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# Qualitative Study to Propose Sustainable Human Resource Management Strategies and Related Consequences: Considering Strategic Stakeholders' Theory

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## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a model of sustainable human resource management (HRM) strategies and consequences by considering stakeholder theory. Qualitative research was conducted to answer research questions. This study uses a purposeful snowball sampling method to draw on in-depth interviews with 19 experts. Data were analyzed by three phases: open, central, and selective coding. The results categorize sustainable HRM strategies into four categories of strategies relevant to employees (competence development, equality and diversity management, caring and support of employees, career planning, participation, work-life balance programs, ability to fulfill the psychological needs, and employees' health and safety management); environment and public sustainable HRM strategies (green job design, green human resource planning, green selection and employment, green performance evaluation and encouragement system; green training, and availability of job opportunity for locals); economic sustainability strategies (overall quality management, commitment of senior management to economic sustainability, cost improvement system, equipment efficiency, process and work-flow standardization and re-engineering); and general strategies regarding different stakeholders (conflict of interest management among different stakeholders, effective management of stakeholder support strategies, and considering stakeholders in decision-making). Moreover, the consequence of establishing stakeholder-oriented sustainable HRM is divided into four groups of individual level, environmental, organizational, and stakeholders relations consequences.

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, ecological and environmental issues have been among the essential concerns in the world, particularly in Iran. Specifically, the increasing destruction of the environment and natural resources is considered a significant challenge in human life (Nathaniel et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Destruction of forests and pastures, severe soil erosion, drop and reduction of underground water tables, increase in earth's temperature, problems and challenges of the ozone layer, the presence of greenhouse gases, disposal of large amounts of waste and hazardous materials produced in industry and using pesticides and destruction of some species of animals and plants are only some examples of human environmental challenges (Samson and Oluwatoyin, 2012; Piwovar-Sulej et al., 2021). Increasing concerns about the environment have forced organizations to adopt sustainable strategies and continue to apply sustainable management in all organizational affairs and issues (Ansari et al., 2021; Aybaghi Esfahani et al., 2017). For this purpose, in line with the implementation of sustainable human resources management (HRM), various units of the organization, including the human resources unit, can play a very active role and encourage employees to achieve the goals of green management with appropriate and practical activities (Paille et al., 2013, Jenny et al., 2017; Tanova and Bayighomog, 2022). Moreover, according to the global competitiveness report published by the World Economic Forum in 2016-2017, Iran is not in a favorable situation in terms of the efficiency and flexibility of the labor market. For example, it ranks 100th among 137 ranked countries in relation to performance compensation and productivity. It is also ranked 120th in the index of appointing and trusting professional managers, which indicates the use of talented people. Iran's best rank in this report is related to the hiring and firing procedures criterion, with a rank of 71. These statistics show that Iran does not have a good situation in the field of indicators related to the efficiency of human resources management. For these reasons, one of the most serious concerns of managers of organizations in Iran is the attraction of talented human resources and, subsequently, the development and maintenance of these important organizational resources in order to satisfy different stakeholders and achieve the organization's economic, environmental and social goals (Kiani et al., 2020; Sayyadi et al., 2017; Kramar, 2022).

Sustainable HRM has achieved much attention (Piwovar-Sulej et al., 2021) as a perspective that shows how human resource management (HRM) can benefit organizations and individuals (Stankevičiūtė and Asta Savanevičienė, 2019). Sustainable HRM is like an umbrella that covers different dimensions and several levels of analysis over time (Ehnert & Harry, 2012). Sustainable HRM is defined as adopting the appropriate strategies and practices for HRM that provide the achievement of financial, social, and environmental goals for the company (Zink, 2011). Research on sustainability in human resources includes many related topics, such as HRM with a social responsibility approach (Al Kerdawy, 2019; Jamali et al., 2015), green HRM (Renwick et al., 2016; Amrutha and Geetha, 2020), and sustainable environmental HRM (Akhtar et al., 2016). Studies also emphasized the positive social, environmental, and financial consequences of sustainable HRM for organizations and the public (Stankevičiūtė and Asta Savanevičienė, 2019), showing the importance of sustainable HRM amongst other relevant concepts.

The basic concept underlying the discussion of sustainable HRM is that companies seek different outcomes (including economic, social, human, and ecological) to meet the expectations of their stakeholders (Stahl et al., 2020; Järlström et al., 2018). The strategic stakeholder approach in HRM addresses the issue of who the business or HRM is for or should be accountable to (Freeman et al., 2004; Järlström et al., 2018). Strategic stakeholder theory deals with identifying critical stakeholders based on their different characteristics (legitimacy, power, and urgency) (Mitchell et al. 1997). However, there is little knowledge about strategic stakeholder theory in the field of HRM. For example, Guerzi et al. (2014) claim that the stakeholder perspective offers a potentially new perspective in developing a deeper understanding of sustainability and sustainable development. HRM can serve multiple stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, and society) and not just corporate owners (Järlström et al., 2018; Beer et al., 2015; Macke and Genari, 2019; Karman, 2020). Therefore, sustainable human resources must perform duties toward its stakeholders to meet the expectations of all the main stakeholders (Kramar, 2022; Macke and Genari, 2019). This will lead to the legitimacy of these measures and their use at the organizational level by all strategic stakeholders. However, there are limited references to the stakeholder theory in sustainable HRM through previous research (e.g.,

Järlström et al., 2018); these studies were primarily conceptual, based on a literature review, and did not explicitly provide many insights on the sustainable HRM strategies and their consequences through a qualitative study. Specifically, most of the research in Iran has focused on green HRM (e.g., Sabokro et al., 2021; Aslani et al., 2022; Shafaei et al., 2020), considering the environmental consequences of HRM. Accordingly, this research considers the concept of sustainable HRM, which offers a broader scope (Agarwa et al., 2022; Mohiuddin et al., 2022).

This study contributes to sustainable HRM literature in some ways. Firstly, the concept of sustainability in HRM was not fully conceptualized through previous studies (Kiani et al., 2020; Sayyadi et al., 2017). Moreover, despite the importance of sustainable HRM, considering this concept with its stakeholders has been vague and unclear in the sustainable HRM literature (Järlström et al., 2018; Ehnert and Harry, 2012; Guerci et al., 2014). As stated by Macke and Genari (2019), the question the articulation of sustainable HRM with the interests of different stakeholders is yet open. The current study is also among the limited studies which provide more in-depth insights regards sustainable HRM in Iran, as most of the previous research in Iran specifically concentrated on green HRM, neglecting other organizational stakeholders, including employees and shareholders. Accordingly, we explore to answer the following questions:

(RQ1) What are the key stakeholders in the sustainable HRM model?

(RQ2) Which strategic human resource strategies can be considered by organizations to satisfy different stakeholders?

(RQ3) What are the consequences of considering these strategies regarding different stakeholders?

The rest of the paper is designed as follows. Section two describes the study's theoretical foundations, sub-headings of sustainable HRM, dimensions of sustainable HRM, and stakeholder theory. Section three provides literature reviews of related studies in the context of sustainable HRM. Section four explains the research methodology regarding sampling and data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and trustworthiness method. In section 5, the results of coding processes are provided and discussed in the conclusion and discussion section (section 6).

## **2. Theoretical Foundation**

### **2.1. Sustainable human resource management (HRM)**

Sustainable HRM has been used to refer to the social and human consequences that contribute to the organization's long-term sustainability (Järlström et al., 2018; Bahuguna et al., 2023). Also, this term refers to HRM activities that increase positive environmental outcomes, as well as their positive social and human outcomes, and not just as mediating factors between financial results and the strategy used (Aust et al., 2020). Unlike strategic HRM, which suggests that HRM practices should be designed for organizational strategy and economic outcomes, a common feature of the sustainable human resource concept is that human resource practices focus on developing of social capital in the organization (Dunphy et al., 2007).

### **2.2. Dimensions of sustainable HRM**

The Brandl and Commission for Sustainable Human Resources claims that sustainability can achieve related goals at three economic, environmental, and social levels without compromising the natural conditions of life (Ehnert, 2009).

Social sustainability refers to maintaining and improving the well-being of current and future generations (Chiu, 2003), creating a harmonious living environment and improving the quality of life, as well as eliminating the gap and social inequality (Enyedi, 2002; Amrutha and Geetha, 2020). Some strategies used to increase social sustainability are social infrastructure (e.g., medical centers, sports facilities, social centers, provision of leisure activities halls); accessibility of recreational facilities; ability to meet psychological needs; social justice (including the elimination of social deprivation and equitable distribution of income); social sustainability design (including access to affordable housing, attractive public realm, environmental quality, etc.,) and availability of job opportunities (Grum et al.,

2020; Ahmad and Schroeder, 2002; Chan and Lee, 2008; Tooranloo et al., 2017; Moriarty and Honnery, 2020).

Environmental sustainability refers to creating a safe and conducive environment and seeking to reduce environmental damage (Arulrajah, 2015; Oláh et al., 2020). Some strategies in this regard are green job design (e.g., integrated environmental and social duties in a single job to protect the environment); green human resource planning; green employment and selection (e.g., employment of green-oriented employees); implementation of green policy; green performance evaluation; green training; green employee relations (e.g., gaining the support of unions in relation to environmental management measures); and green encouragement system (Arulrajah, 2015; Ahmad and Nisar, 2015; Mandip, 2012; Pham and Paillé, 2020; Yong et al., 2020; Binh An et al., 2023). Regarding green human resource planning, it is essential to mention that organizations that anticipate the number and types of human resources are required to take some measures related to environmental management, such as ISO 14001, green products, and accountability (Tooranloo et al., 2017; Arulraja, 2015). These measures can guide organizations in managing environmental issues. Environmental management practices require a wide range of jobs and skills. Thus, the human resource management sector should estimate the HR supply and demand and do relevant activities in this regard by considering green human resource planning (Han et al., 2013; Arulraja, 2015). In green hiring, the organization needs people who pay serious attention to environmental culture (Ahmad and Nisar, 2015; Mandip, 2012; Prasad, 2013). Regarding environmental issues, organizations have their frameworks, and to implement green policies, employees must have a green orientation (Cherian and Jacob, 2012; Prasad, 2013). To develop green employees, the organization has two options: focus on green employment and create awareness and knowledge of environmental protection (Arulraja, 2015). Recruitment activities can maintain environmental management by providing environmental culture training to new employees (Han et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2011). To implement green employment, organizations combine their employment policies with environmental issues (Ahmad and Nisar, 2015; Cherian and Jacob, 2012).

Economic sustainability is achieved by saving valuable resources necessary for future generations and implementing the principle of fair and equitable distribution between generations. Economic stability is related to reducing costs, better management of resources, and efficiency of processes. Some strategies in this regard are human resource efficiency (including overall quality management, employee productivity, efficiency in the use of equipment, etc.); reengineering; the commitment of senior management to economic sustainability; and facility development (Arulrajah, 2015; Tooranloo et al., 2017; Rai et al., 2021).

### **2.3. Stakeholder Theory**

According to Freeman (1984), stakeholders are individuals or groups who have the ability to influence or be influenced by the activities, decisions, strategies, practices, or objectives of a firm. Limited resources and wisdom lead scholars to recognize and prioritize their key stakeholders (Carroll, 1991; Freeman, 1984; Parent & Deephouse, 2007; Crane, 2020; Marrucci et al., 2023). According to Mitchell et al. (1997), the extent to which managers pay attention to a stakeholder/s is dependent on that stakeholder's attributes, including power, legitimacy, and urgency. The more attributes a stakeholder has, the greater attention is paid by managers. Considering corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable HRM viewpoint, the critical attributes are power and legitimacy (Carroll, 1991; Cooke et al., 2021). Legitimacy refers to the extent to which a stakeholder has an acceptable right to make a claim (Järlström et al., 2018). Evidence indicates that employees can be regarded as stakeholders of high legitimacy (Greenwood, 2013; Mitchell et al., 1997; Farmaki, 2019), putting employees at the center of sustainable HRM (Richards, 2022). Power is defined as a stakeholder's ability to influence a relationship by force, utility, or norm (Parent & Deephouse, 2007; Kubacki et al., 2020). In practice, it is challenging to satisfy the objectives of primary stakeholders while also satisfying all other stakeholders (Jamali et al., 2015). Cleveland et al. (2015) considered the manifold stakeholders in HRM. As part of their concept, humanity should be brought back into the conversation about HRM's future. Accordingly, for an organization to be healthy and effective, multiple stakeholders' needs must be considered. Among other aspects, Beer et al. (2015) recommend that HR researchers look at HRM practices from a multi-stakeholder perspective instead of just economic

value. Accordingly, Guerci et al. (2014) raise a question about the responsibilities a firm's HRM system has toward its stakeholders.

### **3. Literature review**

There are not many qualitative studies conducted in the field of sustainable HRM. For example, Dupont et al. (2013) analyzed the sustainability report of GDF SUEZ, focused on its participation in socially responsible HRM practices, and sought to understand how CSR affects human resource functions, roles, and activities. This research found three policies: recruitment and job access, training and career development, and well-being at work. The results showed that these HRM policies are critical due to the challenge of the aging population, the risks of labor shortage, or the war for talent. The results indicate that social responsibility has a positive effect on employee advocacy because it integrates concerns related to equal treatment, health and safety, and diversity.

Tooranloo et al. (2017) conducted a study to analyze factors affecting success in the implementation of sustainable HRM using the combined approach of FAHP and DEMATEL. Accordingly, the influential factors in the implementing sustainable HRM were divided into three categories, including economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The results showed that the environmental dimension is the most critical factor affecting the social and economic dimensions.

Stankevičiūtė and Asta Savanevičienė (2018) conducted a study to examine how sustainable HRM works in practice in Lithuanian organizations, conducting a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with 19 HR managers. The results of the thematic analysis showed that external partnerships, long-term perspective, compliance beyond labor regulations, employee development, justice and equality, flexibility, and employee participation are sustainable HRM characteristics in Lithuanian organizations.

Kiani et al. (2020) conducted a study to design a model of sustainable HRM in Iranian public organizations by using grounded theory. The results explain six categories of causal conditions (individual, group, and organizational components and attention to the organization), the central phenomenon (participation, communication, and sustainability), intervening conditions (internal and external organizational factors), context (capacity building, organizational change, and planning), strategy (sustainable HRM measures, the design of the human resources information system), and the consequences (individual, organizational and social consequences).

Regarding the consequences of sustainable HRM, Stankevičiūtė, and Savanevičienė (2019) findings confirmed the effect of sustainable HRM on reducing work-related stress, work-family conflict, and burnout among the employees of nine organizations of the Lithuanian Association of Responsible. Aybaghi Esfahani et al. (2017) showed that green human resources management (awareness, methods, practices, and activities) affects organizational sustainability (individual, social, and organizational).

## **4. Research methodology**

### **4.1. Sampling and data collection procedures**

The purposive snowball sampling method (Goodman, 1961) was used in this study. When an incident is complex, a purposeful sampling method is used (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, the included experts were university professors who have characteristics such as at least four years of management or management consultancy experience in public organizations, having education in a field related to the research topic (e.g., HRM management, business management, public administration), and have articles and authorships related to the research topic. Considering these conditions ensures that suitable and professional interviewees are selected. One type of the purposive sampling method is the snowball method, which is applicable where the studied units are not clearly recognizable, specifically at what time these units are vastly rare or shape a minor part of a very large population (Goodman, 1961). Through the snowball sampling method, prospective members of the sample are introduced by the previous members, and the sample becomes greater and greater, similar to a snowball (Johnson, 2005; Creswell, 2008). Accordingly, the interview was conducted if the person introduced by previous interviewees met the purposiveness of the sample, including the mentioned criterion. Accordingly, after checking the initial features, the contact information of the next interviewees was given by the previous one. The initial phone call was conducted with the prospective interviewee to ensure he/she

has an initial entry feature and the willingness to participate in an interview. Next, the interview protocol was sent to the interviewee, and the appointment was fixed in her/his preferred place. The demographic information of the interviewees is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The demographic information of the interviewees (Qualitative phase)

Code	Education (Ph.D.)	Age	Related research interest	University position	Managerial/consolatory experience (years)	gender
P1	HRM	45	Ethics, CSR	Assistant Professor	10	Male
P2	business management	49	CSR, green HRM	Associate professor	15	Female
P3	HRM	58	sustainable HRM, Green HRM	Professor	25	Male
P4	Strategic management	37	Ethics, sustainable HRM	Assistant professor	10	Female
P5	Organizational behavior	56	Green HRM	Professor	15	Male
P6	Public administration	40	Strategic HRM, CSR	Assistant Professor	10	Female
P7	HRM and organizational behavior	39	CSR	Associate professor	8	Male
P8	Entrepreneurial management	52	Green HRM, stakeholder theory	Professor	20	Female
P9	Environmental management	36	sustainable HRM	Assistant professor	3	Male
P10	Strategic management	64	Green HRM	Professor	20	Male
P11	Organizational behavior	47	Sustainability	Associate Professor	12	Male
P12	Policy-making of science and technology	49	CSR, green HRM	Associate professor	15	Male
P13	HRM and organizational behavior	58	sustainable HRM, Green HRM	Professor	15	Male
P14	HRM	37	stakeholder theory	Assistant professor	5	Male
P15	Tourism management	36	Green HRM, sustainability, stakeholder theory	Assistant professor	4	Female
P16	Public administration	47	Ethics, CSR	Associate Professor	12	Male
P17	Environmental management	42	CSR, sustainability	Associate professor	10	Male
P18	Organizational behavior	67	sustainable HRM, Green HRM	Professor	20	Female
P19	HRM and organizational behavior	40	Ethics, stakeholder theory	Associate professor	10	Female

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather information. Each interview approximately took approximately an hour to complete. The interviews were primarily based on the following three major questions:

Which stakeholders are essential to be considered in sustainable HRM?

What are the sustainable HRM strategies related to each of these stakeholders?

What are the consequences of sustainable HRM?

Interviews were continued until they reached theoretical saturation, which means that the data can no longer create new and different classes or add features to existing classes (Glaser and Strauss,

2017; Boddy, 2016). In this study, after sixteen interviews, authors found that no new class or concept was generated, showing the theoretical saturation; but as a precaution, three more interviews were conducted to generate new data, concepts, or categories; that is, the interviews continued until the 19th person.

#### 4.2. Data analysis procedures

Open, central, and selective coding, through content analysis, was used to analyze data. First, the researcher extracts as many codes as possible from the line-by-line analyses of interviews. Accordingly, the constant comparative technique is conducted to find similarities and differences, with the aim of persistently refining concepts and relevant categories through the selective coding stage (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). Table 2 shows one sample open code provided based on the interviewee's statement.

**Table 2.** A sample coding in the open coding phase

Open codes	Interview statements
Caring and support of employees	It is essential to provide flexible work time and a supportive environment to increase the work-life
Work-life balance programs	<u>balance</u> (P8).

Through central coding, based on core category, similar codes were labeled as a more extensive code which described them, and then categorized each code into related concepts (Table 3). Selective coding is concentrating on the conceptual model and the relationship between each category. Each code is categorized into the sustainable HRM strategies and consequences (Figure 1).

#### 4.3. Trustworthiness method

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, the criteria of credibility, transformability, conformability, and reliability, proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989), were considered. Credibility was met by triangulation and using those interviewees with different specializations, having academic positions as well as managerial or counselor positions in public organizations, to obtain comprehensive data on the research field. Moreover, the interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees. Each interview was transcribed and coded by two of the authors separately to ensure unbiased recording and coding of interviews (Eisenhardt 1989). The transformability of results was met by using the purposive sampling method and attempts to gain rich data. The conformability of the research was reached by conducting in-depth interviews and continuing engagement with the data and coding process, and conceptualization. To ensure the reliability of the research, coding was presented to some of the interviewees to check their agreement with the coding.

### 5. Results

We use content analysis to analyze the interviews, using three stages of open, central and selective coding. Sample interviewees' statements, open codes and their relevant concepts and categories are shown in Table 2.

The proposed framework of the study is shown in Figure 1.

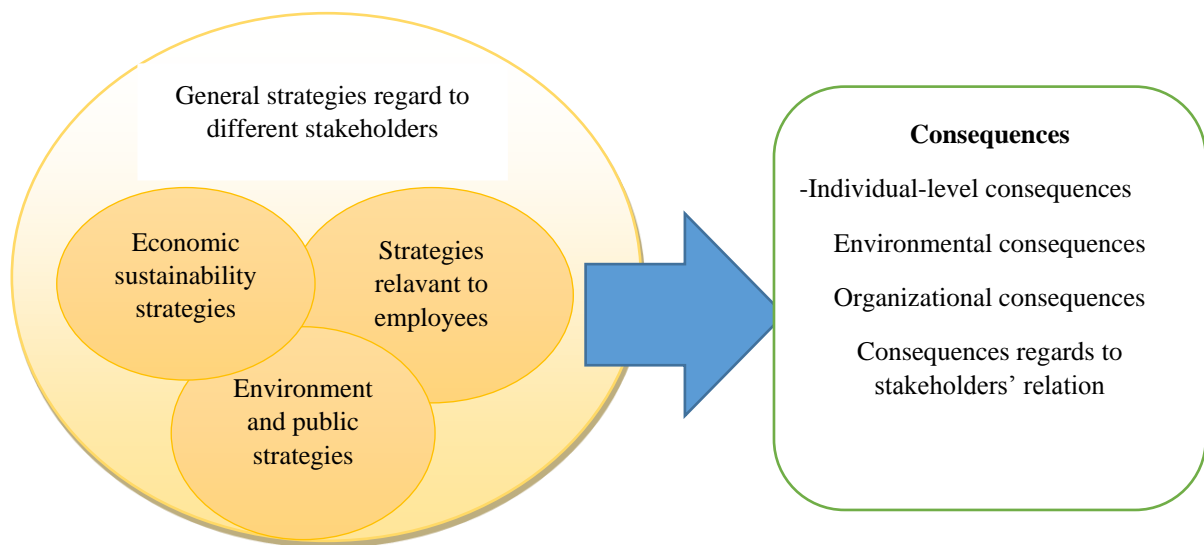
**Table 2.** open codes, selective codes, and categories

Categories	Concepts	Open code	Sample interview statements (Interviewees code)
Environment and public sustainable HRM strategies (related to natives of the region and the general public)		Green job design	Regarding environmental effects, it is important to consider green job design. Accordingly, it is essential to consider environmental and social duties for each job and take them as the responsibility to protect the environment (P8).
		Green human resource planning	In Iran, air contamination is so crucial. It is necessary to consider the use of environmental management by planning to employ some skilled employees to remedy this situation (P8).
		Green selection and employment	To be a green organization, it is vital to employ responsible employees considering environmental damage in their decision. Accordingly, it is necessary to select environmentally and socially responsible candidates by asking some relevant questions in the interview session (P11).
		Green Performance Evaluation and Encouragement System	Considering green measurement in performance evaluation and reward systems makes sure that we meet environmental sustainability (P2).
		Green training	Training is so important to increase employees' awareness and sensitivity about their social and environmental responsibilities (P13).
		Availability of job opportunities for locals	To ensure the local communities' sustainable development, it is crucial to select employees from residents, make sure that locals know about job opportunities, and have priority regard to others (P7).
Strategic Stakeholder Theory-Oriented sustainable HRM	Economic sustainability strategies (related managers and shareholders)	Overall quality management	Low quality of the products provides high expense for companies. Thus, it is vital to control the quality of products, processes, and services to increase financial outcomes (P2).
		Commitment of senior management to economic sustainability	To survive in this competitive world, it is vital for managers to be committed to giving priority to economic sustainability (P6).
		Cost improvement system	An information system center is so essential for cost improvement and decreasing the cost of duplicate activities in the organization. Defining cost improvement goals and profit structure reform is so important to improve costs competitively (P6).
		Equipment efficiency and capacity	To have financial sustainability, we should ensure that all machines and technological equipment are working in a suitable manner, production is met in the planned time, the quality of the product is good and so on (P3).
		Process and workflow standardization and reengineering	The company should standardize the process and workflow to ensure the process meets regulatory requirements such as ISO. It is also important to re-engineer the workflow and train employees' in these new processes (P4).
		Competence development	Employees need to develop their competencies, and organizations can gain better outcomes if they consider these essential strategies (P2)
Strategies relevant to employees		Equality and diversity management	Minorities in organizations should be treated equally despite their diversity (P8).
		Career planning	Career planning can make sure of the availability of career opportunities to satisfy employees' self-esteem needs (P9)
		Participation	The participation of the employees' decision-making or in some entertaining activities in the workplace can increase the sense of inclusion among them (P11).
		Caring and support of employees	It is critical to provide flexible work time and a supportive environment to increase the work-life balance (P8).
		Work-life balance programs	Organizations should consider differences between diverse employees regarding psychological needs. For example, respect is vital for some employees, and self-esteem for others (P19).
		Ability to fulfill psychological needs	Through sustainable HRM, organizations should pay attention to the safety of the workplace to ensure the health and well-being of the employees (P1).
		Employees health and safety management	



**Table 2.**

Categories	Concepts	Open code	Sample interview statements (Interviewees code)
General strategies regard to different stakeholders		Manage Conflict of interest among different stakeholders	There are contradicting ideas among different stakeholders' regard to different strategies of sustainability. It is viatal to manage this conflict of interest by considering comprehensive strategies for all stakeholders (P17).
		Effective management of stakeholder support strategies	It is important to send this pulse to different stakeholders so that the organization support them and consider their expectation in the decision-making proses (P15).
		Considering stakeholders in policy making	If all stakeholders participate in the decision-making process, we can ensure that all voices are considered, and resistance to change will decrease (P10).
	Individual level consequences	Physical and psychological health of employees	There are many positive consequences on employees' health, both physical and psychological (P16).
		Good attitude regards to sustainability and green strategies	By conducting green training, employees may gain a positive attitude regards to greenery and sustainability, and be sensitive to them in their personal life (P9).
		Sustainable citizenship behavior	These activities attract the public to do more citizenship behaviors regards to greenery and sustainability (P9).
		Decrease stress	If organizations do sustainable HRM regards to their employees, their stress is released as there is a balance between their work and life. We also see its consequences in reducing diseases in society (P14)
		Reduce disease in the society	
		Improving employees' morale	Employees may be more ethical and consider morale in their manners, as sustainable HRM provides ethical procedures in an organization (P5).
Consequences	Environmental consequences	Reduce environmental contamination	Sustainability and greenery have some environmental consequences, including reducing pollution and resource consumption (P12).
		Reduce natural resource consumption	
		Establishment of sustainable and green culture in the country	At the macro level, the green culture of the organization leads to a green culture in society, if most of the organizations consider these environmental concerns (P16).
	Organizational consequences	Increasing revenues	Sustainable HRM provides human resources more productive and provides some potential revenues by decreasing expenses (P1).
		Reduce expenses	
		HR performance	As a company, considering sustainable HRM provides this opportunity to build employer branding that considers environmental, social, and economic aspects in their decision-making, and legitimate them in society as a supportive company (P19).
		Social legitimacy	
		Employer branding	
	HR attachment	Employees feel more attachment to the organization, leading to more productivity and organizational efficiency by reducing the cost of HRM.	
	Increase organizational efficiency		
Consequences regard to stakeholders' relation	Mutual understanding among different stakeholders	With more relationships between different stakeholders, and the managers' commitment to consider all of them, they may have a mutual understanding about their expectations, and the conflict of interest may be reduced, through mutual understanding of each other (P9).	
	Increase different stakeholders' commitment		
	Reduce conflict of interest among different stakeholders		



**Fig. 1.** the sustainable HRM strategies and consequences model (strategic stakeholder theory perspective)

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

This research proposes strategies and consequences of sustainable HRM considering strategic stakeholder theory. Accordingly, we conducted 19 interviews with scientific experts.

According to the result, the stakeholders, specifically in Iranian public organizations, can be considered into two categories of internal stakeholders (employees, managers and shareholders) and external stakeholders (natives of the region and the general public). This result is consistent with the studies of Millar et al. (2016) and Charbel and Lopes (2015), who believe that with the strict implementation of environmental regulations and paying attention to them, the general public and especially the employees and locals of the region will benefit from the positive results.

Results show that four groups of sustainable HRM strategies in Iranian public organizations are as follows: strategies relevant to employees; environmental and public sustainability strategies; economic sustainability strategies; and strategies regards to different stakeholders. Accordingly, it is important to consider strategies related to stakeholders as an umbrella that can affect other strategies. Accordingly, the results emphasized the management of conflict of interest among different stakeholders, effective management of stakeholders' support strategies, and considering stakeholders in policy-making as three strategies to increase the mutual understanding among different stakeholders. This category was not recognized by other studies.

To achieve sustainability regards to employees, Iranian organizations can consider competence development programs, equality and diversity management, career planning, work-life balance programs, employees' health and safety management, the psychological needs of staff, and the participation and support of employees. This result is consistent with Stankevičiūtė and Asta Savanevičienė (2018), Ahmad and Schroeder (2002), Chan and Lee (2008), and Oman and Spangenberg (2002); Ghasempour Ganji et al., (2021b), Ganji et al., (2023) and Hosseini and Ghasempour Ganji (2023). Ghasempour Ganji et al., (2021a) show that organizational support and diversity management affect turnover intention and employee commitment among employees, respectively. Competence development programs are among some new strategies which were not highlighted appropriately through sustainable HRM literature. Through competency development programs companies can ensure the development of the talent and skills of all employees.

Strategies related to the environment and the public are related to natives of the region and the general public as two important strategic stakeholders. This category contains strategies such as green job design, green human resource planning, green selection and employment, green performance evaluation and encouragement system, green training, and the availability of job opportunities for locals. These strategies have mostly been mentioned in previous research, including Arulrajah (2015), Ahmad and Nisar (2015), and Mandip (2012). Through green performance evaluation, the results of

the efforts made to preserve and protect sustainable HRM can be evaluated (Ahmad and Nisar, 2015). Among these strategies, we provide new insight regarding the importance of the availability of job opportunities for residents which were not sufficiently emphasized in related studies. This strategy ensures that the locals also benefit from the sustainable development of the organization.

Interviewees also emphasized economic sustainability strategies, in the context of Iranian public organizations, including overall quality management, the commitment of senior management to economic sustainability, cost improvement system, equipment efficiency and capacity, and process and workflow standardization and reengineering. These strategies are in some ways emphasized in previous research, such as: Arulrajah, (2015) and Tooranloo et al., (2017).

The findings of this research showed that with the implementation of sustainable HRM, positive consequences can be expected for it. These consequences can be divided into four general categories: individual, organizational, environmental and stakeholders' relations. With the implementation of sustainable HRM in Iranian public organizations, consequences in the individual dimension such as: physical and psychological health of employees, good attitude regards to sustainability and green strategies, decreasing stress, improving employees' morale, and fixing sustainable citizenship behavior will be created. These consequences are mostly relevant to strategies employees and locals. The research results of Norton et al., (2015) and Stefano, and Fiorentino (2014) confirm these consequences in the individual dimension. An organization will have positive consequences such as: increasing revenue, reducing expenses, employer branding, HR attachment, HR performance, social legitimacy, and organizational efficiency, which is consistent with the studies of Opatha and Arulrajah (2014) and Sriram and Suba (2017). In the environmental dimension, positive consequences such as reducing environmental contamination, reducing natural resource consumption, establishing of sustainable and green culture in the country, and reducing diseases in the society will be among the results of paying attention to sustainable HRM, which are in some way similar to the results of Lloyd et al., (2016). The category related to stakeholders' relation is a new theme suggested in this research. Considering different stakeholders, sustainable HRM can increase mutual understanding among different stakeholders, their commitment, and reduce conflict of interest among different stakeholders, which in turn cause more effective policies in sustainable HRM strategies implementation.

### **6.1. Theoretical and practical Implications**

This study has some remarkable contributions specifically in sustainable HRM literature. Firstly, we are figuring out the concept of sustainability in HRM, which was not fully conceptualized through previous research (Kiani et al., 2020; Sayyadi et al., 2017). Secondly, the current study is among the limited research which conceptualizes the concept of sustainable HRM in relation to different organizational stakeholders (Järlström et al., 2018; Ehnert and Harry 2012; Guerci et al., 2014). Accordingly, we reference Macke and Genari's (2019) call for more papers to articulate sustainable HRM with the interests of different stakeholders. Moreover, most of the studies in Iran considered green HRM, thus, there are so limited insights regards to sustainable HRM as a broader concept. Finally, this study leads to some new sustainable HRM strategies Iranian context. For example, we emphasized the importance of different stakeholders in the establishment of sustainable HRM strategies and also in considering the related consequences. Specifically, it is vital to emphasize strategies relevant to stakeholders (including the management of conflict of interest among different stakeholders, effective management of stakeholders' support strategies, and considering stakeholders in policy-making) as an umbrella that can influence other strategies. Considering stakeholders in the center of sustainable HRM strategies may lead to some consequences regards to different stakeholders as well, which was not considered in previous studies. Moreover, we proposed some new strategies which were not emphasized in previous literature (e.g., competence development programs, and the availability of job opportunities for locals).

This study has some implications for practice, specifically for Iranian organizations. According to interviews, to the discussion of green employment and selection, it is recommended to consider several steps: the first step is the recruitment method, which the findings of the research showed that it is better to do it electronically. Interviewees also highlighted that questions related to the environment should be included in the interviews. Moreover, in order to create a green and sustainable attitude, these goals should be included in the job description of employees. Interviewees emphasized that it is

better to give green rewards to behaviors that are done on a voluntary basis. It is also suggested to include a green bonus in the salary slips of the employees and managers. The results of the research showed that, in the field of green training, the first important step is to assess the needs of training with a green approach, and according to the nature of each job, thus, it is necessary to carry out a specialized needs assessment. On the other hand, to change attitudes and internalize attention to environmental, and social responsibilities, green training should be held continuously and the effectiveness of the training should be measured constantly over time. The research findings showed that in the green performance evaluation through Iranian public organizations, at first, the green evaluation indicators in a general and specialized manner should be defined. It should be compiled with each job so that the employees and managers of different departments can realize what is expected of them and what they should be accountable for. Attention to indicators such as the amount of paper consumption reduction, energy consumption reduction, waste reduction, and the number of green proposals presented, and green knowledge management can be taken into consideration. Interviewees also emphasized that there are internal and external stakeholders in the organizations; thus, it is better to carry out these evaluations in 360 degrees.

## **6.2. Limitations and future research directions**

The current study has a few limitations. Due to the use of qualitative research, the generalization of the results should be considered with caution. Thus, it is recommended to conduct quantitative studies to provide a scale, as well as test the effect of these strategies on different suggested outcomes. We propose our model based on interviews with scientific experts, which have consultancy or managerial positions. However, conducting a model based on directors'/managers' or employees' perspectives can provide valuable insights as well. We conducted this research to provide a model of sustainable HRM strategies and their consequences; thus, we didn't investigate the affecting factors, including drivers, and moderators, which can be later addressed by other researchers.

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