Sustainable HRM and the Three Links Model

SAAM Working Paper No. 20261109

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November 2026

Summary

Many organisations now report on sustainability, yet a firm can cut its energy use while exhausting its workers, or post strong profits while running down the water, skills or communities it depends on. This paper explains what sustainable human resource management (HRM) is and how it relates to the triple bottom line and Green HRM. It sets out seven components of Sustainable HRM in four groups: protecting people, building capacity, extending responsibility and governing for the long term. It then proposes the Three Links Model. Managers often review people, environmental and financial indicators separately. The model helps them examine how decisions in one area affect the others by tracing three relationships, which it calls the Employment, Stewardship and Resource links. Research findings and cases from several countries illustrate the decisions managers can examine through these links. A link test, self-assessment and discussion questions help managers apply the model to a live decision.

Keywords: Economic, Social and Environmental; People, Planet and Prosperity; Sustainable HRM; Three Links Model

Suggested citation: Syed, J. (2026). Sustainable HRM and the Three Links Model. SAAM Working Paper No. 20261109. South Asian Academy of Management.

1 What Sustainable HRM means

Imagine a factory that saves energy, recycles water and includes environmental targets in managers' appraisals. Its workers, however, regularly work excessive hours, agency staff have weaker safety protection, and supervisors discourage injury reports. It might score well on an environmental audit. Would you call it sustainable?

Sustainable human resource management (HRM) means managing people in ways that support organisational performance while sustaining human capabilities, respecting people's rights and contributing to social and environmental wellbeing over time. It asks whether today's results are being achieved by developing people or by wearing them out, and whether the costs are being passed to families, suppliers' workers, communities or future generations (Ehnert, 2009; Kramar, 2014, 2022).

Sustainable HRM builds on strategic HRM and widens what counts as a result. Alongside productivity and profit, managers also look at health, dignity, fairness, skills, livelihoods and environmental effects (Macke & Genari, 2019).

Recent critical work presses further, asking what Sustainable HRM includes, how it can be measured and who actually benefits (Cooke, 2025). These are useful questions to put to any programme carrying the label.

Two tests follow (Stahl et al., 2020). Does the organisation avoid harm, and does it make a positive contribution? A good learning programme counts for something, but it cannot offset unsafe conditions on the shop floor. A profitable business may also be leaving households to absorb the cost of exhaustion, illness or insecure jobs (Mariappanadar, 2014).

Does Sustainable HRM pay?

Sometimes, depending on the practice and the setting. A portfolio of the US "100 Best Companies to Work For" beat industry benchmarks by 2.1 percentage points a year between 1984 and 2009 (Edmans, 2011). A later study of 30 countries found that the link between employee satisfaction and stock returns was stronger where labour markets were more flexible (Edmans et al., 2024). These studies show a pattern in share prices. They cannot tell you whether a particular HR programme will pay. A study of 322 hospitality employees linked Green HRM with greater organisational attractiveness to current employees (Umrani et al., 2022). Tying executive pay to environmental, social and governance (ESG) measures was associated with better ESG outcomes, but not better financial performance (Cohen et al., 2023). So build the business case one intervention at a time, and count avoided disruption and future capability. Safety and basic rights are different. They are obligations whether or not they pay back quickly.

2 What Sustainable HRM is meant to sustain: People, Planet and Prosperity

Sustainability is often discussed through the three Ps: People, Planet and Prosperity. The triple bottom line considers economic, social and environmental outcomes and commonly uses Profit as the third P; Prosperity places greater emphasis on lasting economic wellbeing and the distribution of value. These are closely related ways of organising sustainability concerns (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Elkington, 1994; Giddings et al., 2002).

Table 1 People, Planet and Prosperity and what they mean for HRM

PPP dimension	Closest triple bottom line dimension	What it means for managers	Examples of evidence
People	Social	Protect health, dignity and livelihoods; support work–life balance; build employee engagement and capabilities; include people whose work supports the business.	Working hours, injuries, leave and flexibility, pay fairness, engagement, turnover, learning access and worker voice.
Planet	Environmental	Reduce emissions, pollution and waste; use water, wood, minerals, energy and other natural resources within sustainable limits; protect people from environmental hazards.	Water and energy use, waste, emissions, sourcing of minerals, wood and other materials, recycled content and worker exposure to heat or pollution.
Prosperity	Economic	Maintain a viable organisation, productive capabilities and economic value that can support fair employment and investment.	Productivity, business continuity, skills availability and fair sharing of economic gains.

These dimensions overlap. Pay is a cost to the employer and a livelihood to the employee. Water scarcity is an environmental problem that can also halt production and cut incomes. That overlap is

why Section 5 concentrates on the connections between them. Governance runs across all three, because it settles who makes decisions, whose views count and who answers for the consequences.

Two parts of the People dimension deserve particular attention. The first is work–life balance. In a study of employees from seven cultures, including Malaysia and China, work–life balance was associated with higher job and life satisfaction and lower anxiety and depression (Haar et al., 2014). When work takes up time needed for family and rest, the cost can be carried at home and return to the workplace as fatigue and absence. The second is employee engagement, the degree to which people bring their physical, cognitive and emotional energy to their roles (Kahn, 1990). Across 7,939 business units, satisfaction and engagement were linked to productivity, profit, customer satisfaction, staff turnover and accidents (Harter et al., 2002). Sustained overload can undermine engagement, health and performance, because high demands without matching resources wear people down (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Planet is also wider than carbon. Organisations depend on water, wood, fibre, minerals, metals and fertile land. Some of these can renew if well managed, and others are finite. Global material extraction has more than tripled since 1970, rising from around 30 to 106 billion tonnes (International Resource Panel, 2024). HR has a direct part in this through the skills, job design and incentives that shape waste, reuse, repair and the responsible purchase of raw materials.

Environmental risks also reach the workplace directly. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that at least 2.41 billion workers were exposed to excessive heat annually, based on 2020 data (ILO, 2024a). Protecting those workers belongs on the same agenda as reducing the organisation's footprint.

3 The key components of Sustainable HRM

For this paper, the main concerns of Sustainable HRM are organised into seven components under four connected responsibilities: protecting people, building capacity, extending responsibility beyond the payroll and governing for the long term. Preventing serious harm takes priority. The other responsibilities proceed alongside it, and some are needed to find harm at all, since worker voice and supplier checks often reveal problems managers would otherwise miss. Table 2 groups the components and explains the thinking behind each.

Table 2 Components of Sustainable HRM

Component	What it requires	Examples in practice	Why it matters
A. Protect people: prevent serious harm			
1. Health, safety and recovery	Provide safe work, manageable demands, time to recover and a workable balance between work and life.	Manage hours, workload, heat, fatigue and psychosocial risk; offer leave and predictable schedules.	People wear out when demands outrun resources and recovery (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The way work is organised can itself damage health (Pfeffer, 2010).
2. Fairness, dignity and inclusion	Respect dignity and opportunity across the workforce, including people employed through intermediaries.	Fair hiring and pay, non-discrimination, accessible development and safety coverage for agency workers.	People judge fairness by outcomes, procedures and how they are treated, and they respond accordingly (Colquitt, 2001).

Component	What it requires	Examples in practice	Why it matters
B. Build capacity: renew what the organisation draws on			
3. Capability and engagement	Build skills and employability, and create conditions in which people choose to commit.	Coaching, career development, reskilling, meaningful work and support for those affected by restructuring.	Valuable capabilities that are hard to copy can give a firm an advantage (Barney, 1991). People are better able to engage when work feels meaningful, they feel psychologically safe, and they have the personal resources to participate fully (Kahn, 1990).
4. Environmental capability and behaviour	Equip, motivate and enable people to reduce damage and use natural resources carefully.	Environmental training, practical goals, employee involvement, and reuse and waste-reduction routines.	Environmental action is more likely when people have the ability, motivation and opportunity to contribute (Renwick et al., 2013).
C. Extend responsibility: look beyond the payroll			
5. Wider consequences	Examine burdens on families, supplier workers, communities and future generations.	Responsible purchasing, checks beyond audit certificates and fair support during major transitions.	A firm's decisions affect many groups, and some bear costs they did not choose (Freeman, 1984; Rai et al., 2014).
D. Govern for the long term: keep it going			
6. Voice and accountability	Give affected people a safe way to influence decisions and make leaders answer for outcomes.	Worker representation, effective grievance handling, action on concerns and clear responsibilities.	Voice gives employees a way to raise problems and management an opportunity to address them (Hirschman, 1970). Groups with little power can be overlooked (Mitchell et al., 1997).
7. Long-term perspective	Judge decisions by their effect on capabilities and resources beyond the current reporting period.	Workforce planning, succession, continued learning and preparation for changing technology.	Short-term gains and long-term health can pull against each other, and managers have to hold both in view (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014; Hahn et al., 2018).

The components depend on one another. Environmental training has limited value unless people have time and equipment to apply it. A grievance mechanism achieves little if workers fear retaliation or managers cannot change unsafe schedules. Good pay cannot make up for dangerous work. Look at how the practices work together and who actually receives the benefits. For inclusion, managers need to pursue fair access and business benefits together, with attention to individual circumstances, organisational practices and wider social conditions (Syed & Kramar, 2009; Syed & Özbilgin, 2009).

4 Current approaches to Sustainable HRM and the case for a links view

Several approaches now compete in this field, and they overlap (Aust et al., 2020). Table 3 sets out what each one asks, what it adds and where managers may need more.

Table 3 Current approaches to Sustainable HRM

Approach and key sources	Central question	Main contribution	Where managers may need more
Sustainable HRM as resource reproduction (Ehnert, 2009; Kramar, 2014, 2022)	How can the firm perform today while sustaining the people it will need tomorrow?	Widens outcomes and accepts that goals can conflict.	Offers broad principles, with fewer specific points for managers to test.
Harm-focused HRM (Mariappanadar, 2014)	What costs do HR practices impose on employees, families and communities?	Makes hidden human costs visible.	Concentrates on human harm, with less attention to natural resources.
Socially Responsible HRM (Aust et al., 2020)	Are employees and others affected by employment treated responsibly?	Sets out fairness, inclusion, safety and work–life balance.	Environmental questions usually receive less attention.
Green HRM (Renwick et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2018)	How can HR practices advance environmental goals?	Connects hiring, training, rewards and involvement to the environment.	Says less about worker health, fairness and livelihoods.
Triple Bottom Line HRM (Aust et al., 2020; Westerman et al., 2020)	How do employment practices affect economic, social and environmental outcomes?	Puts all three dimensions in view.	Managers still need to examine how particular decisions connect the three outcomes.
Common Good HRM (Aust et al., 2020; Cooke, 2025)	How can employment practices help address wider societal challenges?	Starts from society's needs and questions who benefits.	Is demanding to translate into routine company decisions.

Sustainable HRM is the broad term, and Green HRM is one part of it. A firm can run an excellent Green HRM programme and still neglect worker health, fairness or job security, as the factory at the start of this paper does. ESG is a different kind of label, covering environmental, social and governance matters, and is used mainly in investment, reporting and corporate oversight. ESG scores can point you towards a problem, but you still have to look at actual working conditions.

Why a links view is useful

Each approach in Table 3 has widened what HR answers for, and several already address interdependence, tensions and displaced harm. In practice, however, managers often review people, environmental and financial indicators separately. Sustainability scholars have cautioned against this habit. Purvis et al. (2019) highlight the often unclear meaning of three-pillar sustainability diagrams, Hahn et al. (2015) show how sustainability goals pull against one another, and Nilsson et al. (2016) warn that pursuing linked goals one at a time risks perverse outcomes. The Three Links Model helps managers examine how decisions in one area affect the others. It rests on three straightforward ideas.

First, organisations depend on people and on natural resources. Employers rely on the health, skills and commitment of their workers, and on water, energy and materials (Hart, 1995; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). A firm that consumes human resources must also sustain their sources (Ehnert, 2009).

Second, business decisions can strengthen or deplete those resources, and the relationships differ in kind. Employment relationships involve reciprocal obligations (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005); environmental relationships involve physical dependencies and consequences. Heat lowers factory output, and water drawn today may not be available tomorrow.

Third, benefits can conceal costs borne elsewhere. Harm can pass to households, supplier workers and communities (Mariappanadar, 2014), and the care and renewal that keep people able to work can be run down without appearing in any account (Rai et al., 2014).

The Three Links Model maps the three pairwise connections among People, Planet and Prosperity. Managers can use these connections to trace benefits, dependencies and costs. It is meant to work alongside the approaches in Table 3, and Table 4 notes the ideas most relevant to each link.

5 The Three Links Model

The Three Links Model is developed here as a practical framework for examining Sustainable HRM decisions. It moves attention from the three dimensions to the connections between them. For each connection it asks what each side depends on, what it contributes and who bears the costs.

The Employment link joins People and Prosperity. The Stewardship link joins People and Planet. The Resource link joins Planet and Prosperity. Each runs both ways, which gives six directions to check. Figure 1 shows the links, and Table 4 sets out what moves in each direction.

Figure 1 The Three Links Model

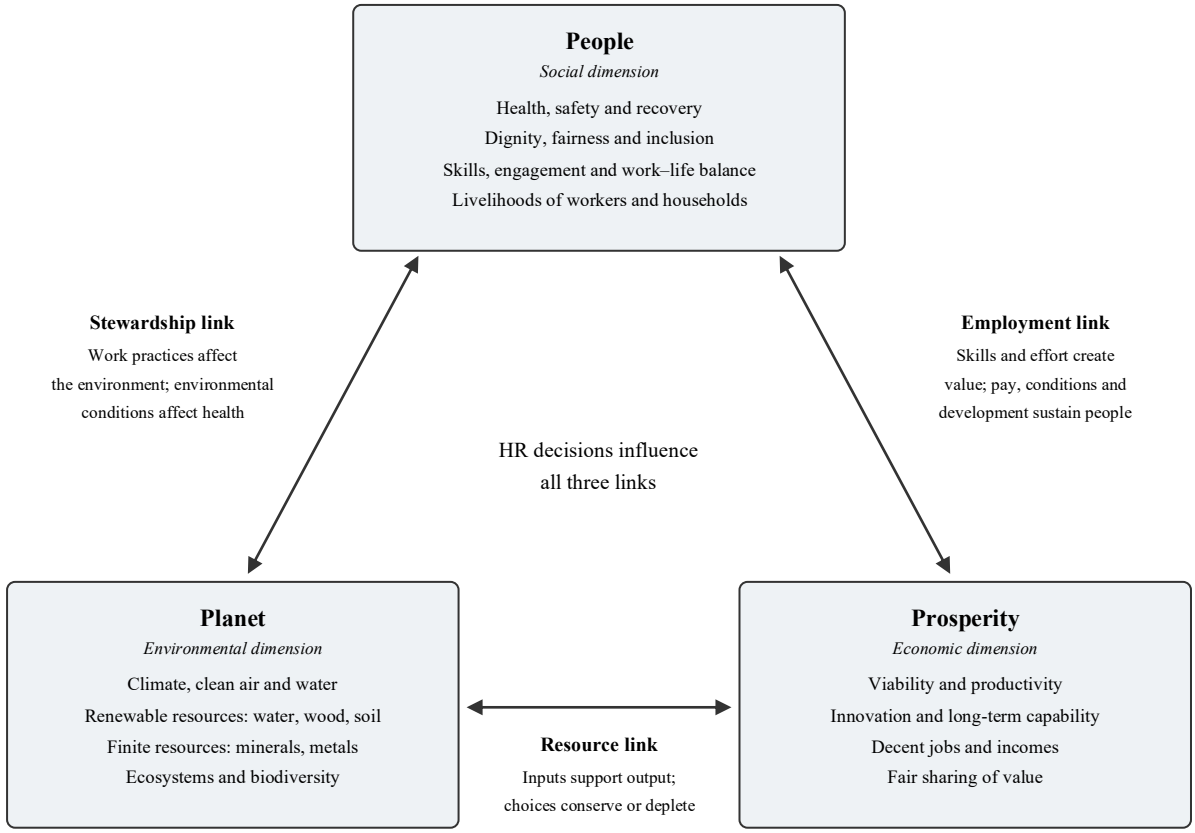


Table 4 The three links in practice

Link	The relationship in both directions	Related ideas	A managerial question
Employment (People ↔ Prosperity)	People contribute skills, effort and ideas to organisational value. The organisation provides pay, employment conditions, development and resources that support livelihoods and recovery.	Social exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005); reproduction of human resources (Ehnert, 2009).	Are results being achieved by developing people, or by exhausting them and transferring costs to their families?
Stewardship (People ↔ Planet)	People influence environmental outcomes through everyday work behaviours, such as conserving energy and water, reducing waste, handling materials responsibly and suggesting improvements. Environmental conditions, including heat, pollution and water quality, affect people's health and ability to work.	Ability–motivation–opportunity in Green HRM (Renwick et al., 2013); evidence on workplace exposure (ILO, 2024a; Somanathan et al., 2021).	How do employees' working practices affect the environment, and how do environmental conditions affect their health and ability to work?
Resource (Planet ↔ Prosperity)	Water, wood, minerals, energy and other natural resources support economic activity. Business investment and operating choices can conserve or deplete them.	Natural-resource-based view (Hart, 1995); resource dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).	Are we sustaining the resources needed for future operations, and who bears the costs when resources or activities must change?

HR influences these links through staffing, work design, skills, pay, performance management and employee relations. Many decisions are shared with operations, procurement, finance and senior leadership. For example, HR can help redesign shifts, but ventilation requires engineering and capital decisions. Supplier labour standards also depend on the prices, deadlines and contract terms set by buyers.

Applying the model: the link test

The link test takes one decision or practice and puts the same four questions to each link. Table 5 shows what to look for. It works best when HR, operations, finance and procurement complete it together, because no single function can see all three links.

Table 5 The link test

Question	Employment link	Stewardship link	Resource link
What are we drawing on?	Hours, skills, effort, goodwill and unpaid care at home.	Employees' attention and skills in environmental tasks, and their physical exposure.	Water, energy, wood, minerals, land and clean air.
What are we putting back?	Fair pay, recovery time, development and security.	Training, equipment, safe conditions and time to do the work properly.	Conservation, reuse, restoration and investment in efficiency and future supply.

Question	Employment link	Stewardship link	Resource link
Who carries the cost?	Employees, agency staff, families and workers in supplier firms.	Workers exposed to heat, chemicals or pollution, and neighbouring communities.	Local communities, future users and workers when sites or resources close.
Who must act, and on what evidence?	HR and line managers, using hours, turnover, injuries, engagement and pay equity.	Operations and environmental or safety teams with HR, using exposure levels, observed working practices, implemented employee suggestions and changes in waste or resource use.	Procurement, operations and finance, using resource intensity, supplier data and transition plans.

A good result on one link is a reason to check the other two. Lower energy use may come with excessive work intensity. Higher productivity may depend on unpaid care at home when workers fall ill. Profits can hold up for a while when a firm replaces worn-out workers or switches suppliers, leaving the original damage where it was. Financial results can conceal these costs. You need evidence from the people and resources affected.

6 Applying the model to a management decision

Consider a hypothetical textile mill facing a large order, hot weather and water shortages. Management lengthens shifts, pays overtime to permanent staff and invests in water recycling. Agency workers perform some of the hottest tasks but have less access to paid recovery and health support. Water use per unit falls, and output rises. Workers also report exhaustion and heat-related illness.

The Employment link directs attention to shifts, pay and unequal access to support. The Stewardship link connects environmental conditions with worker exposure, while also asking whether operators have the time and skills to run the recycling equipment properly. The Resource link connects water availability and investment with future production. Looking only at water savings would miss the human costs; looking only at overtime pay would miss exposure and recovery.

A practical response could combine safer scheduling and suitable heat controls with recovery opportunities for exposed workers across contract groups. Managers should also protect the time needed for maintenance and inspection. HR, operations and finance would agree responsibilities, and workers would help identify whether the changes are usable in practice. Progress should be checked through health and exposure evidence, working hours, actual coverage, production results and environmental measures.

When goals conflict

Some decisions bring genuine losses. Closing a polluting unit can protect the environment while damaging local livelihoods. Automation can improve efficiency while displacing jobs. Sustainable HRM requires managers to consider alternatives, consult affected people, protect basic rights and arrange support. ILO guidance stresses social protection, skills and dialogue when economies move towards environmental sustainability (ILO, 2015).

A firm may need to fund retraining, redeployment or income support, sometimes with public agencies and other employers. Where suitable jobs do not exist, some losses will remain after consultation and

compensation, and managers should say so openly. A transition plan has to protect workers and still deal with unsafe or seriously polluting operations.

7 Real cases across the three links

Seven cases show the links at work. As you read each one, ask which link is strong or weak and who carries the cost.

Employment link: widening opportunity at Ayesha Spinning, Pakistan

Ayesha Spinning's socks division in Punjab employed about 2,800 people. Women made up only 11% of the workforce and were confined to packing, knitting and finishing. After ILO SCORE training, which combines classroom sessions with in-factory consulting, the HR team and joint work council set up a women's development forum, an employee suggestion scheme and inclusive hiring measures. The ILO reports that women's share of employment rose from 11% to 15%, and their share of supervisory roles from 2% to 5%, within three months of the training. At that point the company was aiming for 20% and 7% by 2025 (ILO, 2023). These are short-term results reported by the programme, so track both figures over time. The first shows whether women are getting in, and the second whether they are moving up.

Employment link: bringing women into production at Diamond Fabrics, Pakistan

In 2020 Diamond Fabrics Limited, part of Sapphire Group, needed thousands of garment workers at a factory in Feroze Wattoan, far from major labour markets. Only 12 of its roughly 3,500 employees were women, mostly in data entry, and foreign buyers' social audits were drawing attention to the gap. Women in nearby villages often lacked industrial stitching experience and faced practical and social barriers to factory work. The company responded with several linked measures. A three-month programme funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency at the women-only Female Exclusive Training Institute in Faisalabad offered company transport and a confirmed job, and produced 58 hires across five batches between 2022 and 2025. The in-house training centre added factory-specific skills. From 2024 the company recruited in villages within about 30 kilometres and allowed women relatives to work together. It also introduced or adapted segregated washrooms, day care, separate entry and exit arrangements, a medical room and security. By October 2026 about 453 of some 13,000 employees were women, including 370 in production and 14 supervisors. Management reported annual turnover of 3–4% among women and about 20% among male operators (Syed et al., 2026). The two groups may differ in role and tenure, so the gap does not by itself show that these measures improved retention.

The company gained a new source of labour, and women gained access to paid industrial work. The case also shows how much remains. Women are still about 3.5% of the workforce. Company transport reaches 142 of the 453 women, fixed bus departures limit overtime for those who want it, and headcount rules prevent replacement cover during maternity leave. Training can build capability, but the job remains out of reach unless people can get to it safely and on time.

Employment link: Rana Plaza and supply chains, Bangladesh

The collapse of Rana Plaza in Dhaka in 2013, a building housing five garment factories, killed at least 1,132 people and injured more than 2,500 (ILO, 2024b). Cracks had appeared in the walls the day before, and workers were told to return (United Nations Global Compact, n.d.). The Bangladesh Accord that followed provided for independent inspections, remediation and worker participation under a legally binding agreement (Anner, 2018). The United Nations Global Compact reports that more than 190 brands and retailers signed the Accord and its 2018 update, and that it covered 1,653 factories (United Nations Global Compact, n.d.). A March 2018 assessment reported that 795

factories had remedied at least 90% of their initial findings (Anner, 2018). Anner attributes this progress to features that voluntary schemes lacked: worker representatives in its governance, responsibility for the effects of sourcing, and an obligation to stop using unsafe suppliers. The case carries the Employment link beyond a brand's own payroll. Buyers' prices, deadlines and sourcing decisions shape conditions in factories they do not own.

Stewardship link: heat and productivity in Indian factories

Research in Indian weaving, garment and steel plants found that the output of workers and teams falls on hot days and absenteeism rises. Across a national panel of factories, the researchers estimated that annual output would fall by about 2% if daily temperatures throughout the year were 1°C higher. Climate control removed the productivity losses but not the absenteeism, probably because workers remain exposed at home and outdoors (Somanathan et al., 2021). A second study followed energy-saving LED lighting across garment factories around Bangalore. LEDs give off less heat than conventional lights, and productivity on hot days rose. Using the firm's cost data, the researchers estimated that the payback period was less than a third as long once productivity gains were counted (Adhvaryu et al., 2020). Here Planet affects People, and People affect Prosperity. An energy project can also be a working-conditions project, so treat heat as a health and production issue as well as an emissions issue.

Stewardship link: airline captains and fuel use

In an eight-month field experiment, researchers tested how management practices affected commercial airline captains' fuel-saving decisions. Monitoring and target setting improved fuel-saving practices. The study also reported benefits for job satisfaction and reductions in carbon dioxide emissions (Gosnell et al., 2020). This is the People to Planet direction of the link: skilled employees' everyday decisions changed an environmental result, supported by ordinary management practices.

Resource link: conserving water at Kohinoor Textile Mills, Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Kohinoor Textile Mills' Rawalpindi operation relied heavily on externally supplied water, creating costs and operational risks when water quality varied. A supplier case study reports that upgrading wastewater treatment with ultrafiltration and reverse osmosis achieved 85% water recovery, alongside lower energy consumption and operating costs (DuPont, 2024).

At company level, the 2026 annual report describes a rainwater-harvesting reservoir with a capacity of 62,000 cubic metres to reduce reliance on external supplies. It also reports a wastewater treatment plant and efforts to reduce hazardous chemical discharge. Zero liquid discharge remains a longer-term objective (Kohinoor Textile Mills Limited, 2026, pp. 75–76).

The Resource link is clear: production depends on reliable water, while treatment, reuse and rainwater capture can help sustain that supply. For managers, the investment also creates responsibilities for operator skills, maintenance, safe chemical handling and accurate monitoring. Track freshwater intake, water recovered, discharge quality and total consumption alongside consumption per unit of fabric. Improved efficiency can coincide with rising total consumption when production grows.

Resource and Employment links: closing Spain's coal mines

Coal employment in Spain had fallen from more than 45,000 in 1990 to about 1,700 in 2017 (World Resources Institute, 2021), and the country's uncompetitive mines faced compulsory closure at the end of 2018 under EU rules. An agreement that year between government, unions and the sector paired the closures with support for those affected. About 60% of miners, those aged 48 or over or with 25 years of service, could take early retirement. Younger miners received €10,000 plus 35 days' pay for each year of service (IndustriALL Global Union, 2018). A training and employment plan also

covered subcontracted workers, and a €250 million fund over five years supported new business in the mining regions (Government of Spain, 2018). Mining regions depended on coal, so closing these operations immediately became an Employment link question. The detail to note is the subcontractors, who sit outside the mining companies' own payroll.

8 Bringing Sustainable HRM into ordinary HR decisions

Sustainable HRM becomes practical when it changes routine decisions. Begin with one significant issue, such as excessive hours, uneven safety coverage, material waste or a skills transition, and use the following practices to address it.

- Recruit and develop fairly. Review access to jobs and learning, remove discriminatory barriers and prepare people for future work. Where environmental skills matter, include them in job requirements and development.
- Design achievable work. Check staffing, equipment, workload and recovery before setting output or environmental targets. Ask workers whether the arrangements function as intended.
- Enable green behaviours. These are everyday actions that reduce environmental harm. Make environmentally responsible working practices part of normal jobs. Agree relevant actions with employees, such as preventing material waste, reporting leaks, separating waste correctly and suggesting process improvements. Provide the equipment, time and authority needed to act, and recognise useful contributions (Renwick et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2018).
- Reward responsible results. Include relevant safety, people and environmental outcomes in managers' objectives. Review both the results and the working practices used to achieve them.
- Extend attention beyond the permanent payroll. Examine agency and supplier working conditions, and ensure purchasing terms give suppliers a realistic opportunity to meet required standards. Large companies report less about external workers than about their own (Ehnert et al., 2016).
- Review outcomes and act. Combine management records with worker accounts and appropriate independent checks. Assign an owner, a timetable and resources for correction. Track whether the people at risk actually benefit.

A short self-assessment can start the conversation: Which group faces the greatest avoidable harm? Which link explains it? What decision can change it? Who has the authority to act? What evidence will show improvement?

Rate the three links

Rate each link from 1 to 5 using evidence from your organisation: 1 = serious unresolved gaps; 2 = several gaps; 3 = partly sustained; 4 = generally sustained; 5 = consistently sustained with supporting evidence. Compare ratings with a colleague, discuss the lowest-rated link first, and record one action and its owner. Use these classroom ratings to set priorities. Address any serious safety or rights breach immediately, whatever the ratings elsewhere.

Table 6 Three Links self-assessment

Link	Rating 1–5	Evidence	Priority action
Employment			
Stewardship			
Resource			

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Note: AI assistance was used in language editing, source checking and figure preparation. The author reviewed and revised the final text and takes responsibility for its content.

Questions for discussion

1. Consider a factory that saves energy and recycles water, yet its workers regularly work excessive hours, agency staff have weaker safety protection and supervisors discourage injury reports. Which Sustainable HRM components need attention, and which of the three links reveal the main problems?
2. A business must close a polluting unit in a region with few alternative jobs. What should management do before closure, during the transition and afterwards?
3. Choose one HR practice in your organisation. Identify its economic, social and environmental consequences, including effects beyond the permanent workforce.
4. Apply all three links to a current decision in your organisation. Where does a benefit in one area risk creating a burden in another?
5. Identify one change your organisation could make in the next three months. Who should lead it, whose views are needed, and what evidence would show that it worked?