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STIGMA AVOIDANCE AND ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY: INDONESIA'S RESPONSE TO THE EU RED II ON PALM OIL

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ABSTRACT

The European Union's Renewable Energy Directive II (EU RED II) excluded palm oil as a sustainable feedstock, indirectly stigmatizing Indonesia as a driver of deforestation. This study analyzes Indonesia's response through the lens of stigma politics and ontological security. Unlike previous research that focused on material-economic impacts, this article highlights identity preservation and stigma avoidance. Using a qualitative case study and interpretive analysis of policy documents, official statements, and media coverage, the study finds that Indonesia's strategy reflects stigma avoidance: accepting global sustainability norms while rejecting the negative label. This is demonstrated by its World Trade Organization (WTO) lawsuit against the EU, promotion of the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) certification, and cooperation with fellow producers through the Council of Palm Oil Producing Countries (CPOPC). The study contributes by conceptualizing stigma avoidance as a narrative-based diplomatic practice through which Indonesia safeguards both material interests and ontological security.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamics of global environmental politics, developing countries are often placed in problematic positions, particularly within narratives concerning sustainability. This is evident in the European Union's Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II), formulated in 2018. RED II explicitly excluded palm oil from the list of sustainable feedstocks for renewable energy, citing the high risk of indirect land use change (ILUC) deemed to be closely associated with deforestation and environmental degradation [1]. This policy not only had repercussions for Indonesia's trade and economic interests as one of the world's largest palm oil producers [2], but also generated symbolic pressures that stigmatized Indonesia's image on the international stage.

This stigmatization stemmed from the constructed perception that Indonesian palm oil products are inherently linked to environmental exploitation, forest fires, and land grabbing. Yet Indonesia has demonstrated its commitment to the Paris Agreement and has developed domestic sustainability standards through the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) scheme [3]. Nonetheless, RED II disregards local socio-ecological contexts as well as the normative efforts of producing countries to reform the palm oil industry. Consequently, Indonesia faces a dilemma: on the one hand, it seeks to support global environmental norms, but on the other hand, it must resist interpretations that discredit its national identity. As a stigmatized party, Indonesia is by no

means a passive agent that simply accepts the negative label imposed by the stigmatizers [4]. To respond to the stigma embedded in the EU's RED II, Indonesia has several strategic options for stigma management: acceptance, rejection, avoidance, and counter-stigmatization [5].

In the context of RED II, Indonesia's responses—ranging from filing a lawsuit at the WTO, pursuing economic diplomacy, to launching narrative campaigns at the global level—can be understood as strategies of stigma avoidance. Conceptually, stigma avoidance refers to a response in which the stigmatized actor accepts the shared norm underpinning stigmatization but rejects the specific stigma attached to it. Previous research on RED II and palm oil conflicts has been extensive, particularly from the perspectives of international trade law [6, 7, 8], environmental sustainability [9], and global governance inequalities [10, 11, 12]. These studies have generally emphasized material dimensions, whether related to economic losses or structural inequities within the world trade system [13]. However, few studies have explicitly employed the framework of ontological security to understand state [14] or non-state actor [15, 16] responses to stigmatization in environmental issues. Yet this perspective offers a deeper lens to explain why and how states seek to preserve their identities when external narratives clash with domestic narratives.

Ontological security theory emphasizes that states do not merely pursue protection from physical or military threats, but also strive to maintain a coherent, stable, and recognizable self-narrative amid global dynamics. The stability of identity becomes an existential necessity, as recognition of a state's existence depends on the perceptions of other actors [17, 18]. Four key components help to explain state efforts to achieve ontological security: material and reflexive capabilities, crisis evaluation, biographical narratives, and co-actor discourse [19]. Based on this framework, this study formulates the central research question: How can the ontological security framework explain Indonesia's stigma avoidance strategy in responding to the European Union's stigmatization through RED II?

This article therefore positions Indonesia's response to the EU's RED II as a crucial case for understanding how developing countries negotiate between external stigmatization and internal identity needs. While existing literature has emphasized economic losses, trade disputes, or governance inequalities, limited attention has been given to the reflexive dimensions of state action in safeguarding ontological security. By examining Indonesia's stigma avoidance strategy, this study highlights how identity preservation, narrative construction, and discursive practices shape diplomatic choices beyond material considerations. In doing so, the article contributes both theoretically—by extending the application of ontological security and stigma politics to global environmental conflicts—and empirically, by offering a nuanced account of Indonesia's palm oil diplomacy. This dual contribution strengthens our understanding of how Global South actors resist asymmetrical narratives while maintaining legitimacy within international environmental governance.

As part of efforts to examine more deeply the dynamics surrounding the EU's RED II policy and its implications for Indonesia, this article is organized systematically. Following this introduction, the next section outlines the research methodology employed to analyze data and support the arguments. The discussion is then divided into four interrelated subsections. First, the formulation of RED II by the European Union is explained as a foundation for understanding the context of this regulation. Second, RED II is presented as a form of EU stigmatization against Indonesia, emphasizing how palm oil has been constructed as a high-risk commodity. Third, the article examines the stigma politics strategies employed by Indonesia in responding to this policy, ranging from legal pathways to economic diplomacy. Fourth, the analysis focuses on the application of these strategies through Brent Steele's theory of ontological security, to demonstrate how identity needs and narrative stability drive state actions. Finally, the article concludes by summarizing the key findings and offering recommendations for future research.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach with a single-case study design, focusing on Indonesia's response to the European Union's Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II). The use of an interpretive qualitative method enables the researcher to explore meanings, identity constructions, and symbolic practices embedded within diplomatic interactions, policy frameworks, and international representations [20]. The interpretive framework is chosen to capture meanings, identity constructions, and symbolic practices embedded in Indonesia's diplomatic responses. Data collection was conducted through a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained from official government statements, policy documents issued by relevant ministries, and Indonesia's submissions to the WTO. Secondary data included international and national media reports, academic journal articles, and NGO publications. To ensure credibility, purposive sampling was applied, prioritizing documents and statements directly related to RED II and palm oil diplomacy. The analytical process followed a thematic coding strategy, identifying patterns that correspond to the four components of ontological security—reflexive capability, crisis interpretation, biographical narrative, and co-actor

discourse—while also categorizing Indonesia's stigma management strategies. This methodological design allows for a systematic examination of how Indonesia negotiates external stigmatization while safeguarding its ontological security.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The discussion in this paper is directed toward understanding the dynamics of the European Union's Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II) and its implications for Indonesia, particularly within the framework of stigma politics and ontological security. RED II is not merely an energy regulation oriented toward sustainability, but also a discursive arena that shapes Indonesia's image and position on the international stage. By labeling palm oil as a high-risk commodity for deforestation, the European Union indirectly stigmatizes Indonesia as an environmentally destructive actor, despite the country's commitment to global agendas through the ratification of the Paris Agreement and the implementation of domestic sustainability policies. This condition has generated layered responses from Indonesia, ranging from legal action to economic diplomacy, all of which can be understood as strategies of stigma management. Accordingly, this section is structured in four stages: first, the formulation of RED II by the European Union; second, RED II as a manifestation of stigmatization; third, Indonesia's stigma politics strategies; and fourth, the application of these strategies through the lens of ontological security theory.

3.1. The Formulation of the European Union's RED II

The transition toward cleaner and more sustainable energy sources has become a primary priority for the European Union in addressing the challenges of climate change. In 2009, the EU adopted the Renewable Energy Directive I (RED I) as a milestone policy to promote the use of renewable energy. RED I was designed to achieve greenhouse gas emission reduction targets and to ensure that by 2020, 20% of the EU's final energy consumption would come from renewable sources, including 10% in the transport sector [21]. This policy reflected a concrete step by the EU in decarbonizing particularly the transport sector, which had long been dependent on fossil fuels.

An important dimension of RED I was the establishment of sustainability criteria for biofuels. The EU emphasized that biofuel production must meet strict standards to avoid causing deforestation, biodiversity loss, or indirect land use change (ILUC). This principle aimed to ensure that the energy transition would not produce negative impacts on global ecosystems. Nonetheless, the policy generated controversy, especially since biofuel production had the potential to trigger land allocation conflicts between energy and food needs [22]. This underscored the dilemma between energy security, food security, and environmental sustainability.

Eurostat data demonstrated a significant increase in the EU's renewable energy share, rising from 10% in 2007 to 18% in 2018. Several member states even exceeded their national targets, such as Sweden with 54.6%, Finland with 41.2%, and Denmark with 36.1% [23]. These achievements reflected the success of certain member states in leveraging renewable energy technologies, yet disparities persisted due to differences in capacity, infrastructure, and national regulations. Moreover, criticism of food-based biofuels grew stronger, highlighting the need for a new, more comprehensive and ambitious policy framework.

In response, the European Union adopted the Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II) in December 2018. This policy raised the ambition for renewable energy to 32% of total consumption by 2030, in line with commitments under the Paris Agreement [24]. RED II also tightened sustainability criteria, requiring a minimum greenhouse gas emission reduction of 65% for transport biofuels and 80% for biomass used in electricity and heating [25]. Emphasis was placed on transitioning toward non-food biofuels, aligning with efforts to reduce dependence on palm oil, which was classified as a high-risk commodity for deforestation.

RED II functions not only as a technical regulation but also as a tool of social transformation. Member states are required to prepare national energy and climate plans involving local community participation and addressing the social impacts of the energy transition. The directive is also expected to stimulate technological innovation, including green hydrogen and transport electrification. However, the designation of palm oil as a high-risk commodity has generated geopolitical tensions, particularly with Indonesia and Malaysia. Critics argue that the EU's approach reflects hidden protectionism and discrimination in trade practices [26].

The main rationale behind RED II is closely tied to the EU's commitment to the Paris Agreement. The IPCC report stresses that human activity accelerates climate change, contributing to heatwaves, floods, and sea-level rise [27]. The EU perceives itself as obliged to lead global mitigation efforts, including the commitment to keeping temperature increases well below 2°C, ideally at 1.5°C. RED II serves as a mechanism for achieving this target through energy sector decarbonization, a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. As such, RED II integrates Paris Agreement objectives, including Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the Enhanced Transparency Framework (ETF), and international cooperation in technology transfer [28].

Beyond environmental factors, the EU's dependence on energy imports also motivated the adoption of RED II. Eurostat recorded that from 2008 to 2018, the EU's energy imports consistently exceeded 50%, even reaching around 60% in 2018 [29]. This dependency created economic vulnerabilities due to global price fluctuations and geopolitical risks, particularly regarding supplies from Russia and North Africa. RED II was thus seen as a mechanism to reduce this dependence by strengthening domestic renewable energy production, even if not its explicit objective.

RED II also emerged from the weaknesses of RED I, which inadequately addressed the negative impacts of food-based biofuels. By introducing stricter sustainability criteria, RED II reaffirmed the EU's commitment to ensuring that the energy transition would not harm ecosystems and local communities. At the same time, it underscored the EU's leadership role on the global stage, with the aspiration of setting an example for other countries to enhance their climate ambitions [30]. Energy diversification—from solar, wind, and hydro to biomass—was considered essential to confronting global market uncertainties and maintaining supply stability.

Pressure from civil society and the private sector further accelerated the adoption of RED II. A 2024 Eurobarometer survey showed that the majority of EU citizens supported renewable energy as a climate solution and desired more affordable energy prices [31]. At the same time, businesses identified major opportunities in clean energy investment, with RED II providing a conducive framework for the growth of green industries. By creating new jobs, enhancing economic competitiveness, and reducing long-term energy costs, RED II contributes to the EU's socio-economic transformation.

Overall, RED II reflects the EU's determination to address the challenges of climate change, reduce dependence on fossil fuels, and lead the global energy transition. The directive is not simply a technocratic instrument, but rather a complex geopolitical, economic, and social strategy. By integrating sustainability, innovation, and global justice, RED II asserts the EU's role as a pioneer in climate action. Nevertheless, the effective implementation of this policy requires inclusive international collaboration to ensure that the energy transition is genuinely sustainable, equitable, and beneficial for the global community.

3.2. RED II as a Form of EU Stigmatization toward Indonesia

The Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II), adopted by the European Union in 2018, was officially intended to accelerate the transition to renewable energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Yet behind this ecological mission, the policy has generated significant controversy, particularly for palm oil–producing countries such as Indonesia. The EU regulation that classifies palm oil as a high-risk feedstock for indirect land use change (ILUC) impacts not only the economic and trade dimensions but also gives rise to a phenomenon of stigmatization. To better understand this dynamic, Bruce Link and Jo Phelan's stigma theory, as well as Adrian Rogstad's elaborations, provide a useful analytical framework. From this perspective, stigma is not merely a label but a mechanism that sustains social hierarchies, reinforces power relations, and places certain actors in subordinate positions [5, 32].

The process of stigmatization can be understood as a sequence of interrelated stages. The first stage is labeling, whereby an actor is assigned a particular label for violating norms or exhibiting negative behavior. This label attaches itself to the actor's identity and becomes the foundation for subsequent social constructions. The next stage is stereotyping, which reinforces negative perceptions through generalizations attached to particular actors or groups. Such stereotypes not only reproduce negative imagery but also shape broader societal perceptions of the stigmatized actor. The third stage is separation, or the creation of a sharp boundary between groups considered "normal" or "good" and those stigmatized. This often manifests in practices of social exclusion, positioning stigmatized actors outside of communities or interactional spaces they once occupied. The final stage is status loss, in which stigmatized actors lose their social standing or legitimacy within the social sphere where they should otherwise be recognized. Thus, stigmatization is not merely symbolic action but a complex social process that marginalizes certain actors and strengthens uneven social hierarchies [5, 32].

In this study's context, the process of labeling is clearly seen in RED II, when the EU labeled palm oil as a commodity with a high risk of deforestation. This "high-risk ILUC" label effectively signals that every producing country, including Indonesia, is synonymous with environmental degradation. As Link and Phelan argue, labeling initiates stigmatization by attaching a negative identity that is difficult to remove [32]. Within RED II, this label not only restricts palm oil's entry into the European market but also constructs a global narrative portraying palm oil as a primary source of climate crisis.

The next stage, stereotyping, reinforces the stigma by simplifying complex realities. The European Commission's 2019 report claimed that approximately 45% of global deforestation caused by vegetable oil expansion was attributable to palm oil plantations [21]. This data was used to legitimize the policy, despite the overlooked fact that palm oil is far more land-efficient compared to other vegetable oils such as soy or rapeseed. Such stereotyping fosters the impression that all palm oil production equates to deforestation and environmental

violations. As Rogstad highlights, stereotypes function to entrench negative imagery of particular actors while obstructing recognition of the socio-economic complexities underlying a commodity [5].

The process of separation sharpens the divide between the *ingroup* (renewable energy sources deemed environmentally friendly) and the *outgroup* (palm oil, labeled as destructive). Annex IX of RED II explicitly distinguishes palm oil waste, which is recognized as a sustainable feedstock, from crude palm oil (CPO), which is considered high-risk [24]. This separation creates systematic exclusion: certain products are accepted, while others are driven out of the market. In Link and Phelan's view, such separation reaffirms hierarchies by placing specific actors outside the circle of social legitimacy [32].

Finally, status loss occurs when stigma results in the erosion of legitimacy or recognition of an actor. For Indonesia, stigmatization of palm oil translates into a global perception that the country disregards environmental concerns. This loss of status not only affects Indonesia's diplomatic position in international forums but also weakens the bargaining power of its strategic commodity. Status loss is further reinforced by negative campaigns from environmental NGOs such as Friends of the Earth Europe and Greenpeace, which aggressively promote palm oil boycotts [33]. The role of environmental NGOs in Europe has amplified the reproduction of stigma. Friends of the Earth Europe (FOEE), for example, has disseminated narratives framing palm oil as synonymous with deforestation, labor violations, and climate change, even calling for the rejection of an EU–Indonesia palm oil trade agreement. Greenpeace, meanwhile, has staged theatrical actions ranging from refinery blockades in Paris to boarding palm oil tankers from Indonesia, accusing the palm oil industry of being a key contributor to global warming. Although grounded in environmental missions, these actions politically reinforce negative stereotypes of palm oil and, by extension, of Indonesia [33]. In Rogstad's framework, such NGO campaigns operate at both the stereotyping and separation stages, consolidating palm oil's exclusion from renewable energy while embedding negative imagery in global public opinion. This expands the arena of stigmatization from EU policymaking to transnational civil society, deepening Indonesia's status loss.

The direct implication of RED II has been a decline in demand for palm oil in the EU market. Before the policy's enforcement, Indonesia's palm oil exports to the Netherlands reached USD 956.6 million in 2017. However, following RED II's implementation, the figure dropped to USD 615.7 million in 2019, a decline of approximately 34.26% [34]. Similar downward trends occurred in other European countries. Although exports temporarily increased in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic's demand for alternative energy, the long-term trend shows a steady decline as the EU moves to phase out palm oil in biodiesel by 2030.

Beyond reduced demand, RED II has imposed additional burdens through certification requirements. Palm oil can only be accepted in the European market if it meets specific sustainability standards, such as RSPO certification. These certifications are costly and more accessible to large corporations than to smallholder farmers. Meanwhile, Indonesia's national certification (ISPO) is often deemed less credible by the EU. This condition reinforces status loss for smallholders struggling to comply, underscoring how stigma serves to sustain structural inequalities in global trade [35].

The social consequences of palm oil stigmatization are acutely felt by millions of Indonesian smallholders whose livelihoods depend on the sector. Falling palm oil prices and demand have generated economic vulnerability in producing regions, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities across areas. Within Link and Phelan's framework, such social impacts demonstrate how stigma functions as a mechanism for reproducing inequality, linking negative labels to economic precarity [32]. Politically, RED II has strained Indonesia–EU relations. Indonesia views the policy as discriminatory and filed a lawsuit at the WTO in 2019. Tensions escalated further when Indonesia responded by banning nickel ore exports to Europe in 2020, prompting a countersuit by the EU. These reciprocal disputes illustrate how environmental policy stigma can spill over into global political and economic arenas, deepening structural conflicts between developed and developing countries [36].

From the perspective of Link and Phelan, RED II can thus be seen not merely as a technical instrument for sustainability but as a tool of power. Stigmatization of palm oil allows the EU to preserve global hierarchies: on one hand, positioning itself as a climate leader, while on the other, exerting pressure on developing countries whose economies rely heavily on specific commodities. Rogstad further emphasizes that stigma in international relations can be mobilized to reinforce domination by excluding, marginalizing, and imposing asymmetric standards on others [5]. In this light, RED II demonstrates how environmental regulation may serve as a geopolitical strategy, cloaked in the language of sustainability

3.3. Indonesia's Stigma Politics Strategy in Response to RED II

The European Union's Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II), issued in 2018, has had significant implications, particularly for palm oil–producing countries such as Indonesia. By categorizing palm oil as a high-risk commodity for indirect land use change (ILUC), the EU directly stigmatized Indonesia as a major contributor

to global deforestation. This stigmatization triggered complex political, economic, and diplomatic reactions. Indonesia did not remain passive; instead, it adopted a stigma politics strategy in the form of avoidance, as understood within the typology of stigma management strategies.

In the stigma politics literature, stigmatized actors are not always passive victims. On the contrary, they may take active measures to respond to, manage, or even capitalize on the stigma directed at them [4]. In this regard, four stigma management strategies are available to states: recognition, rejection, avoidance, and counter-stigmatization. Avoidance emerges when an actor accepts the norm underlying stigmatization but simultaneously rejects the negative label attached to it [5].

Indonesia can be categorized as employing an avoidance strategy. On the one hand, Indonesia accepts international sustainability norms as articulated in the Paris Agreement, ratified domestically through Law No. 16 of 2016. On the other hand, Indonesia rejects the label that indiscriminately links palm oil to deforestation, by pursuing legal challenges, conducting economic diplomacy, and strengthening international cooperation. In other words, Indonesia adopts sustainability norms while refusing the stigmatization imposed by the EU.

The first step Indonesia took in responding to RED II was to bring the case to international law through the World Trade Organization (WTO). On December 9, 2019, Indonesia officially filed a complaint (case code DS593) against the EU, challenging RED II and Delegated Regulation 2019/807 [37, 38]. The complaint emphasized violations of the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) principle under Article I of the GATT 1994, as well as the prohibition of quantitative restrictions under Article XI (1) of the GATT [36]. According to Indonesia, RED II unilaterally restricted palm oil access to the European market under the guise of sustainability, yet in practice discriminated in favor of locally produced vegetable oils such as rapeseed and sunflower. Moreover, RED II was considered to contravene the Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement (TBT), particularly Articles 2.1 and 2.2, by imposing stricter technical standards on palm oil alone, thereby creating unnecessary trade barriers. This legal challenge not only reflected Indonesia's economic defense but also represented its refusal of the negative label within the framework of stigma avoidance.

Beyond legal avenues, Indonesia also pursued economic diplomacy to rehabilitate palm oil's image in international markets. This diplomacy was manifested in the promotion of the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) certification as a domestic sustainability standard. A concrete step in this regard was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Netherlands on September 26, 2019, on the sidelines of the 74th United Nations General Assembly [39]. The MoU focused on supporting smallholders in meeting sustainability certification requirements [40]. Through this cooperation, Indonesia sought to demonstrate that palm oil could be produced in accordance with sustainability principles. In addition, Indonesia has strengthened ISPO through the issuance of Presidential Regulation (Perpres) No. 16 of 2025, with the aim of expanding ISPO's scope to the entire value chain, including the downstream sector and bioenergy. The regulation also reinforces administrative sanctions for violators and provides funding or financial support from the Central Government, local governments, and the Palm Oil Plantation Fund Management Agency (BPDPKS) [41]. Indonesia's efforts can be seen as part of a strategy to respond to stigma and to demonstrate that Indonesian palm oil can be produced in accordance with sustainability standards. This strategy is consistent with avoidance: embracing global sustainability norms while rejecting the negative label that simplistically associates palm oil with deforestation. In this way, economic diplomacy became a tool for reshaping global narratives that often display bias against palm oil.

Indonesia's response also involved strengthening international cooperation, particularly with Malaysia. The two countries, which had long competed in the palm oil market, found common ground after RED II's enactment. A bilateral meeting between President Joko Widodo and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad in 2019 resulted in an agreement to jointly combat EU discrimination. This commitment was later institutionalized through the Council of Palm Oil Producing Countries (CPOPC), which serves as a collective platform for producer countries to counter negative narratives [42]. This coalition demonstrates that Indonesia's avoidance strategy was not pursued unilaterally but rather within a collective framework. By involving Malaysia, Indonesia aimed to enhance its global bargaining power while underscoring the commitment of both countries to align palm oil practices with international sustainability standards. Overall, it is clear that Indonesia actively employs economic diplomacy and advocacy in international forums, the media, and through partnerships with other palm oil producers such as Malaysia, to reject the stigma that palm oil equals massive deforestation or environmental destruction.

From the above measures, it can be concluded that Indonesia's stigma politics strategy is best categorized as avoidance. This strategy comprises two elements: first, acceptance of the norms underpinning stigmatization; and second, rejection of the negative label attached. Acceptance of norms is reflected in the ratification of the Paris Agreement and Indonesia's emission reduction targets through its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Rejection of stigma is manifested through the WTO lawsuit [37, 38], economic diplomacy [39], and the

strengthening of international cooperation [42]. This approach enables Indonesia to manage stigma without rejecting the sustainability norms underlying RED II. On the contrary, Indonesia asserts that palm oil can be produced sustainably, thereby challenging the validity of the EU's stigmatizing claims. Through avoidance, Indonesia seeks to renegotiate its position in the international arena: embracing global climate principles while resisting the subordination produced by stigma.

The avoidance strategy chosen by Indonesia has dual implications. On the positive side, it strengthens Indonesia's diplomatic position as a state committed to sustainability while simultaneously protecting its economic interests. By not rejecting global sustainability norms, Indonesia preserves its international legitimacy. However, the strategy also entails challenges. The stigma imposed by the EU is difficult to erase entirely, even after Indonesia's various diplomatic efforts. Furthermore, avoidance is inherently more defensive than transformative. Indonesia has not yet fully succeeded in altering the global narrative on palm oil, despite its efforts to demonstrate commitment to sustainability. Nevertheless, the strategy remains effective as a middle ground, preventing international isolation while rejecting the subordination produced by discriminatory policies.

3.4. Understanding Indonesia's Stigma Politics Strategy through Ontological Security Theory

The European Union's Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II), enacted in 2018, has sparked intense debate in the international arena, particularly concerning the classification of palm oil as a high-risk commodity for deforestation. This policy not only created trade barriers but also stigmatized Indonesia as an environmentally destructive state. In this situation, Indonesia faced not only an economic challenge but also a threat to its ontological security—the need to preserve identity, biographical narrative, and recognition from other actors. Indonesia's strategy in responding to this stigma can be understood through the typology of stigma politics as avoidance, whereby Indonesia accepts international sustainability norms but rejects the negative labels attached to it.

Brent Steele emphasizes that states often act not merely in response to physical threats, but to preserve the consistency of their identity in the eyes of the world [19]. In this regard, Indonesia's adoption of an avoidance strategy in facing RED II can be examined more deeply through the four main components of ontological security. The first component in Steele's framework is material and reflexive capabilities—a combination of tangible resources and moral awareness that drive a state to act in accordance with its identity. Indonesia possesses significant material capability as the world's largest producer of palm oil, contributing over 55% of global supply. The palm oil industry is not only a vital source of foreign exchange but also provides livelihoods for more than 16 million people domestically. This material capacity positions palm oil as a strategic element in Indonesia's economic identity [35].

Yet beyond material factors, reflexive dimensions also shape Indonesia's response. Ratification of the Paris Agreement through Law No. 16 of 2016 reflects Indonesia's moral awareness of its global responsibility to reduce emissions [43]. By ratifying the agreement, Indonesia asserts itself not as an environmental laggard, but as a responsible partner in climate change mitigation. Thus, avoidance enables Indonesia to maintain its image as a developing country committed to sustainability, while countering discriminatory narratives directed at its strategic commodity. In this way, Indonesia mobilizes its material capability to highlight palm oil's positive contributions to national development, while simultaneously drawing upon reflexive capacity to demonstrate compliance with international norms. This underscores an ontological drive: not merely to protect palm oil exports, but to safeguard the consistency of its identity as a state balancing economic priorities with environmental responsibility.

The second component is crisis interpretation. According to Steele, states interpret crises not only materially but also in relation to identity. Indonesia perceives RED II not only as an economic threat but also as a reputational one. Labeling palm oil as "high-risk ILUC" implicitly associates Indonesia with global deforestation, a narrative directly at odds with its self-image as an active participant in climate diplomacy [44]. For Indonesia, the crisis emerging from RED II is far from trivial. It risks undermining diplomatic efforts made through participation in the Paris Agreement and various international environmental forums. Consequently, the threat is existential: it undermines the consistency of Indonesia's identity as a state championing sustainable development. Thus, avoidance is adopted: Indonesia accepts the legitimacy of global norms underlying RED II (sustainability) but rejects the narrative linking palm oil with environmental destruction. Its WTO complaint, ISPO certification promotion, and economic diplomacy are framed not only as pragmatic instruments but as responses to an identity crisis. By resisting stigma, Indonesia seeks to prevent a rupture between the sustainability norms it embraces and the negative label imposed upon it.

The third component is biographical narrative—the collective story about who the state is, its historical trajectory, and its aspirations. Indonesia's biographical narrative is strongly tied to its agrarian roots, with palm oil serving both as a flagship commodity and a symbol of economic development. The palm oil industry is

understood not merely as an economic sector but as part of Indonesia's historical journey in improving the welfare of its people [45]. Palm oil is embedded within Indonesia's narrative as a pillar of inclusive development. The sector employs over 16 million workers, directly and indirectly, while supporting the livelihoods of millions of smallholders. It is thus framed as a "strategic crop of the nation," simultaneously driving economic growth and contributing to poverty alleviation [46, 47]. Palm oil symbolizes not just economic value, but also national sovereignty and developmental achievement.

RED II's classification of palm oil as a high-risk ILUC commodity disrupted this narrative. It negated palm oil's developmental success story and replaced it with a stigmatizing image of deforestation and ecological harm. If left uncontested, Indonesia risked losing the continuity of its identity, as its once-celebrated commodity became reframed as a global liability. To preserve this biographical narrative, Indonesia adopted avoidance. First, it continues to embrace global sustainability norms, reflected in the ratification of the Paris Agreement and NDC commitments. Yet it simultaneously rejects the negative label, promoting ISPO certification [48] as proof that palm oil can align with global sustainability standards. Second, Indonesia renegotiates palm oil's narrative through economic diplomacy, such as its MoU with the Netherlands supporting smallholder certification [39]. This was not merely technical cooperation but a symbolic attempt to reconstruct Indonesia's identity externally. Third, Indonesia reinforced this narrative domestically, consistently communicating to its public that palm oil is a strategic pillar of the national economy [47]. By maintaining coherence internally, Indonesia secured legitimacy against external stigmatization. In short, the biographical narrative operates as an ontological anchor motivating avoidance. By sustaining the story of palm oil as a sustainable development commodity, Indonesia rejects the EU's negative labeling while preserving continuity of identity both at home and abroad.

The fourth component is perlocutionary discourse—how the views of other actors shape or influence state actions. A state's identity does not stand alone; it is socially constructed through external recognition. Perceptions of others often determine whether a state's claimed identity is validated or challenged. In the case of RED II, Indonesia faced discursive pressure from the EU, international media, and transnational environmental NGOs, all reinforcing narratives linking palm oil to deforestation. The EU, through RED II, positioned itself as a global leader in sustainability. Its narrative framed palm oil reduction as a moral act to protect tropical forests and biodiversity. This was amplified by NGOs such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth Europe, which actively campaigned against palm oil [33]. International media echoed these narratives, producing symbolic pressures that stigmatized Indonesia. In ontological security terms, such co-actor discourse destabilized Indonesia's identity claims as a sustainability-oriented state.

Indonesia responded through avoidance, seeking to manage co-actor discourse. First, its WTO lawsuit [37, 38] was not only an economic tool but also a symbolic move to reframe global discourse—from environmental protection to trade justice and structural discrimination. Second, economic diplomacy with EU member states more open to alternative narratives, such as the Netherlands [39], aimed to show that Indonesian palm oil had a place within sustainability frameworks. Third, Indonesia strengthened cooperation with Malaysia via CPOPC [42], collectively producing counter-discourse to challenge the EU's dominant framing. Domestically, Indonesia also framed RED II as discriminatory, fostering public solidarity and legitimizing its avoidance strategy. This ensured domestic identity coherence while bolstering bargaining power externally.

Ultimately, Indonesia secured a victory in its WTO case against the EU's RED II regulations [49]. This ruling, which deemed the policy discriminatory for labeling palm oil as "high-risk" without fair and proportionate consideration, provided strong legal legitimacy to Indonesia's argument that RED II was not purely environmental but also politically and economically harmful. This reinforced avoidance: Indonesia resisted normatively through diplomacy while proving legally that EU claims were unbalanced. From an ontological security and stigma politics perspective, this victory strengthened Indonesia's reflexive capability and provided external validation of its biographical narrative of palm oil as a sustainable and strategic development commodity. Moreover, it reshaped co-actor discourse: Indonesia now speaks with stronger legal standing when confronting accusations in international media, environmental organizations, and trade forums. This enables Indonesia not only to reject negative labeling but also to redefine the discursive framework—arguing that sustainability standards must be fair and non-discriminatory—as part of international norm practice.

Indonesia's response to the European Union's RED II policy, framed as a stigma-avoidance strategy, has produced both internal and external consequences. Domestically, market restrictions and declining demand for palm-based biodiesel in Europe have placed pressure on the downstream sector. Industry reports show that Indonesia's biodiesel exports to the EU have fallen since 2019, exposing vulnerabilities for domestic producers and palm oil–producing regions. These challenges prompted the government to accelerate sustainability reforms by expanding the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) scheme to cover the downstream sector, as stipulated in the 2025 regulation, which also introduces administrative sanctions and financial support from BPDPKS. Major firms such as Musim Mas have achieved full ISPO certification for upstream operations, yet assistance for

smallholders remains limited [50]. This asymmetry highlights a distributional challenge: while smallholders account for a substantial share of national production, limited access to certification exacerbates inequality in the value chain and heightens the risk of agrarian marginalization. Politically, these measures strengthen the government's narrative of defending economic sovereignty and consolidating national support for the palm oil sector, even as critiques persist over the neglect of internal inequality.

Externally, Indonesia's victory in the WTO dispute (DS593) in January 2025 provided significant legal and diplomatic validation of its claims of discrimination under RED II. The WTO panel found that several elements of the EU's implementation, including the classification of palm-based biofuel as high-risk, were inconsistent with international trade obligations. This ruling enhanced Indonesia's bargaining position, compelling the EU to adjust its policies or enter technical negotiations on ILUC criteria and the recognition of domestic certifications such as ISPO. Narratively, the outcome bolstered Indonesia's international standing, challenged protectionist tendencies in EU environmental policy, and inspired other Global South countries facing similar trade barriers [51]. Nonetheless, the ruling did not eliminate normative pressures from non-state actors. Reports by Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth continue to associate palm oil with deforestation and social violations, sustaining a global perception that keeps Indonesia on the defensive. Thus, while Indonesia gained legal validation, it must continue to manage the legitimacy of its identity through a combination of litigation, narrative diplomacy, and the credible enforcement of sustainability standards.

4. CONCLUSION

The examination of Indonesia's stigma politics strategy in responding to the European Union's Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II) illustrates the complex interplay between economic interests, identity dynamics, and global discourse. By classifying palm oil as a commodity at high risk of indirect land use change (ILUC), RED II not only generated trade barriers but also produced stigma that undermined Indonesia's identity on the international stage. For Indonesia, this policy posed a dual threat: a material threat in the form of declining export opportunities, and an ontological threat in the form of delegitimization of its national narrative of palm oil as a symbol of development and self-reliance.

Within Brent Steele's ontological security framework, Indonesia's response to RED II can be understood as an effort to maintain the consistency of its identity. Material and reflexive capabilities were mobilized to demonstrate that palm oil plays a strategic role in the national economy and can be produced in compliance with sustainability standards. Indonesia's crisis interpretation framed RED II not merely as a matter of trade but as a reputational threat to its global recognition. Its biographical narrative, positioning palm oil as the backbone of inclusive development, served as an identity anchor defended through the promotion of Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) certification and economic diplomacy. Meanwhile, co-actor discourse highlighted the importance of external perceptions, as Indonesia sought to renegotiate its identity by filing a complaint against the EU at the WTO, building alliances through the Council of Palm Oil Producing Countries (CPOPC), and engaging in selective diplomacy with EU member states.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study underscores the practical significance of Indonesia's responses. The WTO litigation, ISPO certification reforms, and collaborative diplomacy with other producer countries not only safeguarded Indonesia's symbolic legitimacy but also created concrete leverage in trade negotiations, strengthened the bargaining power of palm oil in international markets, and provided pathways for smallholders to gradually integrate into sustainability standards. These practical steps demonstrate how stigma politics is not merely symbolic but has tangible implications for trade policy, governance reform, and domestic capacity-building.

While the analysis has provided a comprehensive understanding of Indonesia's strategies, several limitations remain. First, this study relied heavily on the analysis of policy documents, government statements, and available academic literature. As such, the perspectives of other actors—such as smallholders, domestic NGOs, or private industry stakeholders—remain underexplored. Second, the study emphasized discourse and identity dimensions, while material-economic aspects, such as detailed export data, global price fluctuations, and direct impacts on smallholder livelihoods, were only briefly touched upon. Third, the focus on RED II as a single case study limits the ability to generalize findings to other international policy contexts, suggesting the need for more comparative inquiries.

Based on these limitations, several directions are recommended for future research. First, comparative studies across major palm oil-producing countries—such as Malaysia—would provide valuable insights into the diversity of stigma management strategies in different contexts. Second, incorporating additional theoretical frameworks, such as critical constructivism or international political economy, could enrich ontological security perspectives with broader structural and material analyses. Third, future research might also explore the long-

term implications of Indonesia's avoidance strategy for its bargaining position in global climate negotiations, revealing the extent to which this strategy is effective in securing both identity and material interests.

Overall, this study demonstrates that Indonesia's response to RED II cannot be understood solely as a trade dispute, but rather as part of a broader effort to maintain ontological security in the face of global stigmatization. The avoidance strategy enabled Indonesia to renegotiate its identity—accepting global sustainability norms while rejecting the negative labels that threatened its biographical narrative. In doing so, Indonesia illustrates how a developing country seeks to protect its material and symbolic interests within an international order deeply shaped by power relations and hegemonic discourse.

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