Transforming Human Resource Management for Common Good Agenda: An Outside-in Approach

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Abstract

Purpose: The main purpose of this paper is to delineate the concept and challenges of sustainable human resource management (sustainable HRM) to manage people from an outside-in approach.

Methodology/Design: This paper is a very conceptual type and presents the views of authors drawn from the scholarly contributions of human-side enterprises in the context of business as usual, corporate social responsibility, triple bottom line, and sustainable development goals (SDGs-2030).

Findings: Since concepts and perspectives of sustainable HRM are emerging, there are challenges to designing and implementing it from an outside-in approach. Traditional organizational structure, inadequate reward, role conflict, ambiguity, and support from management and shareholders are some of the challenges. However, since sustainable HRM is an ethical responsibility to the survival and longevity of businesses/organizations through promoting environmental, economic, and social advantages in the long run, stakeholders could be interested and benefit from it.

Research limitations/Implications: Adequate scientific inquiry is required in the future to comprehend sustainable HRM concepts, practices, challenges, and outcomes in relation to SDGs to promote the common good.

Practice implications: Since Nepal has ratified the SDGs and incorporated these goals into the national development plan, it is the responsibility of private, public, and higher education institutions to act in accelerating the SDG movement to cope with economic, environmental, and social challenges at the organizational level through transforming HRM purposes.

Originality/value: This study highlights the need for a paradigm shift in management practices by framing HRM transformation within the "Common Good Agenda" and positioning HRM as a force for positive social change through an outside-in approach. Such an approach would be especially relevant in light of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs and sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Keywords: : Sustainable human resource management, Sustainable development goals, Sustainability, Common good human resource management, Inside-out approach, Outside-in approach

Introduction

A number of human resource management (HRM) theories and practices have been scholarly debated and emerged since the 1970s. They are widely focused on recruitment, development, utilization, and compensation of human resources to achieve organizational performance (Adhikari et al., 2024). Researchers debated on the soft (Harvard model of HRM by Beer et al., 1984) and hard approach (Michigan model of HRM by Fombrun et al., 1984). Whereas the soft approach of HRM focuses on motivation, communication, team dynamics, and leadership, the hard approach is related to integrating organizational strategy with the HRM strategy and actions. Footing on these conceptual developments of HRM in the last three decades, HR scholars have desperately argued on HR-performance issues and attempted to establish relations between HR practices and organizational efficiency and effectiveness (Becker & Gerhardt, 1996; Guest, 1997; Ulrich, 1997; Kaplan & Nortan, 1992). Although these developments recognize the influence of employment policies on behaviors, productivity, and other employee outcomes, the value of these outcomes was reflected in their contribution to organizational performance (profit and return on investment), rather than any value accruing to the employees and society (Kramar et al., 2013). Simply to say, the mainstream HRM approaches are more inward-looking and could not do justice to the social problems inside and outside of the organization. Distinctly, two types of problems have been seen inside and outside an organization. Inside the organization, people are working under stress, their work-life is an imbalance, suffering from health and sanitation problems, and they are underutilized. Outside the organization, competition is rising resulting in a lessening volume of profits. In the name of increased competition environmental problems such as deforestation, pollution, extreme weather situations, and pandemics have been increasing. In many countries, the problems of unemployment and underemployment, poverty, and public health situation is severe. There is also pressure on organizations from the government and international agencies to act responsibly and to play a role in minimizing the impact of their decisions on ecological imbalances. Thus, realizing the problems with the traditional approach of HR focusing on an inside-out approach, a more outside-in approach HRM emerged as a new concept to resolve economic, social, and environmental issues through managing people in organizations. In this paper, the authors present the concept, perspective, and role of sustainable human resource management (sustainable HRM) to contribute to the global agenda of sustainable development (SDGs).

Concepts and types of sustainable HRM: review of literature
Concept of sustainable HRM

The synonymous of the term 'sustainability' is 'permanence', 'continuity', 'survival', 'stability', 'continuation', 'preservation', 'longevity', and 'consistency' (https://www.macmillanthesaurus.com/sustainability). The Oxford English Dictionary defines sustainability as "the degree to which a process or enterprise can be maintained or continued while avoiding the long-term depletion of natural resources" (https://www.oxfordcollegeofprocurementandsupply.com/how-sustainable-is-sustainability/). The literal definition of sustainability indicates continuity, survival, stability, longevity, and preservation of natural resources. As we frequently hear industrial development brought unprecedented economic growth over the centuries, while also resulting in huge costs to our environment and society. Maximum consumption of coal and other non-renewable resources caused the greenhouse effect that ultimately contributed to climate

change that we have been facing these days and will cause more harm to our future generation.

There has been growing fear that if economic development continues to affect heating the earth, may challenge the existence of our future generation. Realizing this situation, the United Nation's World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also called the 'Brundtland Commission' broadly define sustainable development' as "a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, cited in Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023). According to this definition, sustainable development is concerned with advancing societal and economic development without endangering natural living conditions and requires simultaneous realization of sustainability at the economic, ecological, and social levels (WCED, 1987). Finally, the concept of sustainable HRM emerged from the broader perspective of sustainable development, as a 'means' to achieve corporate sustainability and as an 'end' to design HRM systems and processes (Taylor et al., 2012).

From the viewpoint of business sustainability, the concept of sustainable HRM is at a developmental stage and fairly new perspective (Ehnert & Harry, 2012), an innovative approach in the field of management studies (Macke & Genari, 2018), that still needs in-depth research in concepts and practices (De Prins et al., 2014). According to Kramar (2014), sustainable HRM will continue to develop as a concept in the future. In the beginning, its concepts broaden from the contributions of Elkington (1997), Zaugg et al. (2001), Docherty et al., (2002), Kramar (2014), Kira (2002), Ehnert (2009), Mariappanadar (2003), and Wilkinson et al. (2001) to justify the new role of HRM to work for environmental issues together with social and economic issues of the organization. The understanding of the business inside-in and business outside-in approach (Wright et al., 2003) does contribute to explaining the new perspective of HRM. Wright et al. (2003) express succinctly that taking a business inside-out approach means that HR functions are more inward-looking thus at the time of business briefing only those issues are highlighted that are related to people inside the organization. Alternatively, Wright et al. (2003) argue that taking an outside-in approach HR issues are discussed during business briefings thus HR strategy and activities can deliver in all areas of business rather than just related to HR. Taking reference from these scholarly contributions, several researches have been conducted to develop the theory of sustainable development over the last two decades.

Elkington (1997) founded the 'triple bottom line' approach applying the WCED sustainability concept to business sustainability. He advocates that the long-run corporate success does not depend on financial performance and corporate sustainability (the bottom lines), it largely depends on the long-term integration of corporate goals with people, planet, and profit in the corporate goals (the triple bottom line). According to Ehnert (2009, p. 74): "Sustainable HRM is the pattern of planned or emerging human resource strategies and practices intended to enable an organizational goal achievement while simultaneously reproducing the human resource base over a long-lasting calendar time and controlling for self-induced side and feedback effect on the HR systems on the HR base and thus on the company itself". This definition stipulates reproduction, and regeneration of HR base for long-run business success.

Kramar (2014) defines Sustainable HRM as "a new approach to managing people, by identifying broader purposes for HRM (e.g. the triple bottom line principles), through its recognition of the complexities of workplace dynamics and the explicit recognition of the need to avoid negative impacts of HRM practices." He also comprehends the ideas of minimizing the adverse effects on the environment, people, and communities, and recognizes the vital role that HRM professionals, middle and line managers, CEOs, and employees play in this regard. De Lange and Koppens (2007) highlight the following characteristics of sustainable HRM:

a) It targets the development of human capital.
b) It challenges the profit-making motive as the primary challenge of the business and is concerned with the long-term survival of the organization through HRM processes and outcomes.
c) Regarding the differences from mainstream HRM, sustainable HRM reiterates focus on internal stakeholders' respect, is an outside-in approach, and follows a longer-term approach both in terms of economic and societal sustainability and with regard to individual employability.

Elaborating the sustainability concept of Müller-Christ and Hülsmann (2003), and Ehnert (2009) provides three different sustainability HRM contexts to understand the meaning of sustainable HRM:

a) The 'normative' (or social responsibility-oriented): Based on Brundtland Commission report the normative meaning of sustainability mainly focuses on employee wellbeing, community prosperity, quality of work-life, corporate social responsibility, a moral, ethical value-building activities. To apply this approach, organizations have to treat employees in a socially responsible way to enhance employees' well-being and reduce the impact of work on employees' livelihood.
b) The 'efficiency-oriented' (or 'innovation-oriented') meaning of sustainability focuses on the application of the economic principle to minimize the impact of business activities on natural or social resources or look for innovative ways of using resources optimally. The implication for HR is to minimize the negative impact of using resources and working innovatively.
c) The 'substance-oriented' meaning of sustainability advocates for achieving a long-term balance of resource consumption and resource reproduction by applying economic principles. It is directed toward responsible consumption and reproduction of HR for future organizational viability.

The business-as-usual typology refers to the economic view of the firm and assumes that business organizations seek to increase profit and shareholders' value by acquiring cheap and low-cost resources, applying efficient processes, and creating a strong market position. This typology has economic concerns, focuses on creating value for shareholders, and is an inside-outside organizational perspective. Business sustainability 1.0 assumes extra business challenges occur from the external environment with the exchange of relationships with the market. In this situation, business houses have to consider the voices of NGOs, media, and legislation without compromising business objectives to maximize shareholders' value and minimize social and economic risks. Business sustainability 2.0 typology is concerned with addressing the triple-bottom-line approach and focuses on maximizing the stakeholder and environmental values. In this perspective, the business sustainability approach remains inside-out. To address the triple bottom line approach, this typology of business sustainability follows inside-out

perspectives demonstrating how business is contributing to addressing sustainability issues. Finally, business sustainability 3.0 refers to a truly sustainable business pursuing sustainable issues in society and ensuring sustainable use of resources, competencies, and experience to address the social, environmental, and economic challenges that societies are confronting. These challenges are mainly related to hunger, poverty, corruption, pandemics, youth unemployment, migration, extreme weather, financial instability, and so forth. Much like a social business, this is an outside-in perspective of business sustainability (Adhikari, 2022). Dyllick and Muff (2016) suggest that the business sustainability approach needs to be transformed to achieve SDGs in support of achieving a common good agenda.

Contrary to the mainstream HRM, the bottom line of sustainable HRM performance outcomes is measured in terms of long-term business sustainability maintaining a balance of three goals- environmental, social, and economic. Extending the approach of Ehnert (2009), Kramar (2014) highlights four major outcomes such as organizational, social, individual, and ecological outcomes.

a) **Organizational outcomes:** Better quality of the employment relationship, health, overall well-being of the workforce, and increased productivity.
b) **Social outcomes:** Improved quality of employee relationships at work, and increased recognition and better choice for employment in society among a range of potential sources of workforce.
c) **Individual outcomes:** Increased job satisfaction and motivation to work, balanced quality of work-life, and lower stress at work, absenteeism, and turnover intention.
d) **Ecological outcomes:** Promote the use of recycled resources such as solar energy, paper, water, green products, and services production and minimize the cost of travel.

In sum, sustainable HRM:
- is still emerging in the field of business studies;
- concerns with the survival, continuity, and longevity of the organization;
- contributes to corporate/business sustainability;
- delivers to the use and reuse of human resources;
- recruits, selects, trains, and compensates employees for broader purposes-environment, economic and social;
- contributes to develop human capital base;
- follows outside-in approach where concerns are for environment and social wellbeing (externality);
- works ethically and responsibly for the well-being of employees, to add profit in capital, and to minimize negative externalities of doing business that cost high to those who are not related to business directly.
- promote innovation through increased efficiency; and
- plays role to maintain a balance between resource consumption and reproduction.

Types of sustainable HRM
Mirrored on the business sustainability perspective prescribed by Dyllick and Muff (2016), sustainable HRM is grouped into four types (Aust (Ehnert) et al., 2020):

a) **Socially responsible HRM:** Soft HRM aspects including socially responsible selection, development, utilization, and firing practices reflected in this kind of HRM. In addition to employees, responsible human resource management also takes into account those who work in the areas where a company works. This kind is a reflection of the business-as-usual typology.

b) **Green HRM:** The primary goal of this kind of HRM is to improve the company's environmental credentials by encouraging employees to act ethically toward environmental issues and managing them to raise their ecological awareness. Employing individuals with green attitudes and placing them in green jobs, training staff to shape their green behavior, and paying staff according to green performance results are some of the ways the organization supports these initiatives. This type of HRM perspective is called inside-out.

c) **Triple bottom line HRM:** Elkington's (1997) triple bottom line approach to sustainable management—people, planet, and profit—is expanded upon in this kind of sustainable HRM. This method assumes that HRM equally prioritizes social, environmental, and economic goals. To put it another way, the triple bottom-line HRM takes into account the impact on ecological environments and ecological goals in addition to employee well-being and/or involvement. The collective contributions to profit, people, and the environment are used to assess HRM's performance.

d) **Common good HRM:** Establishing an ethical, ecologically sound, and socially equitable HRM system is the goal of this kind of HRM. All of the HRM types that were previously addressed primarily focused on an inside-out approach that prioritizes the business's economic goals while taking external social and ecological factors into account. In order to address sustainability issues and advance collective livelihood, the common good HRM takes a longer-term, outside-in strategy. This kind of HRM focuses on big issues like climate change, in-work poverty, exploitative working conditions in supply chains, the absence of a labor voice and democratic workplace processes, and, finally, (youth) unemployment and job insecurity, rather than just operational procedures, regulatory compliance, and profitability. Aust (Ehnert) et al. (2020) describe four HRM common good principles. They are as follows:

- The outside-in principle is used to solve the "big disconnect" between macro-level decline and micro-level growth in areas including youth unemployment, poverty, migration, corruption, and climate change, as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Equal and fair employment practices as a principle for building trustworthy relationships and achieving organizational success.
- Principle of opportunities for participation by all stakeholders and a democratic work environment that supports the customization of local HRM solutions to address complex grand challenges.
- Principle of increased psychological contract to safeguard people's demand for employment through meaningful work, safety and job stability.

Looking at the features and principles of the common good agenda, it is imperative to contextualize sustainable HRM and search for its new purpose to address the grand challenges. Countries are different in terms of economic and social capital development, industrial growth, and political structure. The socio-cultural factors, environmental regulations, and attitudes and behavior of employees are not similar

among countries. Business sustainability does achieve weighing these differences and grand challenges to develop and execute sustainable HRM purposes. As noted earlier, the business sustainability approach needs to be transformed to achieve SDGs in support of achieving a common good agenda (Dyllick and Muff, 2016). Transforming HRM purposes from an outside-in perspective, the business sustainability approach can be transformed and could support achieving a common good agenda.

Transforming HRM for common good agenda

Contributions of socially responsible HRM, green HRM, and triple bottom line HRM are highly appreciated and researched to create values for business sustainability. Type 3 HRM can add value to the common good agenda addressing grand challenges. The common good agenda drawn from SDGs could be the milestone for reforming traditional HRM purposes. The UN agenda for sustainable development was established with the publication of "Our Common Future" by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. It was in September 2015 that the UN General Assembly passed a resolution to ratify the unified 17 goals and 169 targets named SDGs 2030 that came into effect on 1 January 2016 (Adhikari and Shrestha, 2024). The resolution clearly states that "This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity" (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015, p. 1) thus SDGs are the common good agenda to ensure the future of the generations through the:

a) end all kinds of poverty and hunger;
b) protection the planet from degradation;
c) ensuring prosperous and fulfilling lives of human beings through economic, social and technological progress in harmony with nature;
d) fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies free from fear and violence; and
e) implementing these agendas developing global partnership and solidarity primarily focusing on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable.

In addition, the resolution calls for contributions from governments, international organizations, private and public sector organizations, and other non-state actors and individuals to achieve SDGs. The means of implementing the common good agenda are as follows (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015):

a) A revitalized Global Partnership in a spirit of global solidarity, in particular, solidarity with the poorest and with people in vulnerable situations
b) Financial resource mobilization, capacity building, and the beneficial transfer of environmentally friendly technologies to developing countries.
c) Engaging from micro-enterprises to cooperatives to multinationals and civil society organizations and philanthropic organizations in the implementation of the new Agenda.
d) Supporting the poor and vulnerable countries with limited domestic resources through international public finance and international financial agencies to mobilize public resources domestically,
e) Enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets by the signatory countries.
f) Implementation requires strong collaboration between governments and public institutions, academic institutions, charitable organizations, volunteer groups, sub-regional institutions, international institutions, and regional and local authorities.

The above-described resolution and implementation means are common to all signatory countries. The sustainable development movement aware the signatory countries and their institutions to act in the direction of UN resolutions in order to eradicate poverty and hunger, build an inclusive society and institutions, peace and security, capacity building and technology transfer, and mobilization of domestic resources, enactment and adaptation of legislation to implement SDGs in order to ensure our common future. Scholars agree that to achieve SDGs goals common good HRM plays a role in implanting common good values within all areas of HR policy, structure, functions, and procedures (Hoffman & Shipper, 2018, Aust (Ehnert) et al. (2020). Integrating economic, social, and environmental goals, as envisioned in the common good agenda into organizational and HR strategies, HRM can contribute to achieving the organizational objectives from an outside-in perspective. A prior study confirms that HRM could be the core partner to maintain organizational sustainability (Taylor et al., 2012). Particularly, sustainable HRM can contribute to the following grand challenges (Table 1):

Table 1. Sustainable HRM Contributions to achieving grand challenges

Common good agenda/Grand challenges	Transforming HRM in search of sustainability
End poverty and hunger (Goals 1 and 2)	End in-work poverty from the organization caused by low-paid employment; Create employment opportunities for youth; Make provisions for equal pay for equal jobs; Implement an appropriate social protection system.
Health and sanitation (Goals 3 and 6)	Provide a healthy and safe work environment and sanitation facilities at workplace to promote well-being of the employees; Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol at workplaces; Protect employees from injuries; Access to quality essential healthcare services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for employees; Protect employees from illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination; Implement health and safety standards as fixed by government, WHO and ILO.
Access to energy (Goal 7)	Promote the use of clear energy; Upgrade fossil-fuel technology into clean energy technology.
Inclusive and decent work environment (Goals 4 and 8)	Free or subsidized schooling of employees' children, provide a continuous learning environment; Enhance special knowledge and skills of employees required for a job to promote sustainable practices at work; Adopt an inclusive policy in recruitment and selection, promotion, and training and development; Provide the opportunity for human capital development and ensure the quality of work-life and decent work that helps to increase productivity; Provide support in technological upgrading, innovation, and high-value addition; Develop multi-role skills; Create decent employment opportunities; Eradicate child labour employment.

Gender equity (Goal 5)	Maintain gender equality in recruitment, promotion, training and development; Eliminate all forms of violence, discrimination and other harmful practices against women workers, empower women employees at work by providing opportunities in participation, training and development; Ensure effective participation and equal opportunities for women for leadership position and decision making; Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.
Industrialization and innovation (Goal 9)	Support organizations to develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient human capital base; Develop the quality of employees through advancing skills and capacity inclusively to foster innovation in organizations; Encourage employees in innovative training through research and development; Increase access to information and communications technology for all.
Reduce inequalities (Goal 10)	Reduce inequalities while compensating employees within the industry and in comparison to regional countries; Achieve and sustain income growth of the employees specially belonging to the bottom of the pyramid; Empower and promote the social, economic and political (union) inclusion of employees; Develop non-discriminatory policies; Enhance representation and voice of employees.
Sustainable settlements (Goal 11)	Make arrangements for affordable housing, and transportation with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons; Provide safe workspaces, in particular for women and persons with disabilities in organizations.
Sustainable consumption and production (Goal 12)	Aware and train employees for sustainable consumption and production patterns and regeneration in organization; Create an environment to reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse; Share with employees about sustainable practices of organizations and HR sustainable practices to top management report so as to disseminate organizational sustainable practices; Ensure that employees have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature; Monitor sustainable development impact at the organizational level.
Climate change (Goal 13)	Provide training to aware employees about the impact of climate change; Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning; Support top management to adopt effective climate change-related planning and management.

Natural water resources (Goal 14)	Literate employees not to pollute rivers, water ponds, and conserve wetlands.
Ecosystem (Goal 15) Peaceful and inclusive	Aware employees in organization for the protection, restoration and promotion of peripheral ecosystems, forest and biodiversity loss and its impact on livelihood.
society (Goal 16)	Assist to promote harmonious and peaceful relations with trade unions and offer justifiable solutions to the problems at all levels of organization for inclusive institution building; Contribute to moral and ethical values for employees especially to minimize corruption practices.
Partnership development (Goal 17)	Develop a partnership with different institutions at local, national, and international levels.
Source: Elaborated by the Authors	

The above-mentioned challenges and goals are drawn and reshuffled from 17 SDGs by the authors to embed into HRM policies, structure, and functions. Although it is difficult to authenticate, at this point in time, how far HRM can contribute to implementing these goals, they pave the way to reform HRM concepts from an outside-in perspective.

Challenges ahead

Sustainable goals are not only intertwined but are also competing and conflicting. On the one hand, sustainable HRM ensures to promote inclusiveness, end-work poverty, and no discrimination at work, on the other hand, it promotes innovation and agile structure which largely depends on the employment of highly qualified and skilled employees which costs a lot. Continuous investment in social capital building contradicts with economic goals of the business and stakeholders. Notwithstanding the benefits of a triple-bottom-line approach to employees, organization, and environment, Bush (2012) explains the detrimental effect of role conflict and role ambiguity to implement HRM with this perspective for achieving its goals. However, Bush (2018) and Kramar (2014) agree that both scholars and practitioners have to understand the moral stand of sustainable HRM and apply a multidisciplinary approach that needs strong theoretical backup to resolve its complexity and ambiguity and to get feedback between action and outcomes.

Chamsa and García-Blandónb (2019) indicate two major challenges—operational and managerial. The operational challenges include integrating into corporate strategy, changing policies at all levels of the organization, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting. Whereas managerial challenges are getting support from top management, employees' empowerment, continuous training on sustainable HRM-related issues, an efficient system of remuneration, development of sustainable culture,

and building cross-functional teamwork. In those countries where there is a short-term orientation of business for return may be difficult for managers and stockholders to embrace sustainable HRM.

The goals of sustainable HRM are interconnected and overlapped. It creates problems in developing measures and indicators to evaluate goals against the outcomes. The HR department has to develop indicators to evaluate the performance outcomes of sustainable HRM in each goal differently. Once the criteria are developed, has to be informed to all units of the organizations. It is also required to define the role of middle managers, line managers, and employees to implement sustainable HRM. Finally, without a proper reward system and motivational initiatives, it is difficult to ensure the commitment of employees to attain the goal of sustainable HRM.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to delineate the concepts and challenges of sustainable HRM to the readers. We, the authors, put a tiny effort into drawing the attention of scholars to undertake HRM research in the context of SDGs from an outside-in approach for the purpose of transforming HRM in search of sustainability. In this paper, the original contribution of the authors is to find the HRM transformation indicators in the context of SDGs. Many researchers still agree that much work is needed to develop a theory of sustainable HRM. However, scientific elaboration of SDGs to transform the purpose of HRM is imperative to reform the business sustainability concept. To reform the traditional HRM policies, managerial and operational challenges emerge from role conflict and role ambiguity, broader work and skill demands by the jobs, attitude of the top management, and shareholders. However, on ethical, survival, longevity, continuation, and stability grounds, we can gradually transform the HRM purpose. Since Nepal has ratified the SDGs and incorporated these goals into the national development plan, it is the responsibility of private, public, and higher education institutions to act in accelerating the SDG movement to cope with economic, environmental, and social challenges at the organizational level through transforming HRM purposes.

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