot be denied that palm oil industry  
96 expansion has brought many positive impacts to the local economy, but inequitable  
97 of benefits between the organization and local communities is usually observed and  
98 adverse impacts to the indigenous people have been highlighted by many researchers,  
99 academicians and non-governmental organisations (Yaacob and Wong 2007, WBG  
100 2011).

101 But nevertheless, this industry up until today is the most important industry for  
102 Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries in South East Asia and Africa since it has  
103 been the main contributor for the countries' economy. Unsurprisingly, oil palm is  
104 called as the 'golden crop'. Hence, to increase and justify the national economy  
105 through this industry, palm oil companies should ensure that their business activities  
106 sustain over the time in the global market. Yet, sustainability cannot be achieved  
107 without a good community engagement. It goes without saying that more and more  
108 of the palm oil companies, especially the big ones now are taking into consideration  
109 of CSR activities to show they are socially responsible. Amongst others they engaged  
110 in various forms of donations, philanthropic activities including offering scholarship  
111 and organising events with communities. However, these programmes have no or  
112 little everlasting impacts to communities they engaged with because these activities  
113 are piecemeal in nature and ad hoc in their practices. Communities are treated as  
114 outsiders and passive receivers rather than strategic partners and collaborators. In  
115 short, community is still perceived as an externality and it is not included in the  
116 company's account, rendering it unrelated when making strategic decision and action.

117 As far as literature in corporate social responsibility and corporate engagement  
118 are concerned, palm oil companies are expected to expand their social responsibility  
119 horizon, to do more to empower, address and resolve social, environmental and  
120 economic issues such as poverty, climate change and to name but a few. In so doing  
121 community engagement which is part of the CSR has to be inclusive, to become  
122 one of the strategic initiatives and important agendas, need to strategize and discuss  
123 together with business related issues which contribute directly and positively to its  
124 financial coffer. Sadly speaking, now CSR has failed to be seen by businesses that  
125 it has a long-term benefit. It is considered as a mere publicity program which is  
126 exercised rather than gaining positive lights and attention from the stakeholders.  
127 In reality, CSR includes deep and meaningful community engagement that acts as a  
128 double-edged sword, not only it gives perpetual benefits to society involved but it also  
129 helps companies to achieve good reputation which in turns attract quality workers  
130 from communities, reduce negative publicity and create loyalty amongst consumers.  
131 From this point of view, CSR itself is as a valuable mechanism and platform for  
132 companies including MPOC to gain profit through the stakeholder interests.

133 Stakeholder's interest is very important for MPOC and it requires the players to  
134 deeply and meaningfully engage with local communities (Yaacob and Wong 2007).  
135 As previously mentioned, stakeholder's engagement is one of the integral compo-  
136 nents of CSR. This serves as a platform for communication between the companies  
137 and the stakeholders that involved directly or indirectly with the company's business  
138 activities and also as viable means for their business sustainability. Words of mouths  
139 from local communities will spread far and wide in the era of IR4.0 where social  
140 media plays crucial roles. In the era where all information can be assessed on the  
141 webs, positive images of MPOC add as an advantage.

142 While proactive community engagement is strongly laudable and welcome, first  
143 ones must understand and fully grasp the very concept of it. Community engagement  
144 is part of a wider company's stakeholder engagement (SE). It lays the very concept  
145 and practice of commitment to ensure a company behaves ethically. Simply put, any  
146 corporation may be deemed as responsible by a society when it acts beyond the limits  
147 of the law and regulations. As quoted by Davis (1973), a corporation is not being  
148 socially responsible if it merely complies with the minimum requirements of the law,  
149 social responsibility begins where the law ends. The management of a corporation  
150 should attempt to go to the horizon of its social responsibility, maximising the positive  
151 impacts and minimising the negative impacts of its routine business activities on  
152 society. At the end of the day, it has nothing to lose but some things to gain.

153 SE, logically has a function to increase positive impacts and at the same time  
154 reduce negative effects of MPOC because it acts as a catalyst to reduce social gap  
155 between the newcomers in the host country and the communities. They dealt with  
156 not only through the provision of employment opportunities, but also with coaching  
157 and mentoring program that is offered by the companies to the local communities  
158 they live and deal with. SE propagates engagement with a community through a  
159 two-way communication and continuous dialogue with their stakeholders, including  
160 local community. This augurs well with the SE which can be defined as a process that  
161 an organisation involves and engages with a stakeholder in a positive manner in the  
162 organized activities including a process of developing, establishing, and maintaining  
163 stakeholder relation that also can be included in stakeholder's identification, commu-  
164 nication, dialogue, consultation and partnership (Greenwood 2007; O'Riordan 2011).  
165 This context of engagement is as a mechanism for consent, control, co-operation,  
166 accountability, it is as a form of employee involvement, as a method to gain trust or as  
167 a substitute for true trust, as a discourse to enhance fairness, and also as a mechanism  
168 of corporate governance (Greenwood 2007).

169 In the study on companies' exploration by Eerola (2013), she said that because SE  
170 is one of the CSR components at the beginning of the exploration, companies should  
171 communicate and inform the local community about the business activities so that it  
172 can help companies to establish a good relationship with the community. But it is not  
173 only about a good relationship. It is also about a good long-term relationship where  
174 business is accepted by the community since the company undergo their business for  
175 a long-term basis so this is justifiable.

176 Eerola's evaluation (2013) also can be a proper and viable mechanism for business  
177 to gain support from local community that an organization is engaged with. In the  
178 case of MPOC, SE guides and provides opportunities for MPOC to engage with  
179 local communities in Indonesia in its efforts to gain a win-win situation where well-  
180 being of a community is looked after and at the same time MPOC move towards  
181 sustainability. This engagement also offers the company an opportunity to seek,  
182 to listen and to address concerns raised by the community regarding plantation  
183 activities and to meet their expectations. Both the company and community would  
184 equally benefit if such engagement is properly implemented in an effective manner.

### 185 3 Data Collection

186 The researchers deliberately applied qualitative approach method because it allowed  
187 in-depth and detailed information than the quantitative method. Hence it provided  
188 a better way of collecting data in natural setting which is viewed as natural rather  
189 than artificial. In this study, the researchers adopted case study approach. According  
190 to Carson et al. (2001) and Yin (2014) in social science study, a case study is the  
191 best method to be applied to answer the question and issues or problems which are  
192 relatively complex and little is known. Albeit it is time consuming and costly, the  
193 researchers found that case study was the most appropriate research strategy for this  
194 study since it offered a holistic view of the subject matter under the study.

195 While, face to face interview is usually the most expensive survey method since an  
196 interviewer needed to spend a large amount of time and costly because they needed  
197 to pay for travelling to and from interviews (Gray 2013). In this research, most of  
198 the data collection costs involved air travelling, accommodation and local logistics  
199 from airports to oil palm plantations, companies' office and place of settlements  
200 of local communities. Fortunately, in this study, travelling for data collection was  
201 possible because parts of the costs were covered by the allocation of the research  
202 grant provided by the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia. In order to minimise  
203 the cost incurred, the researchers scheduled the interviews accordingly and bought  
204 cheap return tickets from no-frill regional and local airlines in advance and as for the  
205 accommodations and logistics a few MPOC generously provided accommodation  
206 and ferried the researchers from airports to their oil palm plantations and vice-versa  
207 at no cost.

208 Altogether five MPOC, all Government Link Companies (GLCs) which operated  
209 in two provinces in Sumatra and one province in Western Kalimantan voluntarily  
210 agreed to participate. The researchers collected data through 30 in-depth interviews  
211 with staff at managerial level of MPOC, head villages and representatives of selected  
212 communities and a government officer through face-to-face meeting. Three major  
213 themes of community engagement involved were: i) Capacity Building, ii) Building  
214 Relationship and iii) Social Economic Development. In each and every interview,  
215 a permission was asked to audio-record the conversation. A semi-structured inter-  
216 view questions were used to facilitate the interviews. It was also helpful to ensure  
217 consistency and smooth flow of the questions. Prior to the interviews, the researchers  
218 prepared the interview protocol to ensure efficiency, consistency and validity of the  
219 interview's process. The interviews were conducted in the four visits, January 2016,  
220 March 2016, December 2016 and March 2017. The informants for this study came  
221 from multiple demographic backgrounds. The youngest informant was age 28 years  
222 old, and the oldest informant was 68 years old. Majority of them have between 20  
223 to 40 years of experience in dealing with palm oil plantation. As far as education  
224 level was concerned, the informants' education level varies, but most of them had  
225 completed schooling at the secondary level. Data were transcribed shortly after the  
226 interviews and were analysed using ATLAS.ti software according to research themes  
227 and subthemes which were identified through extensive literature review.

## 228 4 Findings

229 This section deliberates CCE involved between MPOC and local communities. The  
230 researchers examined each of the company's engagement with its local communi-  
231 ties based on the code and subcodes appearing in the analysis. Overall, there were  
232 two groups of companies in relation of CCE of MPOC. They were classified based  
233 on the similarity of their engagement with the community. Group A which consists  
234 of company B, D and E is known as the positive group engagement. In terms of  
235 capacity building, Company B and E show a low CSR awareness, but moderate for  
236 Company D. However, none of the companies was involved in any sort of training  
237 and education with local communities. When it came to building relationship, even  
238 though all companies did not appoint anyone as a personal contact, effective two-way  
239 communication and cultivating relationship were identified and observed with the  
240 local communities. As far as a socio-economic development with the local commu-  
241 nities was concerned, only Company D engaged in collaboration or partnership. But  
242 the project failed due to lack of monitoring and regulating by the said company.  
243 All local communities in Group A were satisfied with the employment opportunities  
244 provided by all companies.

245 On the other hand, Group B, in which consists of Company A and C were cate-  
246 gorised as the negative group. From the information gathered from the interviews, it  
247 seems there was a lack capacity building of this group. The result also shows neither  
248 local communities aware of the concept of CSR now nor CSR activities conducted  
249 by MPOC. As far as the education outreach was concerned, the researchers found  
250 no training and exposure provided to the local communities pertaining to oil palm  
251 plantation. Even though the companies were aware of the importance of training and  
252 education for local communities who had their own plantations and would rely on  
253 them to process their fresh fruit bunches upon harvesting in terms of implementation,  
254 it was yet to be implemented. In terms of building relationship, none of these compa-  
255 nies appointed someone as a personal contact when dealing with local communities.  
256 In addition, the finding showed no effective two-way communications occurred with  
257 the communities and the companies also failed to cultivate relationship with local  
258 communities. As far as social-economic development was concerned, no collabora-  
259 tion or partnership in any project or activities were engaged with the local commu-  
260 nities. When this did not exist, expectedly, no monitoring and regulating involved  
261 between both parties. While companies in this category provided job opportunities  
262 to the local communities, it was rather small and unequal compared to the outsiders  
263 (Table 1).



**Table 1** Corporate-community engagement of the Malaysian Palm Oil Corporation

Code	Sub-Code	Group B		Group A		
		Company A	Company C	Company B	Company D	Company E
Capacity building	CSR awareness	Low	Low	Low	Moderate	Low
	Training and education	x	x	x	x	x
Building relationship	Personal contact	x	x	x	x	x
	2-way comm	x	x	/	/	/
	Cultivating relationship	x	x	/	/	/
Socio-economic development	Collaboration or partnership	x	x	x	/	x
	Monitoring or regulating	x	x	x	x	x
	Employment opportunities	Small	Small	/	/	/

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

CSR has gained traction over the last two decades as more and more businesses have realised the importance of it. As for stakeholders socially and environmentally responsible business be their paramount concerned (Delannon et al. 2016). With the situation where stakeholders are more educated, companies should be more sensitive towards local communities and be more proactive in CSR approaches, and one of them is through deeper, meaningful and sustainable engagement with local communities to gain favourable images and reputations (Greenwood 2007). Due to their sheer size and visibility, international companies inevitably need to practice more CCE activities than smaller companies. Afterall, as they have the upper hand of better financial support and tend to have a greater impact on society (Haniffa and Cooke 2005; Russo and Tencati 2009). On the other hand, many studies had shown that international companies proactively engaged with local communities were welcome as perceived as part of them and they managed to resume their activities as no conflict against them that could distract their daily operations. On the other hand, failure to gain minds and hearts of the local communities will in turn create conflict and their establishment and presence will be frowned upon and will surely give negative knee-jerk reaction. When locals found that they have no or little opportunities to prosper and develop with the existence of the so-called foreign companies, they will have a mindset that these companies are going to colonise them. Supposedly, companies and local communities' development go hand in hand.

285 In general, the findings of this study show MPOC was rather reactive in their CCE  
286 to say the least. Capacity building was rather weak due to the absence of strong under-  
287 standing of CSR amongst the management. It comes as no surprise no training and  
288 education was engaged with the locals. Although building relationship was observed  
289 through effective two-way communication and cultivating relationship was initiated  
290 in some MPOC, the absence of personal contact shows companies were not serious  
291 enough to build perpetual relationship. In terms of socio-economic development, not  
292 all local communities felt they had an advantage of employment opportunities. The  
293 clear absence of collaboration or partnership (except for one company) as well as  
294 lack of monitoring and regulating to ensure long lasting relationship clearly shows  
295 MPOC was rather preoccupied with their daily operations which directly related to  
296 their financial bottom line.

297 The findings of this study are instructive. In order to ensure that company prac-  
298 tices CCE, the MPOC should first understand the very concept of CSR. Rather  
299 than taking it as in passing, it should be deeply thought in their top management  
300 minds and concrete strategies should be charted and implemented to ensure CCE  
301 is taken seriously through the involvement of frontline staff (Dobela et al. 2013).  
302 CCE should have better understanding of their locals' plights and difficulties as well  
303 as the strengths. By having such kind of mental map, appropriate initiatives can be  
304 made to ensure community needs and wants can be fulfilled. With better two ways  
305 communication and continuous supports that involved in appropriate collaboration  
306 in agreeable activities and projects added with monitoring of MPOC to ensure their  
307 success, local communities will feel the benefits of MPOC presence. Because the SE  
308 concept cover various aspect in society, whereby the community around the plan-  
309 tations shall have the right to enjoy a better life other than wages received each  
310 month for fellow communities who worked with MPOC. The intended requirements  
311 for local communities are easily recognised such as better accommodation facili-  
312 ties, new technology development into the villages, offer learning and knowledge  
313 outreach to educate community and also provide an equal quality of living environ-  
314 ment. So that there is no more maxim the richest become richer and the poor will  
315 always be poor. Over time, the presence of international companies which in this  
316 case is MPOC in the hearts of provinces in Indonesia can address social and envi-  
317 ronmental issues. This directly and indirectly project positive image and reputation  
318 of MPOC in specific and Malaysia in general internationally.

319 In conclusion, CCE of MPOC in Indonesia was rather reactive. Their presence  
320 should make locals felt and have a noticeable effect and influence for the betterment of  
321 the said communities. In order to do so, MPOC needs to strategize and their strategies  
322 should be inclusive. Developing local communities through meaningful engagement  
323 and collaboration is a win-win situation which have a better consequence for MPOC  
324 even though their commitments not necessarily translated in monetary terms in a  
325 short term. After all, the very essence of business is to serve the community, in this  
326 case, local communities in Indonesia.

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