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Research Paper

Sustainability as a Global Norm:
power asymmetry and neocolonialism?

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Abstract

Sustainability as a global norm has been implemented for the last two decades with standards and regulations to ensure the compliance of the global community. However, the implementation of such a global norm is not always smooth, such as in the case of Indonesia and the European Union (EU) disputes on palm oil trade caused by the EU's Renewable Energy Directive (RED) II policy. The application of sustainability standards, especially by the Global North countries to the Global South countries, brings the suspicion of a neo-colonialist attitude characterized by asymmetric power dynamics and economic domination. Using qualitative methodology research by analyzing primary materials on reports and case observation, this study explores the neocolonialism perspective in enforcing sustainability norms in the context of North-South relations. To illustrate the discussion, this study uses the case of the RED II policy toward Indonesia's palm oil export to the EU. The findings reveal the asymmetric power in norm-making of sustainability, asymmetric power in regulatory making, economy as an instrument of control, and discrimination in implementation. The findings suggest features consistent with neocolonialism in the implementation of sustainability as a global norm through trade relations.

Keywords: Sustainability, Global Norm, Neocolonialism, RED II, Power Asymmetry

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1. Introduction

What influences an actor's decision to implement a global norm? Are political interests and power plays factors behind this action? These questions arose in 2018, when the European Union amended an environmental regulation to embrace sustainability and reduce carbon emissions: the Renewable Energy Directive (RED) II, which came into effect in 2021. The implementation of this policy is perceived as one-sided and does not fully represent all EU member states (Hamid-Walker, 2025), and it clearly puts pressure on EU trade partners such as Indonesia. The RED II unfairly ruled against accommodating EU member states in their efforts to reduce carbon emissions by 32% by 2030, putting Indonesia at a disadvantage since palm oil is one of its major commodities. Parties' interests and power dynamics might affect how a global norm is being implemented.

Indonesia, as one of the biggest producers of palm oil, is extremely impacted by the restriction of the EU's RED II policy. Indonesia has nothing to complain about regarding the goals of sustainability, but the treatment that the EU has given through its policy to reach the renewable plan has put Indonesia in a difficult situation. On one hand, to meet the standard of sustainable commodity standards, Indonesia attempted to implement the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) as a certification measure to guarantee the sustainability of Indonesian palm oil. However, the system does not fully consider that the existence of this policy could create unstable global trade implications by creating barriers to exporting certain commodities. This is implicated in the decision taken by Indonesia to file a case with the World Trade Organization (WTO) in seeking justice to resolve the discrimination against Indonesian palm oil. The RED's article outlines several reasons why Indonesia challenged the EU's renewable policy. This situation triggered varying perspectives among different opponents regarding the EU's sustainability standards.

Literature reviews on the impact of RED II on Indonesia, especially on the palm oil industry, mostly focus on the sustainability aspect and its impact on the governance of palm oil in Indonesia. Widyatmoko's (2017) One study argues that RED II poses external regulatory pressure, as it has pushed Indonesia to improve its environmental image, strengthen sustainability practices, and preserve long-term competitiveness. Another study by Suratiningsih et al. (2023) finds that the gap in the regulation's implementation in a regional context is mainly due to a vague policy. A study by Djatmika et al. (2023) finds that the adapted regulation on biofuel continues to marginalize independent smallholders outside farmer groups because certification has not fully reached rural farmers. Additionally, large corporations disproportionately accumulate the benefits from biofuel production, while marginalized groups also share the costs (Djatmika et al., 2023). Tyson and Meganingtyas (2022) argue that RED II exposes weaknesses in Indonesian certification and regulatory coordination, rather than simply motivating technical improvements in plantation management. In short, those studies highlight the RED II impacts on the regulatory aspect while showing the gaps at the implementation level as the objective of the sustainability norm.

Other studies focus on the association of RED II with restricted access for Indonesian palm oil and palm-based biodiesel in the EU market that may disadvantage Indonesian producers. The quantitative study covering 2011–2024 reported a significant decline in Indonesia's market share in the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain after policy implementation, while Germany remained relatively stable (Rosyita et al., 2025). Qualitative and legal studies characterize RED II as a non-tariff barrier leaning toward protectionism, identified by the differential treatment of palm-based biodiesel compared with other feedstocks, including rapeseed oil produced within the EU or where the environmental classification appears insufficiently transparent (Fischer & Meyer, 2020; Mayr et al., 2021). Those studies, though, do not uniformly establish that protectionism is the sole or intended purpose of RED II but identify it as an overlap between environmental objectives and domestic political-economic interests.

In the context of North-South relations, RED II-related governance poses as both climate regulation and a political mechanism through which the EU influences trade partner countries' production practices, trade strategies, and development priorities. The RED II is a form of external environmental governance for the Global South's countries as part of European bioenergy, agricultural, and clean-energy value chains. Mai-Moulin et al.'s (2021) study argues RED II's sustainability criteria represent a significant improvement in the governance of European bioenergy, but uncertainties remain regarding imported biomass, forest management, biodiversity, indirect land-use change, and the protection of local communities in the producer countries affected by it. These unresolved issues illustrate how European

environmental standards can redistribute regulatory and commercial costs to producer countries while allowing the EU to define the terms of sustainability. Almeida et al. (2023) turn attention to power asymmetry, arguing that European climate and trade policies may preserve asymmetrical political and economic relations by presenting the EU as a moral and regulatory leader while extending its influence through trade, investment, and environmental conditionality. Similarly, research on Global North–South green-hydrogen partnerships by Lindner (2023) finds that cooperation has expanded through pilot projects, feasibility studies, and scientific initiatives, but that donor and investor priorities frequently dominate sociopolitical considerations and sustainable development objectives. This concern is consistent with the concept of "greening dependency" by Middelanis et al. (2026), who argue the Global South countries supply renewable energy or critical materials while higher-value manufacturing, technological capabilities, and industrial profits remain concentrated in the North. Overall, the literature supports the conclusion that RED II political consequences depend on whether European standards and partnerships are implemented through reciprocal governance and trade partners' developmental priorities rather than through unilateral European regulation and resource security.

A concept and norm are built. It is suspected that the way Global North countries impose the In consensus, previous studies agree that sustainability has become a global norm. This norm shapes how states, international organizations, and corporations plan for and work toward our shared futures. In 2015, the UN adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, which were a big step away from making rules that everyone had to follow. Instead, they created "governance through goals," which can be thought of as a new, non-binding way for states to steer the world while still agreeing to common goals (Biermann et al., 2017). De Jong and Vijge (2021) argue that the change from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals shows a shift in global discourse that can be seen in national policy frameworks as well. Weder (2023) Traces how sustainability has been progressively normalized as a taken-for-granted standard of appropriate behavior. But the sustainability norm's strength lies less in regulation and more in flexibility, which argues it acts as an "empty signifier" that different states can use to support different policy goals. The large and flexible nature of the word "sustainability" has sometimes made it harder for the norm to change how states act (Hadden & Seybert, 2016). These previous studies highlight that sustainability operates as a widely institutionalized yet contested global norm whose power depends on ongoing discursive construction rather than formal obligation.

From the literature reviews, we can see the gap in the study of Indonesia's case studies on RED II implementation, which mostly highlight the shortcomings for Indonesia without explaining what the action might signify and the political allusion behind it. Previous studies also show that the RED II, which focuses on sustainability as a global norm, does not always include a justice mechanism and is not free from political interests. Sustainability as a global norm aims to be operated as universal standards developed through sovereign equality, multilateral negotiation, and legally constituted international institutions. However, formal equality does not necessarily produce equal influence in the practice. In most cases, power asymmetry accentuates the relations between the powerful and less powerful nations.

This study aims to examine the dispute between Indonesia and the EU regarding RED II from a political perspective, focusing on the power asymmetry and the similitude behind the political interactions that arise from the implementation of sustainability as a global norm, which the EU uses to justify RED II. We hypothesized that neocolonialism alluded to the EU attitude concerning the RED II in the context of Indonesia, based on, first, the exploration of how the sustainability as a principle in trade and relationships influences power dynamics. Who dictates the sustainability narrative? This leading question led us to examine the development of sustainability as a global norm. It is undeniable that the concept of sustainability originated from genuine concern about the planet's ability to support human civilization due to its rapid degradation. However, how was the idea developed, and were the projects designed and implemented with consideration for partner contexts and needs? Secondly, we examine the development of the "greater good" narrative in the RED II policy implementation toward Indonesian commodities. We seek to glimpse how the implementation of the sustainability norm represents a tendency of neocolonialism by investigating trade partnerships between Indonesia and the EU on palm oil trade.

2. Methods

This research is a qualitative case study that highlights the findings, as it enables the examination of empirical relationships among various concepts to evaluate an existing theory or perspective (Johnson et

al., 2020, p. 229; McNabb, 2021, p. 276). By investigating the causal mechanisms of actor and behavior shown in the case study, the hypothesis brought by a concept could be tested. We argue that this approach fits the objective of this research, as this study aims to decipher actor behavior, the EU, against the hypotheses, behavior consistent with a neocolonialism tendency.

The focus of analysis in this study is the international system that has established sustainability as a global norm. In this case study approach, we analyze the EU as one actor, examining how it uses power and politics to implement sustainability as a global norm, particularly in the context of the Indonesian palm oil trade to the EU. Data collection is based on documents and other materials, as well as observations in the field. Data analysis focuses on key identified aspects, which are actors' behaviors, notably the power dynamic and political incentives behind the implementation of the sustainability norm in palm oil trade. Neocolonialism serves as the conceptual framework for our analysis of how power dynamics, domination, and control seemingly accentuate actors' behaviors, as illustrated in our case study.

Revisiting Neocolonialism theory

Neocolonialism refers to power relations characterized by domination by a region or a nation over others, usually between former colonizers and a decolonized nation-state, not through formal political rule but through economic, financial, and cultural influence (Anheier & Juergensmeyer, n.d.; Nkrumah, 1965; Tegegne, 2024). It creates a situation in which external economic interests continue exploitation by targeting the periphery to maintain a dependent development path. Nkrumah emphasizes the role of foreign capital, control of markets, and the imposition of economic structures that reproduce underdevelopment while maintaining sovereignty (Nkrumah, 1965). In other words, the remaining control and dominance of foreign powers over the ex-colonized states.

From a global perspective, power asymmetry in international institutions resembles neocolonialism. Neocolonialism may operate through multiple channels such as trade rules, aid architecture, investment regimes, intellectual property regimes, security arrangements, and financial conditionality such as debt, terms of loans and grants, which can constrain states' policy autonomy and shape their development trajectories (Acharya, 2014; Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Fentahun, 2023; Lendzoumbou, 2024). The argument is that norm diffusion, institution-building, and the strategic use of soft power can reproduce patterns of dependence without compromising states' sovereignty. As an example, World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, regional trade agreements, and bilateral investment treaties can embed power asymmetries, enabling external actors to influence domestic regulation and industrial strategy (Lendzoumbou, 2024). The conditional terms connected to loans, aid, or trade may serve to align domestic policies with the interests of external creditors, investors, and markets, sometimes at the expense of local development priorities. Asymmetrical power relations between the Global North and the Global South can be observed in neocolonial behavior even in the globalized field of data processing (Lynch et al., 2023), the digital account of history (Florin & Gagarina, 2025), or the museum (Harrison, 1997), and the world of literature (Koplatadze, 2022). In this view, neocolonialism is not only about who owns capital but also about who writes the rules, who enforces them, and whose interests are prioritized in rule-making processes.

Neocolonialism can be relevant to measuring states' cooperation. Whether cooperation between or among states is an alliance or neocolonial can be measured by the economic system and the direction of political policy, in which the outside direction might characterize it (Nkrumah, 1965; Ziai, 2020). The practices of a globalized economy create a controlled economy through debt, trade, and development cooperation that require a structural adjustment to the country involved. The international system and global economic institutions pressure weaker states to follow the dominant narrative. Ziai (2020) argues that foreign actors' control of the economy is a reality of today's economy, even though the controlling actors might not always be the former colonial powers. Dismantling this concept serves as a useful lens for analyzing how powerful regions, like the EU, exert economic control over lesser powers by leveraging global norms, including sustainability norms.

To measure the findings, the discussion will be guided by indicators derived from the concept of neocolonialism: rule-making dominance, unequal participation, compliance pressure, economic domination, and asymmetric benefit.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Asymmetric norm-making of Sustainability

The study will begin by examining how sustainability, as a core principle, has evolved into a global norm. It is important to understand the nature of a global norm within the context of political dynamics that arise from economic aspirations, resource competition, and distribution, as well as the need to preserve the planet. Sustainability emerged as a global norm from postwar discussions on development and resource use, evolving into a global policy framework that linked environmental conservation to social and economic advancement (Garsdal, 2024).

The establishment of sustainability as a global standard can be analyzed through the perspective of global disparities by linking it to the Norm Life Cycle framework proposed by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), which encompasses three phases: norm emergence, norm cascade, and internationalization, or norm acceptance. Finnemore and Sikkink refer to norms as standards of appropriate behavior for actors with specific identities. They argue that norm-making is a dynamic social process in which norms emerge, are accepted, and then reshape actors' behavior based on what is perceived as appropriate (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In norm-making, actors serve as norm entrepreneurs who deliberately try to alter global inequalities by connecting economic interests to the prevailing normative order through ideas they view as more suitable. The norm entrepreneur will frame issues, mobilize support, and push norms into institutions. Norm-making is necessary to achieve behavioral change, where the ideational force focuses on aligning the protection of the earth with these efforts, rather than being driven by coercion. Once a norm reaches a critical threshold of adoption, diffusion accelerates as states and other actors treat the norm as legitimate and act accordingly. Still, this process faces resistance, idea contestation, or norm diffusion that can slow or redirect how and whether norm-driven change takes hold.

The first stage of sustainability norm-making, emergence, happened in the 1970s and 1980s. Sustainability, spurred by ecological concern, described the notion, expectation, and ideal form of sustainable conduct in political, social, and economic situations. The notion spread through intellectual exchanges and led to international agreements. The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), or Stockholm Conference, established ecological justice as a force for an environmentally sustainable economy and society. Sörlin and Paglia (2025) The Stockholm ideas discussed and formulated the human dimensions of the environment, introducing crucial notions like the human environment. Ten years after the Stockholm Conference, the focus shifted from protecting the environment in a more nuanced way and promoting ecological justice to putting human progress first. A new notion was widely promoted as a corridor for sustainable growth, anticipating current and future requirements while protecting the environment and social welfare, as shown in the 1985 Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer. Riani et al. (2023) claim that aligning earth conservation with economic development is the ideological force behind it. The concept of environmental conservation no longer focused exclusively on planet preservation but was also linked to human economic activity as the main cause of ecological concerns.

The second stage of sustainability norm-making, the norm cascade, emerged in the late 1980s and challenged the human environment notion. The UN's Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development launched sustainability as a global policy norm in 1987 (Wilke, 2026). This report argues that the global environmental crisis can be traced to the Global South, which struggles for survival amid massive structural poverty, and the Northern model of irresponsible consumption, production, and industrialization. It had the right momentum to strengthen the multilateral approach to overcoming economic interests that require simultaneous institutional and structural transformations in politics and global inequalities by connecting economic interests, development, and environmental protection. Sustainability gained normative power as the long-term sustainable development concept took hold. Sustainable development is described as a global response to overcoming the societal hindrance of economic interests, which requires simultaneous institutional and structural transformations in politics and economy (Avelino et al., 2016; Avelino & Wittmayer, 2016) In 1992, the premier agency in global environmental governance, the UN, conducted the Convention on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, resulting in the Agenda 21. This conference generated both ideational force and justification, as well as material incentives and political commitments from developed countries to financially support sustainable development, environmental protection in

developing countries, and the transfer of technology. Sustainability has moved from a common idea to a practical reality that has standardized environmental behavior, making it a global norm.

The third stage of the norm-making process is the acceptance of this norm as a new standardized behavior and its operationalization. In this stage, it is crucial to ask which actors hold significant power to operationalize a new standard and guide and limit state behavior. The global community of states has agreed that sustainability could be enforced not only in industrialized states but also in the developing countries. However, the acceptance is not a one-directional process, as it is described as a tug-of-war between interests and negotiations. More so, accepted norms cannot be automatically operationalized. Huelss' study (2017) points out that norms are not simply transformed and translated into practice as instruments of governance because they are not neutral or objective tools. There is a process of norm-operationalization that conceptualizes the origin of norms within the context of their functional management through the reproduction of shared expectations (Huelss, 2017). In this process, international organizations play a strategic role in establishing sustainability as a global norm by operationalizing norms through the transformation of standards of appropriateness (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), also known as norm-codification. Norms are converted into expected collective behaviors that provide passageways for the design and redirection of bilateral, multilateral, and regional collaboration. Here, international organizations act as norm brokers in operationalizing sustainability as a global norm by codifying broad commitments into shared goals, institutional mandates, reporting processes, coordination forums, and implementation pathways that connect global priorities to national and local actions. From this role, the norm-broker holds immense power to dictate how the commitments are served.

The Norm Life Cycle framework suggests that the process of establishing sustainability as a global norm is highly characterized by asymmetric power, with the North acting as the norm entrepreneur, international organizations as the norm brokers, and the South as the target and actor for implementing the new norm. The process indicates rule-making dominance and unequal participation. While developed countries commit to financially supporting the implementation of the new norm, their support can act as a double-edged sword in front of conflicting interests that can also be used as compliance pressure. As Wilke (2026) concludes, sustainability is best described as a wicked problem due to its nature as a normative concept in which the three interdependent dimensions that are economic, environmental, and social most of the time conflict with each other. The states' contesting interests within the three dimensions of sustainability characterize the acceptance of the sustainability norm as adjustable and susceptible to control and domination for asymmetric benefits.

3.2 Asymmetric participation regulatory

The main pillar of sustainability as a global norm is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The program converted norms into time-bound global development targets. It frames sustainability as universal, cohesive, and relevant to all nations, rather than limited to less affluent countries; nevertheless, this broadening made implementation more politically challenging and complicated coordination across sectors (Fearnside, 2019; Sianes et al., 2022). Notwithstanding the critiques regarding the limited and technocratic nature of the agendas, perceived as insufficiently addressing structural inequalities and the interdependence of social, economic, and ecological problems (De Jong & Vijge, 2021; Garsdal, 2024), the two agendas embody the most pragmatic aspect of sustainability as a universal standard. The two agendas are also important narratives to curb unresolved tensions between economic growth, environmental limits, and global equity.

The implementation of sustainable development as a global ethic relies on the notion of "for a greater good." Sustainable development sets rules to regulate an entity's patterns of actions in order to assess the level of sustainability. In principle, the so-called values for sustainability in the areas of economic, ecological, and social levels apply mainly to the 193 member states of the United Nations regardless of their level of acceptance. Moral obligation is used to bind states to conform to the standard (Thompson, 1997). Therefore, a global norm, whilst still opening the room for a dialogue, is basically imposed through a global system using the specific narrative that incites responsibility to comply. Minton et al. (2015 in Schmitz, 2019) argue that positive views toward sustainability-related values and practices could lead to environmentally friendly attitudes and behaviors. As an objective, the pursuit of

sustainability different actors pursue sustainability through various routes at all levels. Sustainability has become a standard and serves as an important vehicle for governing global consumption and production (Blankenbach et al., 2020). From these understandings, the instrumentalization of the sustainability narrative becomes a central practice across all aspects of state relations, from the economy to culture.

International organizations play important roles in participation and regulation. As norm-brokers, international organizations reshape sustainability into a governable agenda of targets and compliance-oriented processes through the SDGs, reporting frameworks, partnerships, and coordination bodies such as the High-level Political Forum, while delegating much of the implementation burden to states, local authorities, and non-state actors (Bernstein, 2020). In participating, states may selectively reinterpret, challenge, or domesticate international norms in response to this burden, in accordance with their own institutional and political circumstances (Engberg-Pedersen & Fejerskov, 2021; Scobie, 2022). Research on the Global South's small island nations indicates that governments may recognize SDG governance norms without incorporating the proposed implementation pathways (Scobie, 2022). A study of 159 international organizations found that while SDG engagement increased, it did not lead to greater policy integration (Bogers et al., 2022). As a result, depending on whether sustainability is consistent with an organization's mission and member adaptation, international organizations occasionally participate in norm diffusion (Tallberg et al., 2017). Thus, international organizations function as powerful yet constrained norm brokers, universalizing sustainability rhetorically, even as their operational frameworks may reproduce unequal implementation capacity and obscure the political conflicts embedded in sustainable development.

3.3 Power asymmetry and economy as the instrument of control

In 2020, the EU decided to adopt and enact the European Green Deal (EGD), an overarching framework for the European Union's economic transformation toward climate neutrality by 2050. Its climate targets include, among others, reducing net emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to the 1990 level. The sectors encompass energy, transport, industry, food, biodiversity, and the circular economy. Some governments in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Poland, were worried that climate rules could raise energy costs, harm coal-dependent regions, or conflict with ordinary people's interests (Rákos, 2022). Farmers' resistance in Europe, often driven by concerns about the cost and fairness of the transition rather than a complete rejection of climate action, has pushed the EU to relax or withdraw some agricultural environmental measures (Chapron, 2024). In this case, the EU has displayed the reminiscence of European imperialism where one centralized and strongest power came to regulate how and what 'normal' politics might work on the continent. However, unlike the golden ages of classical imperialism, when European major powers exhibited and normalized violence and war to confirm hegemonic power through control of the forces of production, in contemporary politics the EU pursues its ambitious and grandiose missions through knowledge, innovation, research, and technology.

The European Green Deal (EGD) is the policy umbrella that indirectly resulted in the Indonesian palm oil trade ban. Its climate-neutrality and biodiversity objectives have been translated into several instruments that affect palm oil in various ways. into several instruments that affect palm oil in different ways. The two most consequential instruments under EGD are EUDR (deforestation-free supply chains) and RED II's ILUC rules (biofuel eligibility).

The Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II) and its indirect land-use-change (ILUC) rules are that directly affect the palm oil trade. Previously, according to Oosterveer's study (2020), the sustainability of palm oil was a controversial issue in the EU, leading various societal actors to call for stronger measures to protect the environment in its production. RED II and ILUC set the target for EU Member States to reduce to zero by 2030 the contribution of high-risk biofuels associated with ILUC, toward meeting national renewable energy. It removes the policy value of qualifying volumes for national renewable-energy compliance. The principle stipulates the reduced incentives for certain palm oil in the biofuel market through 2030, and requirements for proof of legality and deforestation-free status for palm oil and its derivatives entering the European Union market. However, as the largest exporters of palm oil in 2019, Indonesia and Malaysia were not involved in the public and political debates surrounding palm oil (Oosterveer, 2020). Therefore, when RED II and ILUC applied, they automatically became a market barrier for Indonesian exporters, who were unable to provide the required geolocation data, proof of legality, and traceability information stipulated by ILUC.

In the dispute between Indonesia and the EU, the EU justified banning Indonesian palm oil on climate change, biodiversity, and moral grounds, which Indonesia argued were not directly linked to the policies imposed on palm oil and palm oil-based biodiesel (Tempo, 2025). From this situation, it can be seen that the narrative has been controlled by the EU, as it flexibly bends the narrative to suit as it flexibly bends the narrative for its own interests.

As seen in the EU's RED II policy that affected Indonesian palm oil, sustainability agendas were set by the Global North, reflecting their priorities. On the RED II policy, the EU has stronger access to decide and manage the regulation, mechanism, target, and criteria for achieving carbon emissions by 2030 (Searle et al., 2017). At a certain point, analysts suggest that through this standard, the EU could increase its influence and dominant power in global trade by shaping the political and economic impacts resulting from the policy's implementation (Kinseng et al., 2023). Kinseng et al. (2023) see the EU strategy as an imperialistic action to shadow another country's major sector so the EU itself could remain dominant in international trade. This interpretation is consistent with the neocolonialist attitude of dominating all stages of the decision-making process, regulation, and control.

Indonesia's case against the EU palm oil trade exemplifies how trade can serve as an instrument for control. The EU's decision on the RED II policy, which aims to achieve 32% renewable energy sources by 2030, along with the ILUC rule, is leading to the discontinuation of palm oil for biofuels due to land-conversion issues that raise sustainability concerns (Testriono et al., 2024). The EU's decision to exclude the trade partner in the decision-making process became the basis of Indonesia's case proposal to the WTO in December 2019. Indonesia argued that the EU imposed discriminatory trade barriers, unjustified protectionism disguised as environmental sustainability, and flawed anti-dumping calculations that unfairly penalize core Indonesian exports like palm oil, biofuels, and fatty acids. The EU, as the primary policymaker, has exerted pressure on Indonesia's economy and trade dynamics, which significantly reflects the existing power asymmetry.

The issue between the EU and Indonesia is covered by the WTO under the dispute settlement case number WTO DS593 of "European Union — Certain Measures Concerning Palm Oil and Oil Palm Crop-Based Biofuels". Through this evidence, there are several foundations of Indonesia's claim towards the EU's inconsistency regarding this issue (World Trade Organization (WTO), 2026):

a. Agreement of Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) [Articles 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.5, 2.8, 2.9, 5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.2, 5.6, 5.8, 12.1 and 12.3]
b. General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) 1994 [Articles I:1, III:2, III:4, X:3(a) and XI:1]
c. Subsidies and Countervailing Measures (SCM Agreement) [Articles 3.1(b) and 5]

Indonesia pointed out the unjustifiability of the EU's RED II Policy, which, in the agreement of TBT Indonesia, challenges the issue of technical regulations regarding the treatment of products; such treatment should ensure equal opportunity and proportionality, without discrimination based on whether the products originate from outside or within the region (WTO, 2026a). An international institution or organization is expected to foster a trade environment free from barriers, including to specific producers or partners, while simultaneously considering the need to safeguard economic supply chains.

Radmann (2021) study finds, based on the claim submitted by Indonesia and the response submitted by the EU, the tendency of power asymmetry, specifically on the lack of clarity regarding the calculations used to categorize high-ILUC and low-ILUC risks, as well as ambiguity concerning which biofuel categories are acceptable to the EU in international trade. Indonesia is concerned that the ILUC emission measure is detected directly, leaving of legitimate basis under the EU regulation for its treatment of Indonesian palm oil beyond descriptive characteristics. On the first written submission by the EU regarding the claim from Indonesia, EU stated that regulatory differentiation regarding specific production methods can be implemented to achieve a sufficient level of accuracy—as seen in the EU biofuel regime—where, under the same methodology, ILUC estimates carry a different level of certainty or accuracy compared to direct land-use change emissions; consequently, the EU set an ILUC cap of 7% for conventional biofuels under RED I (European Union, 2021).

Decisions and regulations established by the EU reveal a tendency toward power asymmetry; specifically, regarding the 7% ILUC target, Indonesia lacked equal participation in setting the target or in establishing the definitive calculation method used for it. Given that the EU is a crucial export market and

a major trading partner for Indonesian palm oil, Indonesia has complied with the regulation under the pressure of this target. This situation can be viewed as a form of "soft control" by EU power to constrain Indonesia's activities in the export market, a dynamic characteristic of neocolonialism. While sustainability concerns about palm oil industries are valid given the acceptance of it as a global norm, the implementation that instrumentalizes the use of the economy to control other states' behaviors reflects a neocolonialist tendency.

3.4 Discriminatory implementation

Indonesia accused the EU of applying discriminatory acts in these trade relations. The EU used Indonesia's needs for the palm oil market to comply with a standard that EU member states do not have to meet. The allegations were ultimately upheld in WTO court after the WTO, following several panel consultations, issued a ruling containing several key findings on 10 January 2025. The findings stated that there was a discriminatory action by the EU towards Indonesia (World Trade Organization (WTO), 2026):

a. Indonesia failed to establish that the 7% maximum share and the high ILUC-risk cap and phase-out were inconsistent with the obligation in Article 2.4 of the TBT Agreement to use relevant international standards as a basis for technical regulations;
b. the European Union administered the high ILUC-risk cap and phase-out inconsistently with Article 2.1 of the TBT Agreement by failing to conduct a timely review of the data used to determine which biofuels were high ILUC risk, and because there were deficiencies in the design and implementation of the low ILUC-risk criteria, which resulted in arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination between countries where the same conditions prevail;
c. it was unnecessary to rule on Indonesia's alternative claim that the European Union acted inconsistently with the obligation in Article 5.8 of the TBT Agreement to ensure that conformity assessment procedures which have been adopted are published promptly or otherwise made available in such a manner as to enable interested parties in other Members to become acquainted with them;
d. the high ILUC-risk cap and phase-out was inconsistent with Article III:4 of the GATT 1994 because it accorded less favorable treatment to palm oil-based biofuel from Indonesia than that accorded to like products of EU origin;

Based on the panel report regarding the dispute between Indonesia and the EU, an analysis of the claims raised by Indonesia reveals that the WTO identified a form of discrimination that manifested in policy inconsistencies concerning ILUC. WTO acknowledged that this discrimination was unjustifiable. One aspect concerns the regulations under GATT Article III:4 regarding "National Treatment on Internal Taxation and Regulation," which mandates that "like products" must be accorded treatment equivalent to that granted to products from any international trading partner (WTO, 2026c); Indonesia identified a disparity in the regulations applied by the EU to Indonesian products compared to those produced by EU member states. Previously, studies Mayr et al. (2021) and Mitchell and Merriman (2020) also find the clearest conflict between the EU's environmental justification and exporting-country interpretations of fairness. They find RED II's freeze-and-phase-out approach for high-ILUC-risk biofuels is challenged in relation to Indonesia, while legal analyses conclude that the EU measures may be inconsistent with WTO obligations and may not be justifiable under available exceptions.

The WTO panel's report on the Indonesian vs. EU dispute, the DS593 report adopted on 24 February 2025, found that the EU engaged in discriminatory trade practices by implementing policies that harmed palm oil-based biofuels from Indonesia compared to similar biofuel products produced in the EU (Tempo, 2025). The WTO panel also found that the EU's Delegated Regulation on the matter is inconsistent with WTO rules and must be amended (WTO, 2026b). While the WTO panel's decision sides with Indonesia in the matter, the rulings do not restore palm biodiesel's former position in EU renewable-energy policy and do not remove EUDR compliance requirements. The panel requires the EU to correct discriminatory implementation, especially data review and the low-ILUC route, while leaving room for the EU to maintain an environmentally motivated ILUC regime. The EU's implementation period expired on 24 February 2026, after which Indonesia then sought authority to retaliate, which the EU contested. That arbitration was suspended in June 2026 pending compliance proceedings, so the Indonesia case remained unresolved at the latest WTO status update (WTO, 2026b). The WTO panel report and previous studies by Mayr et al. (2021) and Mitchell and Merriman (2020) illustrate an aspect of neocolonialist theory in which EU member states are subtly afforded opportunities for greater dominance by restricting countries that could otherwise emerge as competitors.

Conclusion

Sustainability is undoubtedly a much-needed value to prolong the quality of the earth and support human livelihood. The global adoption and enforcement of sustainability in Global South countries marked a new reality. As a global norm, sustainability is a social construct, shared expectations on appropriate behavior, and shapes the interactions between actors.

The norm-making process of sustainability reflects the power dynamics that create political tensions among states regarding the enforcement and imposition of sustainability as a source of power. Examining the power asymmetry, the process of establishing sustainability appears to be moving toward the acceptance of Eurocentric standards of appropriateness in relation to global environmental concerns. Sustainability could be perceived as a means of controlling and imposing European-standardized norms through leadership in climate change mitigation and the green economy. Within the process of institutionalizing sustainability regionally and globally, it also yields a shifted meaning of production. From the conceptual evolution of sustainability, it can also be seen as a norms-making instrument of great powers, determining, formulating, and shaping a shared understanding of expectations, rules, and standards for the harmonious pursuit of economic interest, planet protection, and human well-being.

It is important to note that the way sustainability is developed as a global norm, the application of the norm, and its use as a bargaining chip in trade and relations are valid concerns to reflect on. Instead of empowering, the norm of sustainability is rather limiting the opportunities of Global South countries to control their own resources, optimizing their economic interests in the global capitalist economic system. Seemingly, the making of sustainability as a global norm does not entirely reflect ecological and social justice; it also shows the features consistent with neocolonialism by seeking to dominate the global commodity standards and determine the international trade route, system, and structure. In the implementation phase, sustainability has been used as an instrument of control and domination. The problems lie in the imbalance of rights to define the narrative and the unjust implementation.

In the case of the Indonesia-EU dispute over palm oil trade, the findings suggest that RED II can be characterized as a powerful form of extraterritorial environmental governance, tarnished by neocolonialist tendencies. The central mechanism is regulatory asymmetry: European targets and market rules shape land use, certification, and trade conditions in places where Indonesia, as an affected actor, has less influence over the formulation of those rules are formulated. This asymmetry becomes environmentally unjust when European accounting systems recognize biomass as carbon-neutral while production or harvesting weakens carbon storage, biodiversity, or local land security. In this legal dispute, Indonesia received a satisfactory result. However, similar situations may occur in other trade sectors or areas of development. Therefore, the risk of reproducing neocolonialism calls for a global dialogue in which countries from the Global South also have a say in shaping the narrative and implementation of sustainability as a global norm.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The authors confirm that artificial intelligence tools (Quillbot) were used solely for language proofreading and grammar correction in preparing this manuscript. The authors conducted and verified all analyses, interpretations, and conclusions independently.

Author Contributions

The first author was responsible for writing and editing the original and final drafts, including conceptualization, methodology, data curation, and analysis,. The second author contributed to writing the original draft, data curation, and revision of the final draft. The third author contributes to writing the original draft and data curation.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. The earliest draft was presented at the 9th Sustain Conference, Kyoto University, November 2025.

Limitations

This study relies exclusively on documents and reports, which presents methodological constraints. Further research concentrating on the same topic using empirical data may be required to substantiate or contest the conclusions of this study.

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