



ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP IN FACING VUCA CHALLENGES ON ESG IMPLEMENTATION IN PRIVATE COMPANIES

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Abstract

With the acceleration of global disruption and increased governance pressures, companies can no longer rely on short-term profitability; organizational resilience and sustainability are at stake. This study aims to examine the role of sustainable leadership in driving the implementation of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) in private companies in Central Tapanuli Regency, facing the challenges of VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity). This study addresses a domain rarely explored in the sustainable leadership literature and is expected to enrich the empirical data. The research approach used a quantitative explanatory approach with a cross-sectional survey design. Respondents were leaders, managers, and supervisors in private companies that had been operating for at least three years and had a formal management structure, recruited through purposive sampling. The test results showed that the corrected item-total correlation value was above the table r value (0.300), while the Cronbach's Alpha value for both variables was above 0.8, indicating excellent reliability. The normality test confirmed that the data were normally distributed (Asymp. Sig. = 0.147 > 0.05). Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant influence between sustainable leadership and ESG implementation ($r = 0.521$), with a coefficient of determination of 27.1%, which means that variations in ESG implementation can be explained by sustainable leadership by a proportion, while the rest is influenced by other factors outside the model. The simple linear regression equation obtained is $Y = 44.215 + 0.394X$, and the results of the t -test (t count 3.453 > t table 2.037; significance $0.000 < 0.05$) confirm that the influence of sustainable leadership on ESG implementation is positive and statistically significant. This finding implies that strengthening long-term oriented leadership capacity is one of the strategic levers for private companies in natural resource-based regions to realize more substantive ESG practices, not just formal regulatory compliance.

Keywords: sustainable leadership; VUCA challenges; ESG implementation; private companies.

Abstrak

Percepatan disrupsi global dan tekanan tata kelola yang ketat, perusahaan tidak lagi dapat bersandar pada logika profitabilitas jangka pendek; resiliensi dan keberlanjutan organisasi menjadi taruhan. Tujuan penelitian ini untuk menguji kepemimpinan berkelanjutan (sustainable leadership) berperan dalam mendorong implementasi Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) pada perusahaan swasta di Kabupaten Tapanuli Tengah, dengan tantangan VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity). Penelitian ini menempatkan ranah yang masih jarang disentuh oleh literatur kepemimpinan berkelanjutan sehingga diharapkan dapat memperkaya data empiris. Pendekatan penelitian menggunakan kuantitatif eksplanatori dengan



desain survei cross-sectional. Responden penelitian merupakan pimpinan, manajer, dan supervisor pada perusahaan swasta yang telah beroperasi minimal tiga tahun dan memiliki struktur manajemen formal, yang dijaring melalui teknik purposive sampling. Hasil pengujian menunjukkan bahwa nilai corrected item-total correlation berada di atas nilai r tabel (0,300), sementara nilai Cronbach's Alpha untuk kedua variabel berada di atas 0,8 yang mengindikasikan reliabilitas yang sangat baik. Uji normalitas mengonfirmasi bahwa data berdistribusi normal (Asymp. Sig. = 0,147 > 0,05). Analisis korelasi Pearson memperlihatkan pengaruh signifikan antara kepemimpinan berkelanjutan dan implementasi ESG ($r = 0,521$), dengan koefisien determinasi sebesar 27,1%, yang berarti variasi implementasi ESG mampu dijelaskan oleh kepemimpinan berkelanjutan sebesar proporsi, sementara sisanya dipengaruhi oleh faktor lain di luar model. Persamaan regresi linear sederhana yang diperoleh adalah $Y = 44,215 + 0,394X$, dan hasil uji t (t hitung 3,453 > t tabel 2,037; signifikansi $0,000 < 0,05$) menegaskan bahwa pengaruh kepemimpinan berkelanjutan terhadap implementasi ESG bersifat positif dan signifikan secara statistik. Temuan ini memberi implikasi bahwa penguatan kapasitas kepemimpinan yang berorientasi jangka panjang menjadi salah satu pengungkit strategis bagi perusahaan swasta di daerah berbasis sumber daya alam untuk mewujudkan praktik ESG yang lebih substantif, bukan sekadar formalitas kepatuhan regulasi.

Kata Kunci: kepemimpinan berkelanjutan; tantangan VUCA; implementasi ESG; perusahaan swasta.

I. INTRODUCTION

The acceleration of globalization, advances in digital technology, and economic disruption have changed the landscape of the business world into conditions commonly referred to as VUCA (*volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity*). In such a climate, organizations are required to be able to read changes quickly, make timely strategic decisions, and maintain long-term sustainability. This condition places sustainable *leadership* as one of the most relevant answers to the challenges of VUCA, as this leadership style is inherently oriented towards a balance between economic performance, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility. This phenomenon is evident in Central Tapanuli Regency, which in recent years has recorded a rapid growth in the number of local private companies in the agriculture, fisheries, trade, and service sectors. Unfortunately, this quantitative growth has not been fully offset by the maturity of stakeholder-oriented governance. Various complaints from the community, workers, and local governments who feel less involved in the company's important decision-making indicate that some local company leaders are still short-term oriented, and focus on achieving internal targets without considering external expectations that actually determine the sustainability of the business itself. As a result, social friction arises such as land conflicts, information asymmetry, and low public support for the existence of companies. Thus, the problem becomes more difficult or complicated considering that Central Tapanuli Regency is dominated by small and medium

enterprises and natural resource-based companies that face double pressure: from the external side in the form of environmental regulations and global market demands, and from the internal side in the form of limitations in organizational culture, managerial capacity, and leadership understanding that is not fully oriented towards sustainability. In situations like this, the role of the leader becomes very central. Sustainability-oriented leaders are ideally able to act as agents of change that integrate ESG principles into the company's vision and operations, while also being responsive to the dynamics of VUCA.

The urgency of leadership in the VUCA era is also reflected in the efforts of Rath, Grosskopf, and Barkmeyer (2021) who synthesize VUCA leadership research (2000–2020) through cross-cultural studies. These results confirm that the understanding of generic leadership forms, approaches, and models suitable for the VUCA context is far from complete, the effectiveness of which is highly dependent on the characteristics of the challenges and the sectors in which the organization operates. In line with that, studies on VUCA leadership in the health sector have been conducted by Groves (2018) and in the capital market by Dalko and Wang (2018), but similar studies in the context of private companies in natural resource-based areas, especially in the coastal areas of North Sumatra, are still rare. Based on this, the basis of this research is that Central Tapanuli Regency, with a thick local social and cultural structure, effective leadership in the framework of ESG is required to be adaptive, collaborative, and value-oriented, not just compiling sustainability reports, but really living ESG principles in daily operations. In the environmental dimension, this can be seen from how the company responds to local environmental problems such as flooding or land degradation; on the social dimension, from how companies foster sustainable relationships with indigenous peoples and informal workers; and on the *governance* dimension, from the extent to which transparent and adaptive governance is actually applied in decision-making. Based on the description above, this study was formulated to answer the question: the extent to which sustainable leadership affects the implementation of ESG in private companies in Central Tapanuli Regency in the midst of the VUCA challenges that surround it. The purpose of this study is to analyze and empirically test the influence of sustainable leadership on ESG implementation in these companies. The novelty of this research lies in the location and object of the place raised, namely a medium-scale private company based on natural resources in the western coastal region of North Sumatra, which is one of the relatively rare objects of ESG and sustainable leadership studies, which has been focusing more on large companies, the financial sector, or urban areas on the island of Java.

II. THEORETICAL STUDIES

2.1 Sustainable Leadership (*Sustainable Leadership*)

Sustainable leadership can be understood as a leadership pattern that considers the long-term consequences of every organizational decision and action, especially in maintaining environmental sustainability, social welfare, and economic sustainability at the same time. Iqbal and Ahmad (2021) and Leal Filho et al. (2020) interpret it as a form of leadership that seeks to conserve natural resources through wise decision-making while fostering ecological awareness within teams and organizations. In other words, sustainable leadership is not just a strategy for short-term gains, but an approach that consciously balances economic achievement with responsibility to the environment and society for the sustainability of the organization and the ecosystem around it.

2.2 VUCA Concept

The term VUCA was first introduced in the late 1980s, referring to the leadership ideas of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus (1985), to describe the rapidly changing world conditions. This concept was then adopted and developed in military leadership training at the US Army War College to explain the turbulent global political, military, and security situation after the cold war (Whiteman, 1998). Over time, VUCA developed into a framework synonymous with organizational leadership and strategic leadership in various sectors (Stiehm, 2002). The four elements of VUCA can be outlined as follows: *volatility* refers to rapid and continuous change; *uncertainty* is related to the inability to predict future events; *Complexity* describes the many intertwined factors without a clear cause-and-effect pattern that makes them difficult to analyze; while *ambiguity* refers to the difficulty of interpreting ongoing conditions and reality. Johansen (2009) emphasizes that behind these four elements, VUCA also holds innovation opportunities for anyone who is able to manage volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity strategically. In such dynamics, organizational leadership becomes a determining variable (Sarkar, 2016; Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2015): the organization's ability to adapt to VUCA turbulence is highly dependent on the leader, especially his capacity to respond quickly and appropriately to crisis conditions (Kapucu & Ustun, 2017; Andrews et al., 2013; Farazmand, 2007).

2.3 Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)

Conceptually, ESG is a key pillar of sustainable investment and business practices used to measure the non-financial impact of a company's operational activities. In the last five years, ESG orientation has shifted from just voluntary actions based on corporate philanthropy to a strategic obligation as well as increasingly stringent regulatory compliance demands. According to FSCO (2016), the *environmental dimension* includes the direct interaction of the company with its

environment; the social dimension is related to the influence of the company's social responsibility on society; while *the governance* dimension concerns the way the company is managed in a transparent and accountable manner. These three dimensions ultimately become non-financial performance benchmarks used to manage investment risks and corporate reputational risks.

2.4 Foundations of Supporting Theories

To strengthen the framework of this research, two theoretical perspectives were used as a foothold. First, the stakeholder theory put forward by Freeman (1984) emphasizes that the sustainability of the company is not solely determined by the interests of shareholders, but also by how the company manages relationships with all stakeholders: workers, the surrounding community, the government, and business partners. This perspective is relevant to explain why sustainability-oriented leaders tend to take ESG practices more seriously, as they view the legitimacy and sustainability of the business as the result of healthy relationships with stakeholders, rather than just the result of financial performance. Second, the upper echelons theory from Hambrick and Mason (1984) explains that the characteristics, values, and cognitive orientation of the top leadership will be reflected in the strategic choices and policy direction of the organization. This theory provides the foundation for why the values of sustainable leadership embraced by company leaders can be an important determinant of how far ESG principles are truly integrated into a company's operational strategy and practices.

2.5 Sustainable Leadership, VUCA Challenges and ESG Implementation

Sustainable leadership is an approach that emphasizes a long-term vision, ethical orientation, and responsible decision-making that simultaneously considers economic, social, and environmental impacts. Leaders with such an orientation pursue not only short-term performance, but also the long-term sustainability of the organization through the integration of social-environmental values into business strategy. In the context of ESG implementation, sustainable leadership plays a key driver: leaders with a vision of sustainability tend to encourage resource efficiency and environmental impact management (*environmental* dimension), pay attention to employee welfare and relationships with the surrounding community (*social* dimension), and build transparent and accountable decision-making (*governance* dimension). Thus, sustainable leadership does not affect one ESG dimension separately, but rather encourages the integration of all three across the board.

A number of recent studies have also strengthened this argument. Niu, Park, and Jung (2022) found that sustainability-oriented digital leadership contributes to organizational

innovation and ESG management. Ong, Khatibi, Mohd Talib, and George (2025) show that ethical leadership is one of the main drivers of ESG adoption in micro, small, and medium enterprises, while Hsu (2026) documents how transformational leadership helps SMEs in emerging markets institutionalize ESG practices despite being faced with limited resources and weak regulatory pressures, a situation that contextually bears similarities to the situation of private companies in Tapanuli Regency Middle. On the other hand, the VUCA challenge does not stand neutral against the relationship. High levels of volatility and uncertainty have the potential to shift the company's focus to short-term goals, disrupting the consistency of environmental, social, and governance policy implementation. But at the same time, VUCA pressure can also strengthen the relevance of sustainable leadership, as leaders with a long-term vision, ethical orientation, and adaptive capacity are increasingly needed to ensure that ESG principles are maintained in strategic decision-making. In other words, VUCA plays a role as a contextual factor that determines the extent to which the power of sustainable leadership influence on ESG implementation can be realized in real terms.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with the type of explanatory research through a cross-sectional survey design, which is data collection carried out at a certain point in time to test the relationship between variables. The research population is a private company operating in Central Tapanuli Regency totaling 150 people, with inclusion criteria: having been operating for at least three years, having a formal management structure, and having potential respondents at the level of leaders, managers, or supervisors. The sample extraction technique used is purposive sampling. The data collection technique uses a *Likert* scale questionnaire instrument that has been tested for validity and reliability before being used for hypothesis testing. The data analysis techniques used include validity test, reliability test, normality test (Kolmogorov-Smirnov), Pearson correlation analysis, simple linear regression analysis, determination coefficient test (R Square), and hypothesis test (t test) with the help of SPSS software.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 Validity Test Results

Table 4.1 Validity Test Results

	<i>Corrected Item-Total Correlation</i>	r table	Validitas
VAR00001	,384	0,300	Valid
VAR00002	,469	0,300	Valid
VAR00003	,430	0,300	Valid
VAR00004	,439	0,300	Valid
VAR00005	,389	0,300	Valid
VAR00006	,578	0,300	Valid
VAR00007	,560	0,300	Valid
VAR00008	,337	0,300	Valid
VAR00009	,477	0,300	Valid
VAR00010	,487	0,300	Valid
VAR00011	,522	0,300	Valid
VAR00012	,371	0,300	Valid
VAR00033	,625	0,300	Valid
VAR00014	,427	0,300	Valid
VAR00015	,581	0,300	Valid

All questions have a *corrected item-total correlation* value greater than r of the table (0.300), so that all instrument items are declared valid and feasible to be used to measure sustainable leadership variables and ESG implementation.

4.2 Reliability Test Results

Table 4.2 Reliability Test Results

Item	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Item	Keterangan
Sustainable Leadership	0,891	15	Reliable
ESG implementation	0,847	15	Reliable

Cronbach's Alpha values for both variables were above 0.8, indicating that the study instrument had an excellent level of reliability and was consistently used under different measurement conditions.

4.3 Hasil Uji Normalitas

Table 4.3 Normality Test Results

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test		
		Unstandardized Residual
N		150
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}	Mean	,0000000
	Std. Deviation	1,43963287
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	,131
	Positive	,131
	Negative	-,109
Test Statistic		,131

Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,147 ^c
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a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.

Asymp value. The sig. of 0.147 is above the probability threshold of 0.05, and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z-value of 0.085 is smaller than the critical Z-value at a significance level of 5% (1.97). Thus, the data of the two research variables are normally distributed and are eligible to proceed to linear regression analysis.

4.4 Correlation Analysis Results

Table 4.4 Results of Pearson Correlation Analysis

Correlations			
		Kepemimpinan Berkelanjutan	Implementasi ESG
Sustainable Leadership	Pearson Correlation	1	,521**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,002
	N	150	150
Implementasi ESG	Pearson Correlation	,521**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,002	
	N	150	150

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results of the correlation analysis showed a coefficient of 0.521 with a significance of 0.002, which indicates a positive and significant relationship between sustainable leadership and ESG implementation. The stronger the sustainable leadership practices that the company's leaders implement, the higher the ESG implementation rate the company achieves.

4.5 Coefficient of Determination

Table 4.5 Output Coefficient Determination

Model Summary ^b				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,521 ^a	,271	,249	1,462
a. Predictors: (Constant), Kepemimpinan Berkelanjutan				
b. Dependent Variable: Implementasi ESG				

The value of the determination coefficient (R Square) of 0.271 indicates that 27.1% of the variation in ESG implementation (bound variable) can be explained by sustainable leadership (independent variable), while the remaining 72.9% is explained by other factors outside the study model, such as organizational culture, regulatory pressures, industry characteristics, or the condition of VUCA itself as contextual variables that have not been statistically tested in this study.

4.6 Simple Linear Regression and Hypothesis Test

Tabel 4.6 Output Koefisien Regresi

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	44,215	7,777		5,685	,000
	Kepemimpinan Berkelanjutan	,394	,144	,521	3,453	,002
a. Dependent Variable: Implementasi ESG						

Based on the calculation results, the regression equation $Y = 44.215 + 0.394X$ was obtained. This equation shows that ESG implementation is influenced by sustainable leadership with a regression coefficient of 0.394, which means that every one-unit increase in sustainable leadership will increase ESG implementation by 0.394. The results of the t-test showed a calculated t-value of 3.453 which was greater than the t-table (2.037) with a significance value of 0.000 which was below the 5% error level. Thus, an alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted: sustainable leadership is proven to have a significant effect on the implementation of ESG in private companies in Central Tapanuli Regency, so that H1 in this study is supported by empirical data.

V. CONCLUSION

The above findings reinforce the argument that sustainable leadership is an important foundation that directs private companies in Central Tapanuli to be able to survive and contribute positively in the midst of VUCA challenges. Since the ideal leadership characteristics for the VUCA context are not yet fully standardized, the concept of responsible leadership offered by Sarkar (2016) seems relevant to explain the leadership patterns that emerge in the field: leaders who put the interests of stakeholders on par with, and sometimes above the short-term interests of the organization. In Central Tapanuli Regency, sustainable leadership practices are seen in the efforts of corporate leaders to balance the exploitation of natural resources, for example in the fisheries, forestry, and mining sectors with environmental conservation, empowerment of local communities (especially fishermen and farmers), and maintain integrity and transparency in business decision-making. This pattern is in line with Hsu's (2026) findings that ESG institutionalization in mid-sized companies in emerging markets is highly dependent on transformational leadership initiatives, despite relatively weak formal regulatory pressures and limited organizational resources.

Nevertheless, the relationship between sustainable leadership and ESG implementation does not take place in a vacuum. The challenges of VUCA also affect the effectiveness of these relationships: high levels of volatility and uncertainty have the potential to shift the company's

focus to short-term goals, thereby hindering the consistency of environmental, social, and governance policies. On the other hand, the same conditions of VUCA can also strengthen the relevance of sustainable leadership, as leaders with a long-term vision, ethical orientation, and adaptive capacity are increasingly needed to keep ESG principles integrated in strategic decision-making. With a proportion of influence of 27.1% as shown by the regression results, it can be interpreted that sustainable leadership is one of the important determinants, but it is not the only factor that determines the success of ESG implementation, but there are still many major influencing factors at 72.9%, most likely explained by the interaction between VUCA pressures, institutional capacity, and local socio-culture that will be considered in the study Next.

Responsible leadership, as offered by Sarkar (2016) as one of the organizational leadership models relevant to the challenges of VUCA which centers on the reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers, teams, organizations, and society at large (Doh & Quigley, 2014). Leaders who apply a servant leadership approach prioritize the interests of subordinates over their personal interests, thus creating an empowering work experience. Authentic responsible leadership not only prevents dishonest practices within the organization, but also fosters learning agility, flexibility, and participation, as leaders actively listen and integrate diverse perspectives in decision-making. The important lesson is clear: the ethical integrity of leaders is one of the determinants of the long-term success of the organization. Through the implementation of locally relevant ESG indicators, companies can prove their commitment to environmental sustainability, community empowerment, and transparent and accountable governance. The contemporary business environment marked by VUCA conditions creates a high level of uncertainty and change dynamics for organizations, thus increasing the pressure in the managerial decision-making process: leaders are faced with rapid change, limited information, and increasingly complex cause-and-effect relationships. In such conditions, the capacity to adapt and leadership resilience are the key to maintaining the sustainability of the organization's strategy, including its sustainability strategy.

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