

Corporate Ethics, Sustainability, and Stakeholder Engagement in AirAsia's Post-Pandemic Strategic Transformation

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Abstract

This report critically analyses AirAsia's post-pandemic sustainability and recovery strategies, focusing on the integration of environmental, social, and technological initiatives that align with global sustainability goals. AirAsia, a leading Malaysian low-cost airline under Capital A Berhad, has undertaken comprehensive efforts to recover from the COVID-19 crisis while promoting long-term sustainable growth. The analysis explores key initiatives such as the airline's net-zero carbon target by 2050, adoption of fuel-efficient A321neo aircraft, implementation of digital innovations like AI-driven maintenance and facial recognition systems, and community-based programs through the AirAsia Foundation. The study applies stakeholder theory and virtue ethics to evaluate the ethical and social implications of AirAsia's sustainability journey, particularly in areas of employee welfare, environmental stewardship, and economic fairness. Furthermore, the report highlights the significance of AirAsia's collaboration with Airbus and the Malaysian government in advancing Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) production and supporting local businesses through digital platforms. Findings reveal that AirAsia's integration of sustainability and technology has strengthened its operational resilience, stakeholder trust, and alignment with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 9, 12, and 13). However, challenges remain in deepening employee welfare programs and scaling up green innovations. The report concludes that AirAsia's sustainability-driven transformation positions it as a regional leader in ethical, efficient, and responsible aviation.

Keywords

AirAsia, Ethical Governance, Corporate Ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF)

1. Introduction

One of the biggest low-cost airlines in Asia is AirAsia, a Malaysian airline. The airline, which was founded in 1993 and started operating in 1996, has revolutionised air travel by making it accessible and inexpensive for millions of people. AirAsia operates domestic and international air transport, cargo, as well as digital services including fintech and e-commerce through its AirAsia Super App under Capital A Berhad [1].

AirAsia has made efforts by design to weave sustainability into its business practices, particularly with challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic. The airline, in an effort at recovering, rolled out a series of initiatives intended to enhance the operational efficiency of the company, reduce environmental impacts, and advocate for economic and social sustainability. One of the significant initiatives is AirAsia's target to go net-zero carbon by 2050. It is done by a comprehensive decarbonization strategy through fleet replacement, fuel efficiency, and production of sustainable aviation fuels (SAF). AirAsia, in September 2024, inked a memorandum of understanding with Airbus to explore decentralized SAF manufacturing in Southeast Asia and improve air traffic management to reduce CO₂ emissions [2].

AirAsia also gives importance to in-house sustainability activities such as the 3R principle (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle), paper reduction through digitalization, and eco-friendly food packaging in flight. The company encourages customers to participate in decreasing their carbon footprint with activities such as "Your Green Journey with AirAsia [3]" Aside from green initiatives, AirAsia also fosters economic sustainability by enabling small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) through its digital platforms, enabling local businesses to reach farther. AirAsia's sustainability strategy overlaps with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) [4].

In the broader context of global aviation, AirAsia's transition underscores a growing realization that sustainability and corporate ethics are not merely public relations tools but essential components of long-term survival. Airlines that fail to integrate these principles risk regulatory penalties, customer backlash, and reputational loss. On the other hand,

companies like AirAsia-embracing sustainability as part of their corporate DNA-position themselves as resilient, innovative, and future-ready organizations capable of navigating complex challenges in a volatile world.

Ultimately, this study explores how sustainability, ethical governance, and stakeholder engagement contribute to AirAsia's post-COVID transformation. It analyses the interplay between environmental responsibility, technological innovation, and economic resilience within the company's strategic framework. The findings not only illustrate AirAsia's evolving corporate identity but also provide valuable insights for other airlines seeking to balance profitability with sustainability in the rapidly changing aviation sector.

2. Sustainability and Recovery Initiatives

AirAsia's post-pandemic transformation is deeply rooted in its sustainability agenda, which integrates environmental, operational, and social dimensions into the company's long-term growth strategy. As global aviation recovers from the economic shock caused by COVID-19, the airline's ability to couple recovery with sustainable innovation demonstrates a forward-thinking approach that aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and global climate action frameworks. The airline's Operational Eco-Efficiency Program, digital transformation, and community-based sustainability projects represent the cornerstone of this holistic recovery framework.

One of AirAsia's commendable sustainability initiatives is the Operational Eco-Efficiency Program, which aims to reduce fuel consumption and carbon emissions. In 2023 and beyond, AirAsia has implemented over 20 fuel efficiency initiatives, including the 400ft Thrust Reduction Altitude program, which are designed to optimize flight performance. These have successfully avoided 129,469 tonnes of CO₂ emissions which is equivalent of planting over two million trees while generating cost savings of approximately RM187 million [5].

AirAsia has made an investment in modernising its fleet by deploying fuel-efficient A321neo aircraft in an effort to further lessen its environmental effect. 362 new A321neo aircraft have been ordered by the airline, and deliveries are expected to take place between 2024 and 2035. It is anticipated that these new aircraft would drastically reduce carbon emissions and fuel consumption, supporting AirAsia's long-term objective of reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 [6]. This dual benefit of cost reduction and environmental conservation illustrates how eco-efficiency can serve both economic and ecological goals simultaneously. Such efforts align with SDG 13 (Climate Action) and contribute directly to Malaysia's national target of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

It's another major initiative includes AirAsia's digital transformation and contactless innovations, which strive to improve safety for passengers as well as working efficiency. AI chatbots, automated bag-drop, and F.A.C.E.S (Facial Recognition Across Customer Experience Service) biometrics have been incorporated at key airports. These are enhancing customer experiences, and AirAsia's Net Promoter Score has risen to 52 in 2020 from 38 in 2019 [7].

AirAsia is also dedicated to waste reduction and recycling programs to reduce waste generation. In 2023, the airline successfully managed more than 1,000 tonnes of non-hazardous waste, sending 49% to recycling. All these activities are in line with sustainable consumption practices and support responsible resource management [8].

AirAsia Foundation introduced social enterprise grants and community support to aid the economic recovery of ASEAN. The AirAsia Foundation provided RM244,907 worth of grants to social enterprises in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines in 2023. These grants were to be used for projects in poverty alleviation, gender equality, and environmental sustainability, which indicate the social responsibility of AirAsia [8].

Moreover, AirAsia's sustainability and recovery initiatives exemplify the triple bottom line approach, which balances People, Planet, and Profit. The company's operational efficiency directly contributes to financial resilience, its environmental initiatives promote ecological balance, and its community engagement programs strengthen social capital. This integrated model reflects AirAsia's understanding that true sustainability requires a holistic view of business performance that goes beyond financial metrics.

AirAsia's sustainability and recovery initiatives illustrate a transformative shift from reactive crisis management to proactive strategic innovation. Through initiatives such as the Operational Eco-Efficiency Program, fleet modernization, digital transformation, waste reduction, and social empowerment, AirAsia has positioned itself as a leading example of sustainable aviation in Southeast Asia. While challenges remain-particularly in scaling Sustainable Aviation Fuel production and deepening employee engagement-the company's current trajectory indicates strong alignment with global sustainability frameworks and national policy objectives. By embedding sustainability into its recovery strategy, AirAsia not only enhances operational efficiency but also secures its reputation as a responsible, forward-looking, and ethically grounded airline for the post-pandemic era.

3. Stakeholder Impact and Analysis

AirAsia's sustainability efforts have had a meaningful impact on several key stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and government bodies. The airline's sustainability strategy demonstrates how stakeholder-centric thinking can strengthen resilience, rebuild trust, and create long-term value. By aligning its initiatives with stakeholder theory, AirAsia not only addresses environmental and social concerns but also reinforces its corporate reputation and operational stability in the post-pandemic era. For employees, the company's push toward digital transformation and environmentally friendly practices creates opportunities for personal growth and skill development. Through regular

training and workshops, AirAsia not only raises awareness about sustainability goals but also actively involves its staff in making those goals a reality. This reflects stakeholder theory, which emphasizes that looking after internal stakeholders like employees can lead to greater commitment and better performance [9].

On the customer side, more people today care about the environment and expect companies to do their part. AirAsia has responded by working to lower its carbon emissions and exploring the use of sustainable aviation fuels. These actions help strengthen customer trust and loyalty. By sharing updates through sustainability reports and public campaigns, the company shows that it listens to and values its customers, another core idea in stakeholder theory. These actions not only boost customer loyalty but also strengthen AirAsia's brand equity as a responsible carrier. By demonstrating transparency and environmental accountability through sustainability reports and public engagement, the airline aligns with stakeholder theory's principle of responsiveness-listening to and addressing stakeholder expectations. As a result, customers perceive AirAsia as a socially responsible and innovative airline that delivers both affordability and environmental stewardship.

For investors, sustainability is increasingly linked to financial performance and risk mitigation. AirAsia's adherence to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards makes it a more credible and attractive option for long-term investors. The company's public disclosure of its decarbonization targets, fleet renewal strategies, and social responsibility programs demonstrates accountability and commitment to transparency. AirAsia's commitment to ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) standards makes it a more attractive and trustworthy option. The company publishes detailed updates on its sustainability progress, which gives investors the transparency they need to make informed choices. This aligns with stakeholder theory too, as it highlights the importance of being accountable to those who financially support the business [9].

Lastly, government agencies play a key role in shaping AirAsia's approach to sustainability. The company works closely with regulators to stay compliant with environmental laws and takes part in broader initiatives to reduce the aviation sector's impact on the planet. This shows that AirAsia understands the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the authorities, which helps secure its long-term license to operate [9]. By maintaining open communication with regulatory bodies and aligning its practices with government sustainability frameworks, AirAsia reinforces its social license to operate. This cooperative approach enhances regulatory trust, mitigates reputational risks, and ensures that the airline remains a key player in shaping the region's sustainable aviation landscape.

4. Sustainability and Technological Integration

AirAsia has strategically integrated technology to support its sustainability objectives in keeping with post-pandemic recovery efforts. The leveraging of technology in AirAsia has digitized its operations which could reduce environmental effects and increase efficiency. The airline in order to reduce in-person interactions and paper use have implemented contactless technology like facial recognition for boarding and electronic payment systems [10]. AirAsia also used AI-driven predictive maintenance, which allows for real-time aircraft performance monitoring to minimise carbon emissions and maximise fuel efficiency [11].

In order to reduce its carbon footprint, AirAsia explored and collaborated with Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF). AirAsia and Airbus agreed on a Memorandum of Understanding between their sustainability divisions to investigate decentralised production of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) in Southeast Asia using alternative feedstock and technologies [12]. Additionally, the airline used advanced flight planning software to optimize routes and reduce emissions and fuel waste. AirAsia's sustainability approach heavily relies on AI and big data analytics [11]. The airline guarantees that flights run as efficiently as possible while reducing needless fuel usage by employing data-driven route optimisation. Dynamic pricing models driven by AI improve load factors even more while cutting down on operational inefficiencies and energy waste.

AirAsia's logistics division which is called Teleport has incorporated AI-powered logistics management technologies to improve efficiency and expedite freight deliveries [13]. AirAsia's digital tracking technology successfully improves their supply chain as it minimises delays, uses less consumption of fuel during transit and improves information accuracy. For example, AirAsia uses Iot (Internet of Things) to enable their customers to track their shipments on time as well as cut carbon footprint [14]. AirAsia supports a more sustainable and effective supply chain by digitising its e-commerce and logistics services which is consistent with its larger environmental objectives.

Furthermore, there are numerous Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are directly aligned with these technology developments. Firstly, AirAsia's make investments in digital platforms and aircraft technology to encourage sustainable business practices and advancing infrastructure development are aligned with SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). Secondly, AirAsia is committed to reducing waste and its carbon footprint by using paperless transactions and e-payment systems, as well as providing environmentally friendly in-flight services which support SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). Thirdly, AirAsia is actively reducing its environmental impact by implementing AI-driven carbon footprint tracking and its exploration of low-emission aircraft technology further supports SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Looking ahead, AirAsia has a great deal of opportunity to use technology to bolster its environmental initiatives. Automation in operations and logistics powered by AI has the potential to reduce waste and increase fuel efficiency.

Blockchain technology could ensure accountability in emission reduction efforts and provide transparency in carbon offset programs. A more sustainable supply chain may result from developments in drone delivery systems and green logistics projects. AirAsia can strengthen its dedication to sustainability and promote long-term growth and resilience in the post-pandemic era by consistently utilising technical advancements.

5. Business - Government Collaboration

Collaborations between businesses and governments play a vital role in promoting sustainability, economic growth, and social recovery, especially in the post-pandemic era. AirAsia, as one of Malaysia's leading low-cost carriers, has demonstrated a strong commitment to aligning its corporate strategies with national policies and regional sustainability frameworks. By forming partnerships with both governmental agencies and international industry players, AirAsia leverages collective expertise and resources to advance its environmental, social, and economic sustainability goals.

In 2019, AirAsia collaborated with the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs to support the "Buy Malaysia Product" initiative by the government. The campaign aims to let more people gain more insight about the quality of Malaysia-made products and promote the country's economy. In order to promote this campaign, AirAsia was actively seeking the local supplier and products to make it available on its inflight and cafe menu. It also provides more than 550 local businesses with the opportunity to list their products for free on travel platform airasia.com and e-commerce platforms OURSHOP and ROKKI [15].

Additionally, AirAsia announced to collaborate long-term with Airbus in the past year of 2024. Together, they are driving research into aviation sustainability in the ASEAN region, with a focus on developing alternative feedstocks and technologies for decentralized production of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF). The collaboration not only focuses on leveraging AirAsia's fuel efficiency, but also requires Airbus' expertise in the aviation sector to improve advanced measures in air traffic management [16].

The collaboration between MDTCA and Malaysian Trade are aligned with the sustainable development goals of AirAsia. This will not only promote the development of local businesses, but also reduce the carbon footprint of imported goods. By integrating more Malaysian products into AirAsia's services, it can effectively help promote local businesses and enhance economic and social responsibility. This initiative can also stimulate domestic consumption, provide wider market access for different companies, help the economic revitalization of the people, and contribute to the post-epidemic recovery.

At the same time, AirAsia and Airbus continue to address environmental sustainability issues, focusing primarily on the development and adoption of SAF, which can significantly reduce carbon emissions in the aviation industry. Improved air traffic management can also better improve operational efficiency, thereby reducing fuel consumption and emissions. These ongoing efforts have been driving AirAsia's goal of achieving net zero emissions by 2050, and the company has become a leader in sustainable aviation practices. After the recovery from the epidemic, it can effectively save costs and improve operational efficiency, making AirAsia more competitive in the changing landscape.

The combined impact of AirAsia's collaborations with government bodies and international partners extends far beyond corporate sustainability. These initiatives have generated a multiplier effect across the Malaysian economy and the broader ASEAN region. Economically, AirAsia's partnerships stimulate domestic consumption, expand market access for SMEs, and enhance supply chain resilience. By promoting local products and reducing reliance on imported goods, the airline supports Malaysia's vision of becoming a self-sufficient and innovation-driven economy. Socially, the "Buy Malaysia Product" initiative contributes to community empowerment and inclusive growth by enabling rural entrepreneurs, artisans, and small manufacturers to participate in the global marketplace. This inclusivity helps narrow socioeconomic disparities and fosters greater national unity through shared economic prosperity. Environmentally, collaborations with Airbus and local suppliers collectively reduce AirAsia's carbon footprint, fuel consumption, and waste generation. The introduction of SAF and improved operational efficiency through digital and technical collaboration not only positions AirAsia as a regional leader in sustainable aviation but also sets a benchmark for other low-cost carriers pursuing similar climate goals.

6. Ethical Implications

AirAsia's sustainability initiatives in the post-pandemic era have had significant ethical implications, particularly in the areas of social justice, economic fairness, and environmental stewardship. Evaluating these efforts through the lens of virtue ethics helps determine how the company has responsibly navigated its sustainability commitments while aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Virtue ethics emphasizes the moral character of an organization and its decision-makers rather than focusing solely on the outcomes of actions or adherence to rules. From this perspective, AirAsia's actions can be interpreted as reflections of virtues such as compassion, integrity, justice, and responsibility—essential qualities of an ethically grounded organization.

AirAsia has demonstrated a strong commitment to social justice, particularly in ensuring employee welfare following the disruptions caused by the pandemic. The airline faced significant layoffs, but in response, it introduced several upskilling programs to help displaced employees transition into new career paths. For example, the AirAsia Academy provided digital training programs, equipping former staff with skills to secure employment in the technology and e-commerce sectors. Air Asia academy celebrated the outstanding achievements of its Class of 2022 graduates who

overcame adversity and successfully reskilled themselves with new marketable skills for the digital economy in a competitive technology-centric job market. From a virtue ethics perspective, these efforts reflect values of compassion and responsibility [17]. By prioritizing the development and well-being of its employees, AirAsia has exhibited the moral character necessary for ethical corporate behavior. However, some critics argue that AirAsia could have taken more proactive measures to prevent mass layoffs or provided greater financial assistance to employees, raising concerns about whether it fully upheld virtues such as fairness and care.

Economic fairness is another key consideration in AirAsia's economic fairness. The company has actively supported local businesses, particularly through initiatives like OurFarm, which connects farmers directly with consumers and businesses. By eliminating middlemen, AirAsia has helped farmers receive fairer prices for their produce, thereby contributing to a more equitable supply chain. From a virtue ethics perspective, this demonstrates integrity and a commitment to fairness, as it prioritizes ethical business relationships and supports vulnerable communities. However, AirAsia's expansion into non-aviation sectors, such as ride-hailing and food delivery, has raised concerns about market competition. Some argue that ethical leadership requires businesses to avoid actions that could disadvantage smaller competitors, questioning whether AirAsia's aggressive expansion aligns with virtues of humility and justice [18].

Environmental stewardship is another major aspect of AirAsia's environmental stewardship. The company has implemented various initiatives to reduce its carbon footprint, such as fleet modernization, improved fuel efficiency, and digitalisation efforts to minimize paper usage. These actions contribute to SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). From a virtue ethics standpoint, AirAsia's commitment to sustainability aligns with the virtues of responsibility and foresight, as it takes proactive steps to minimize its environmental impact. However, critics highlight that the airline industry remains a major contributor to carbon emissions, and while AirAsia's initiatives are commendable, they may not go far enough in addressing the root causes of aviation-related environmental issues. True virtue would require an even stronger commitment to innovative solutions for carbon reduction [19]. Nonetheless, aviation remains a high-emission industry. While AirAsia's adoption of green technologies represents progress, critics contend that such actions may not be sufficient to offset the broader environmental impact of air travel. From a virtue ethics viewpoint, true environmental virtue would require even deeper innovation—such as investment in carbon-neutral aviation technologies, transparent reporting of carbon offset initiatives, and stakeholder collaboration to drive systemic change. AirAsia's commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 is ethically commendable, but sustained progress will depend on whether these promises translate into measurable, transparent, and equitable actions across all operational levels.

In conclusion, AirAsia's sustainability initiatives can be largely viewed as ethically sound when examined through the lens of virtue ethics. The company has demonstrated virtues such as compassion, integrity, and responsibility in its efforts to support employees, promote economic fairness, and reduce environmental impact. However, questions remain regarding whether it has fully embraced virtues such as justice and humility, particularly in its competitive expansion and long-term environmental strategies. Moving forward, AirAsia can strengthen its ethical standing by further embedding virtuous practices into its business model, ensuring that its sustainability efforts not only align with economic and operational goals but also reflect a genuine commitment to ethical corporate responsibility.

7. Conclusion

In summary, integrating sustainability into business practices is critical to long-term success, as it enhances a company's resilience, improves its reputation and builds lasting trust with stakeholders. In AirAsia's case, integrating sustainability into its operations has enabled the company to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic while addressing environmental, social and economic issues. Sustainable practices such as adopting fuel-efficient aircraft, investing in digital transformation, supporting local businesses, and engaging in community development have not only reduced operating costs and environmental impacts, but also aligned with customer values and investor expectations. By aligning its goals with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), AirAsia ensures that its growth contributes positively to broader social and environmental outcomes, fostering stakeholder loyalty and long-term viability.

To further enhance its sustainability journey and secure future success, AirAsia could deepen its involvement in the development of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF). Collaborating with local governments, academic institutions, and green energy providers to build decentralized SAF production facilities in Southeast Asia would not only support regional innovation but also reduce long-term fuel dependency and emissions. Another valuable step would be introducing a blockchain-based carbon offset tracking system. This would allow passengers to transparently view the environmental impact of their carbon offset contributions, encouraging greater customer participation in sustainability efforts while reinforcing trust in the company's green initiatives.

Therefore, it is advisable that AirAsia should strengthen employee welfare and community resilience by offering long-term retraining pathways, mental health support, and partnering with educational institutions for sustainability-focused internships. The company can also support regional economic development through a community innovation fund for green startups. In logistics, AirAsia's Teleport division should adopt electric or drone-based delivery options, enforce eco-friendly packaging guidelines, and incentivize green-certified suppliers to reduce environmental impacts across the supply chain. To advance circular economy practices, AirAsia could introduce a "Zero Waste Cabin" initiative that

replaces single-use plastics with compostable or reusable alternatives and implement closed-loop recycling for inflight packaging and materials. Upcycling old uniforms or aircraft materials into new merchandise can also demonstrate creative reuse.

Overall, it would be beneficial if AirAsia enhanced its stakeholder engagement by establishing an independent ESG advisory council composed of experts and regularly hosting dialogues with customers, investors, NGOs, and regulators to ensure its sustainability strategy remains inclusive and forward-looking. These practical steps will not only help AirAsia achieve its net-zero goals but also position it as a regional leader in sustainable and ethical aviation. By embracing these practical forward-thinking strategies, AirAsia can not only enhance its current sustainability efforts but also shape a more resilient, innovative, and ethically grounded future.

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