

Investigating the implementation of triple bottom line in an agricultural company

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Mini-dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree *Master of Business
Administration* at North-West University

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Examination: October 2018

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following persons and institutions:

- To my Heavenly Father who gave me grace and strength to see the course through successfully
- To my parents who supported me and believed in me so much, as well as carried me in their prayers along the way
- To my two brothers and family who also encouraged me and who were a good support in the tough times
- To Professor Ines Nel who helped me with my thesis and gave the necessary guidance and advice to get it done
- To my study group, Potch 1, who were committed and dedicated to helping each other see the studies through to the end
- To the agricultural company who kindly sponsored my studies and allowed me to do this research at the company itself as well
- The branch managers who were willing to participate in the interviews for this study

ABSTRACT

With sustainability being a key issue in today's global business environment, organisations have had to consider how they can do business in the long-term in order to make profits but at the same time conserve the resources they use in their activities. The earth has finite resources that need to be used in such a manner that the generations that come after us, are able to maintain themselves in the same manner as the current world population.

Businesses are regarded as separate legal entities and as such have had to adopt different aspects of sustainability into their operations. Two of these concepts are corporate social responsibility, which deals with how the business acts as a separate legal entity within society, and Triple Bottom Line, which is an accounting framework for measuring businesses' activities in terms of sustainable business practices.

This study investigates the implementation of Triple Bottom Line at an agricultural company and specifically with regard to its implementation at the branches of the company in the Eastern Free State. It was found that differing levels of implementation of the elements of Triple Bottom Line prevailed at the branches. Challenges to the implementation of Triple Bottom Line at the branches were also identified during the course of the study. Furthermore, corporate social responsibility was a sustainable practice that was not focussed on at all the branches that formed part of the study.

The study concluded with recommendations for improving the implementation of Triple Bottom Line at the branches of the company that are located in the Eastern Free State. The recommendations include steps that can be followed to improve the current implementation of Triple Bottom Line at the agricultural company.

Key words: sustainability, triple bottom line, corporate social responsibility

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

Abbreviation	Meaning
CC	CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP
CS	CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY
CSR	CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
EFS	EASTERN FREE STATE
TBL	TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has become a key word in businesses today, and is a concept that normally refers to how a business is conducting its affairs to be financially successful, limit its' effect on the environment and be socially responsible in the long term. Another way of defining sustainability is a pattern of resource use that aims at meeting immediate needs whilst preserving the environment so that these needs can also be met in the interest of future generations (Naidoo, 2016:12). A measure for sustainability was developed by John Elkington in the 1990s, titled the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach to financial/company reporting and management of businesses. The TBL approach therefore focuses not only on management for profits but also on the social and environmental aspects of a business (Slaper & Hall, 2011:4).

For a business to be sustainable in the long run, its main goal is to generate profits with the capital invested in it by shareholders and to ensure that the business can continue in the long term by covering its operational costs. Businesses also function as separate legal entities and are expected to be run by responsible corporate citizens. In this context it may be argued that being responsible corporate citizens, businesses are required to not only focus on profit making but also on awareness and protection of the environment, and furthermore, on social responsibility. Simply considering the latter, one may intuitively feel that a conflict concerning claims for resources may arise. This phenomenon is specifically referred to by Ozanne *et al.* (2016:251) and in addition they indicate that it is often in the implementation phase aspect of TBL that challenges start arising. This is due to the rivalry for the allocation of resources that may be needed to implement and achieve TBL goals. Tensions related to performance may arise as a result of trying to meet competing strategies and goals simultaneously (Ozanne *et al.*, 2016:254).

A company is expected to think beyond making profits to how its activities affect the use of its resources and how it balances its needs with those of society to achieve lasting acceptable financial outcomes for itself, the communities around it and the environment (Naidoo, 2016:376). In a world where organisations have limited resources at their disposal for meeting the needs of people and where social and environmental awareness has increased over the last few years, organisations need to be aware of their actions and implement sustainable business practices.

The agricultural company, on which this study is based, has started implementing sustainable business practices within the company, such as using solar energy at its head office and improving its employee equity within the company as well as creating opportunities for employees' further development through studies and other forms of training. However, the question arises as to whether these practices are being implemented at the same levels throughout the company at its various branches in the Eastern Free State (EFS) and not exclusively at the head office.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Studies have shown that the main incentives for implementing sustainable business practices are profit orientated, followed by social and environmental practices (Hogevold *et al.*, 2015:438). This suggests that the implementation of TBL in a company may not be happening in the same manner for each of the elements of TBL, as managers at various levels of the company may be more aware of the economic motive, than of the people and the planet. Secondly and probably as a result of the abovementioned differences in implementation, the extent of implementation could vary in an organisation.

Research has also indicated that the implementation of sustainable business practices appears to evolve over time and is an ongoing process (Hogevold *et al.*, 2014:369). Businesses often start off by addressing environmental concerns as their initial development of sustainable business practices (Hogevold *et al.*, 2014:368). Organisations therefore do not become sustainable overnight, but develop their activities and planning to

make the necessary adjustments towards achieving sustainable business goals. With the bottom line having been the main focus in organisations before the advent of TBL in the 1990s, a need still exists for appropriate change strategies to advance to full sustainability levels that encompass all the aspects of TBL (Smith & Rootman, 2013:2).

The issue of sustainability has come to the fore due to environmental issues such as climate change, water usage and contaminated land presenting some of the most serious threats to the planet, society and organizations and one firm's actions can negatively affect the resources available to other firms (Bowen *et al.*, 2018:1412). This also highlights the concept *corporate citizenship*, which refers to the companies having to be good citizens who are expected to minimize their social and environmental harm and realize that they do not exist in a vacuum (Naidoo, 2016:375-376). Companies can no longer do business and make profits at the cost of the environment or society, as there is a larger degree of environmental and social awareness in the world today.

According to The Global Risks Report for 2018, environmental risks have grown in prominence during the last 13 years of its existence (Collins, 2018:11). It further states that rising temperatures and more frequent heat waves will disrupt agricultural systems, which have become more vulnerable due to the prevalence of monoculture production as more than 75% of the world's food production comes from only 12 plant and five animal species (Collins, 2018:12). This would have a negative impact on any organisation involved in agriculture as their business models are reliant on the selling of inputs for the planting of crops and the selling of harvested crops that they receive back from the producers. These scenarios have created a specific need for organisations and their stakeholders to investigate conservation and the preservation of the environment and its resources. The same would be applicable to the agricultural company in this study, which has to manage its impact on the environment and the communities in which it operates to ensure that the current farming practices will be sustainable in years to come to provide food security for future generations.

Sustainability is an often mentioned business goal, but it has been found that measuring the degree to which an organization is sustainable has often proved to be difficult (Slaper

& Hall, 2011:4). TBL is based on an accounting framework, but was designed to go beyond the traditional measure of profit and to include social and environmental dimensions as well as being an important tool for supporting sustainability goals (Slaper & Hall, 2011:4). It is necessary for an organisation to be able to measure its sustainability practices for it to present itself as a responsible corporate citizen. Society has developed a strong sense of social and environmental awareness and demands proof of the implementation of sustainable business practices. Sustainability practices are considered corporate social responsibility (CSR) when an organisation implements these practices voluntarily and not under pressure or in an enforced manner (Hogevold *et al.*, 2014:365).

Since uncertainty prevails, a study of the implementation of TBL in the agricultural company could assist in determining how widely sustainable business practices are implemented in the company's various branches, as well as what challenges these branches are faced with while attempting to implement TBL. As Hogevold *et al.* (2014:368) found that sustainable business practices evolve over time within an organisation, this study will also assist with the investigation into the extent to which the sustainable practices implemented at the head office have spread to the branches of the company.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

It was found that the head office of the entity under consideration initiates the implementation of TBL and the question arises as to whether it is also implemented at the branches of the company.

Another aspect that could influence the implementation of TBL in the branches of the agricultural company, is whether there is sufficient awareness of it to aid in its being applied in the company.

If there is maybe a lack of awareness of TBL in the agricultural company, the implementation of TBL would not be done holistically, with an inherent tendency to focus on the bottom line.

1.4 OVERARCHING AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

1.4.1 The overarching aim of the research

The overarching aim of the research was to investigate the implementation of triple bottom line in an agricultural company, specifically with regard to the various branches of the company.

1.4.2 The objectives of the research

With a view to address the overarching aim, the following objectives were formulated:

- To define the terminology associated with sustainable business practices and TBL by conducting a literature review;
- To highlight the challenges encountered when implementing TBL in organisations and other factors that may also influence the application of TBL in an organisation;
- To investigate the current situation concerning the implementation of TBL within the agricultural company's various branches in the Eastern Free State (EFS);
- To gather relevant and useful data and transform it into useful information by using qualitative empirical studies concerning the agricultural company's implementation of TBL; and
- To evaluate the information and make suggestions for the improved implementation of TBL at the agricultural company's various branches in the EFS.

1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.5.1 Literature study

The aim of the literature study was to gain knowledge of and insight into sustainable business practices and the implementation of TBL. To address the overarching aim and objectives, a literature study was conducted to define the terms associated with sustainable business practices and the concept *TBL*. The challenges faced while implementing TBL were also elaborated on.

In the literature study, reference was made to various issues that affect the implementation of TBL and the achievement of sustainable business practices. In conducting the research, journals, articles, books and web pages were consulted and will be referred to in this study.

1.5.2 Empirical study

The implementation of TBL within an organisation can assist in improving sustainable business practices, which will lead to a decreased impact on the environment and good social standing for an organisation within society.

The aim of the empirical study will be to apply knowledge gained from the literature study to investigate the implementation of TBL within the agricultural company. The general awareness of employees regarding TBL will also be determined during the course of the study. This will assist in determining to what extent TBL is being implemented within the agricultural company and whether some aspects of TBL exist that are receiving more attention than are others.

1.5.3 Research method

A qualitative research approach, in the form of interviews with the managers at the EFS branches of the agricultural company, formed the basis of the empirical study.

1.5.4 Population

The agricultural company comprises a total of 33 branches in the EFS, which include 12 commercial branches, 13 silo branches and 8 mechanization branches that formed part of the interview process. Each of the branches has its own manager responsible for the activities at the branch. The population being surveyed is not a vulnerable one as all the persons being interviewed are not subject to decisional impairment and had indicated voluntary participation in the research by giving informed consent to the interviews in advance.



Figure 1.1: Eastern Free State area where branches are located, indicated in green (Places, 2018)

1.5.5 Sample

The sample size will include all the branches mentioned in the population. Since the study being performed is qualitative in nature, a point of saturation can be reached in the data gathering before all the branches are included in the sample selection.

1.5.6 Collection of data

The collection of data will take the form of structured interviews, where the managers will be asked specific questions with regard to the implementation of TBL at their premises. The interviews will be recorded as well and the use thereof limited to the research purposes of this study.

1.5.7 Analysis of the data

Data analysis of the interviews will take the form of a thematic analysis, to determine what themes are relevant for the empirical study purposes. Selected themes will then be used to form the basis of the empirical findings.

1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted within a division of the agricultural company and may thus not be representative of the whole company. The greatest limitation was that there are various other agricultural companies within South Africa and therefore the results might not be representative of all the agricultural companies.

Another limitation of the study is that there may be a lack of general awareness of TBL within South Africa. However, with the release of King IV in November 2016 a continuous drive prevails within the country's business sector to include and implement TBL elements into organisations' sustainable strategies.

1.7 CONCLUSION

Chapter 1 has provided the introduction to sustainable business practices and TBL, which form the background to the proposed research for this study. It also indicated the research method and population that are going to be used during the course of the research. The ethical concerns were also mentioned with regard to the population selected and the method of data analysis described for the empirical purposes of the study. The literature review will be presented in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This literature review reflects the views of authors and factors that have affected the development of sustainable business practices and the implementation of TBL within organisations. Companies can no longer afford to see themselves functioning in isolation but need to view themselves as being part of a larger economic environment with various stakeholders involved in it. For organisations to function in a sustainable manner not only must the bottom line be focused on; the environmental and social aspects that interact and affect the organisation also need to be focussed on. Allied with this is the idea of Corporate Citizenship (CC), where the organisation is regarded as being part of the broader society in which it operates and which affords the organisation standing as a juristic person in that society with rights, but also with responsibilities and obligations (Iodsa, 2016:11).

Being a responsible corporate citizen implies that an organisation needs to accept its obligations towards ensuring that its activities are executed in a sustainable manner. King IV also states that sustainable development implies that an organisation intentionally interacts with and responds to the opportunities and challenges presented by the combined context of the economy, society and environment in which it operates (Iodsa, 2016:18). Sustainability, corporate citizenship and TBL are thus seen as interrelated elements that all help to direct the activities of an organisation in a responsible manner towards implementing actions and policies that create financial value, but at the same time conserve natural and social resources.

2.2 TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE

2.2.1 Introduction to triple bottom line and sustainability

Business sustainability became more prominent during the early 1980s, which caused companies to depart from their limited economic perspective of generating profit at all cost, to a broader perspective on accountability to society and the environment (Padin *et al.*, 2016:852). Consequently, a decade later, TBL started emerging as a new tool for measuring organisational performance – not only in the context of measuring financial success but also in the impact thereof on the environment and responsibility towards the social environment. (Hogevold *et al.*, 2015:429). In following the TBL approach, sustainable development embodies the three inextricably linked pillars, namely environmental integrity, social equity and economic prosperity (Hogevold *et al.*, 2015:430). Eventually the three pillars of TBL profit, societal and environmental responsibility became known as profit, people and planet.

The adoption of TBL begins with a simple shift of defining the objectives of management, as dictated by the board of directors, from shareholder profits to maximising stakeholder value (Hogevold *et al.*, 2015:430). These changes to pursue TBL in an organisation not only promote business sustainability but could also create a competitive edge, increase market share and boost shareholder value for a business (Hogevold *et al.*, 2014:362). Venkatraman and Nayak (2015:196) also affirm that companies should consider all three dimensions of profit, people and planet as equally important and that the implementation and successful execution of sustainable business practices need to be executed from an integrated perspective.

Sustainability in a business context centres the focus on how resources are being used by businesses. It also considers whether the current levels of the consumption of natural resources used in the production of goods and services will be sustainable in the long term. One may therefore conclude that a realization should be created that there are limitless worldwide needs that need to be satisfied within a world of limited resources.

2.2.2 Reasons for the development of sustainability and TBL

Businesses have traditionally focussed on profit maximization for the shareholders, but often at the cost of natural resources and a lack of focus on the social wellbeing of its employees and other persons affected by the organisation's operations. In reaction to this, a stakeholder approach developed, which refers to any individual or group who can affect or are affected by the actions, decisions, policies or practices of an organisation (Buchholtz & Carroll, 2012:63-64). The development of the stakeholder approach in connection with the development of technology meant that companies had to become much more transparent – they could therefore no longer be secretive about their practices (Elkington, 1997).

Resources were often used by companies for short-term profits and gains but at the cost of the long-term ability to produce goods and resources at the same levels. The reason for this was the pollution, excessive consumption and waste generation caused by the use of the resources in the creation of products and services by the companies. In today's global business environment, organisations are also facing increasing competitive, regulatory and community pressures which require organisations to put strategies in place that reduce the environmental impact caused by the products and services that are produced and offered (Smith & Rootman, 2013:1). TBL thus developed as a framework to assess the interconnected dimensions of people, planet and profit with the aim of assisting companies in achieving their sustainability objectives (Slaper & Hall, 2011:4).

2.2.3 Advantages of sustainability in organisations

Following the TBL approach with its interrelated elements of profit, people and planet, can assist organisations in developing advantages due to incorporating sustainable business practices in their operations. Business sustainability, however, is developed through practices that go beyond mere required compliance within the market and society (Hogevold *et al.*, 2014:362). Implementing TBL must not be seen as something that simply

has to be done to comply with social and stakeholder expectations, but must become a way of doing things in an organisation to benefit its activities. The decision to implement sustainable business practices in most organisations was due to their becoming environmentally aware and the initial cost savings benefits, such as reducing the use of power or conserving resources such as water (Hogevold *et al.*, 2014:371). The so-called 'green revolution' is the result of tangible benefits that are seen and experienced by stakeholders in the implementation of 'green' and sustainable strategies (Poveda & Young, 2015:3).

Some of the following potential benefits can arise from the implementation of sustainable strategies:

- It promotes the transformation of markets and industries by encouraging the implementation of innovative and efficient methodologies to minimize the social, economic and environmental impacts while meeting stakeholders' needs (Poveda & Young, 2015:7).
- It leads to the development of new cultures both within and outside the organization, as adaptations have to be made to implement sustainable business practices (Poveda & Young, 2015:8);
- The company's profits can be improved as sustainable practices can lower costs with regards to the use of natural resources;
- The company's brand image could also receive increased positive publicity and reputation, as stakeholders start associating the company's activities with the implementation of sustainable business practices (Poveda & Young, 2015:8);
- Potentially lower compliance costs are incurred as the organisation aims to meet regulatory requirements as part of its process in implementing sustainable business practices (Larry, 2015:40); and

- Competitive advantages can be created by the organisation, because TBL forces an organisation to be clear about what it is achieving and what is being measured, which can lead to an organisation having a lower risk profile and giving it easier access to funds, as it is then seen as a safer investment (Larry, 2015:43-44).

2.2.4 Motives for implementing TBL

TBL arose as a reaction to businesses focussing on the bottom line and profit maximisation. By including the elements of planet and people, TBL's aim was to make organisations aware of a stakeholder approach and that its operations affected the environment and the society around it. This shift in focus towards sustainability started highlighting the motives for implementing TBL in organisations. The motives for implementing sustainable business practices such as TBL vary from where sustainability is seen as a means to an end to better serve human interests, to where sustainability is seen as an end in itself (Schuler *et al.*, 2017:214).

The motives for implementing sustainable practices such as TBL could be based on instrumental reasoning, where sustainability is seen as a means to serve human interests and suggests that sustainability is desirable because it maximizes social welfare and shareholder wealth. It was mentioned earlier that companies should consider all the elements of TBL as equally important (Venkatraman & Nayak, 2015:196). Institutional reasoning however, implies that the profit motive still outweighs the people and planet motives that serve to enhance the validity of the profits generated, as it was done in a sustainable manner. Hence the importance of the social and environmental aspects could be reduced if profits are threatened and choices need to be made between sustainable business practices that are considered altruistic and the need to safeguard the bottom line.

In the field of environmental ethics, intrinsic value reasoning requires sustainability to be viewed as an end in itself (Schuler *et al.*, 2017:216). This implies that sustainability is a goal to be desired for its own sake, rather than to be attained in addition to creating shareholder wealth. Intrinsic value, however, has a different meaning when it comes to

financial management, where it refers to the intrinsic value of an organisation, based on its sales less operating costs, the value of its free cash flows as well as the weighted average cost of its capital used to generate its business (Brigham *et al.*, 2016:35). These two different interpretations of intrinsic value could lead to challenges when it comes to the execution of sustainable business activities. The environmental ethics approach would expect that sustainable practices should be implemented in spite of the costs that may be involved to put them in place. On the other hand, someone involved in financial management would consider the financial figures of the organisation to determine how well it is currently going at the company, namely its intrinsic value based on financial figures. Any negative changes in the financial figures, for example a reduction in sales, could then influence decisions to implement sustainable practices as there might be less finances available to establish or maintain sustainable practices. The implementation of sustainability using an environmental ethics approach could assist in ensuring that the profit motive is not prioritised over the social and environmental concerns.

When it comes to the implementation of TBL, certain conflicts arise between the different elements due to stakeholders holding different expected goals that an organisation should achieve. Internal and external stakeholders expect businesses to be financially successful and achieve their strategic objectives, while others expect businesses to engage in sustainability (de Lange, 2017:972).

2.2.5 Organisational factors needed to assist in implementing sustainable business practices such as TBL

Due to businesses having been profit orientated before the introduction of sustainable business practices such as TBL, change is often required to shift finances and priorities from the profit element of TBL to the people and planet elements. Business sustainability has also been found to be dynamic rather than static and that it should be seen as a continuous process requiring flexibility and adaptation (Hogevold *et al.*, 2014:361). One can therefore conclude that the implementation of TBL needs to be approached as a

continual process, which requires flexibility in the allocation of resources to enable all the elements of TBL to be implemented within an organisation.

This reallocation of resources, such as time, money and personnel are often needed to help take an organisation from where it is currently operating, to where it wants to be in operating sustainably in the future. If an organisation keeps following the same strategy it has always had, it will end up with the same results that its strategy has directed it in. The implementation of sustainable business practices will require organisations that have not yet implemented such practices, to make the necessary changes in resource allocation and strategies to take them in a new sustainable direction.

The implementation of sustainability also requires a holistic approach in implementing the necessary changes to ensure that environmental, social and economic challenges are dealt with jointly and/or simultaneously (Rauter, Jonker & Baumgartner, 2017:144). The attitude companies adopt towards sustainability will determine whether they are catalysts or barriers with regard to supportable business practices (Rauter *et al.*, 2017:144).

Handling changes in an organisation is already a challenging task and made more so if the wrong attitude prevails, as it will quickly become evident to stakeholders that the changes being made may just be a means to an end. In studies conducted by Rauter *et al.* (2017:150), it was found that leaders play a central role in initiating sustainability-related activities. However, leaders cannot do it on their own; they rely on employees to help implement the ideas, which indicates that collaborative efforts are required to implement changes for sustainable business practices. Implementing changes also takes time, as current business practices have to be adapted to new sustainable practices, which is why the necessary time for implementing changes should also be allowed by management in an organisation (Rauter *et al.*, 2017:150).

2.3 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR)

Another influence on the development of sustainability was the increase in the awareness of CSR. Companies as corporate citizens need to be aware of their actions and of how

they affect the environment and society around them. CSR refers to an organisation being a legal entity in its own right, with the capacity to perform actions in business with all the rights and duties entitled thereto (Naidoo, 2016:377). It also refers to the good that companies are expected to do in the course of being a good citizen and entails the commitment of business to managing and improving the economic, environmental and social implications of its activities at the firm, local, regional and global levels (Naidoo, 2016:377).

CSR has a similar approach to the implementation of TBL, as both are involved with managing and improving the economic, environmental and social activities of a firm. They both support the economic sustainability of an organisation to be a going concern in the long term, while enhancing this process with the implementation people and planet aspects of an organisation at the same time.

In analysing the elements of CSR, the following figure indicates that there are required, expected and desired elements to good CSR:



Figure 2.1: Elements of CSR (Ebrary.net, 2018)

The elements of CSR can be explained in detail as follows with regard to the different levels of implementation:

- **Economic** – it is required of a business to be profitable by maximizing sales and profits to enhance the lives of the employees and societies in which they live, as well as rewarding investors on their investments made in the company.
- **Legal** – it is required of an organisation to obey laws and adhere to regulations to protect the environment and employees as well as to avoid fines and penalties for disobeying regulations, which could negatively affect the profitability and image of the organisation as well.

- Ethical – businesses are expected to be ethical, which requires that activities and practices that are prohibited and expected by society are adhered to, to assist in creating an organisation which doesn't simply want to comply with the legal minimum requirements but wants to do what is right and fair;
- Philanthropic – there is a desire from society that businesses would be good corporate citizens that give back and provide programs to develop and support communities (Buchholtz & Carroll, 2012:34 - 37)

This supports the earlier notion that the implementation of sustainable business practices is an evolving process. Organisations would initially have to comply with the required aspects of CSR, namely being economically feasible and legally compliant. Organisations are expected to be up to standard with regard to fines or other penalties for non-compliance, which would create a negative image for the company.

TBL and CSR both focus on doing business in a sustainable manner, by applying the elements of profit, people and planet to how an organisation conducts its business affairs. CSR also includes the elements of organisations acting ethically and complying with legal regulations. These aspects of CSR are also inherently present in the elements of TBL, namely profit, people and planet. Profits need to be made in a legal manner while treating stakeholders in an ethical manner and ensuring that legal aspects are adhered to when it comes to environmental concerns and regulations. Sustainability practices are also considered to be CSR when they are voluntary and are not performed under pressure or enforced (Hogevold *et al.*, 2014:365). The implementation of TBL could benefit from having a good level of CSR present in an organisation, as it helps to establish a good basis from which sustainable activities can be implemented.

2.3.1 Drivers of CSR

Organisations function in an external environment, which includes aspects such as the economy, prevailing political situation in a country as well as various laws and regulations that affect it. Internally, organisations have a certain culture within which they operate, its leadership style as well as its policies that serve as guidelines for the activities of the organisation, to name but a few.

In the implementation of CSR, internal and external drivers can influence the extent and pace at which it is implemented. Lozano (2015:35-36) found some of the most characteristic motivations for corporations to engage in corporate sustainability (CS) actions are as indicated below (see Table 2.1):

Table 2.1: Internal and external motivations for CC (Lozano, 2015:36)

Internal Motivations	External Motivations
Attract and retain employees	Avoid fines and penalties
Increase employee productivity	Behave ethically
Assist in increasing product quality	Improve access to markets and consumers
Improve performance and generate more profits and growth	Assist in enhancing corporate and brand reputation

As can be gathered from the internal motivations, the main objectives are to create an environment within the organisation that will boost employee morale and performance as well as to attract and retain employees, which will keep the necessary skills and experience within the organisation. A positive result of this could be improved staff performance, which will lead to better performance and growth for the organisation and increased profitability. This will support corporate sustainability as the company will be more economically viable in the long-run.

External motivations are to avoid fines and penalties and create an organisation that behaves ethically. This will create a positive reaction from consumers, who will be willing to support the organisation's services and/or products due to the enhanced brand reputation of the organisation. Corporate sustainability can also be enhanced by avoiding the external factors that could lead to negative perceptions of the organisation and reduced sales and profits due to customers boycotting the organisation.

The implementation of TBL should also be developed along the lines of what is required in terms of laws and regulations to a level where it is an expected and desired aspect of an organisation that enhances the public image of the organisation and leads to other benefits such as increased sales, cost benefits from implementing sustainable business practices, and employees that are proud to be working for and associated with the organisation.

2.4 TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE

The three dimensions of TBL performance are often referred to as people, planet and profit (Thompson *et al.*, 2017:356). The aim of an organisation is to succeed in all three performance areas simultaneously, as indicated in the figure below:

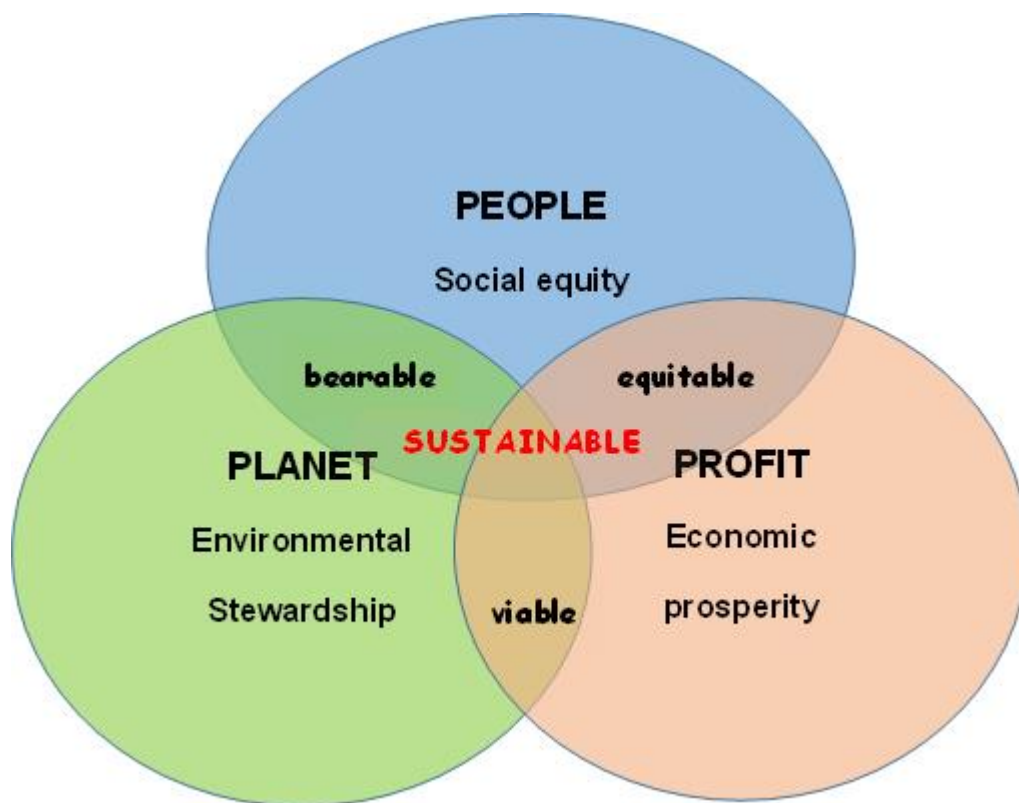


Figure 2.2: Triple Bottom Line Venn diagram (Bailey, 2013)

The achievement of sustainable business practices, by meeting all the different requirements of TBL, leads to a powerful business model, as it allows the organisation to make profits in the long-term, while improving the lives of the people it is connected to as well as conserving the environment (Bailey, 2013:1). As depicted in Figure 2 as well, only meeting some of the performance areas leads to organisations being 'viable' when only the profit and planet aspects are taken into consideration.

This could indicate that an organisation is doing well financially and conserving the environment, but not taking care of its employees in the same manner as it is taking care of profits and the planet. This could affect the long-term sustainability of an organisation as it might develop a bad reputation as an employer and would not be able to attract good-quality employees to work for it in the future. This once again highlights the importance of implementing all the aspects of TBL in an organisation with a view to ensure that

sustainability is being achieved by the organisation, from its head office to all its areas of operation.

2.4.1 Challenges encountered when implementing TBL

Implementing all the aspects of TBL in an agricultural organisation will require integration and change management as critical success factors for the advancement of the organisation as a sustainability initiative (Sroufe, 2017:315).

A survey done in 2017 found that although sustainability is important to 90% of the executives, only 60% of the companies applied a sustainable strategy (David *et al.*, 2017:8). This indicates that a disparity often exists between the implementation of sustainable practices in companies and the perceived benefits of sustainability for the organisation. In the same manner, the implementation of TBL in the agricultural company, which forms part of this study, may suffer from the same difference in the actual implementation of TBL at its branches, versus the importance of TBL to executives who are aware of its potential benefits to the company.

One of the biggest challenges is that, for a long period, businesses have mainly focussed on the profit aspect of TBL. This was also confirmed in research done by Hogevoold *et al.* (2015:13), in which it was found that the main incentives to implement sustainable practices was economic. This dilemma is brought about by the decisions stakeholders or managers have to make in terms of weighing the social and environmental concerns against economic results (Garcia *et al.*, 2016:183).

This may bring about tension among the various stakeholders in the agricultural company, as stakeholders may be torn between pursuing competing objectives and being in conflict with other stakeholders in terms of priorities (Ozanne *et al.*, 2016:254).

As a result of these tensions, the implementation of TBL often falls prey to prioritization (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018:1627). What this implies is that not all of the elements of TBL,

namely profit, people or planet, are regarded as being equally important when it comes to their implementation within organisations. The different types of prioritization of TBL can be represented as follows:

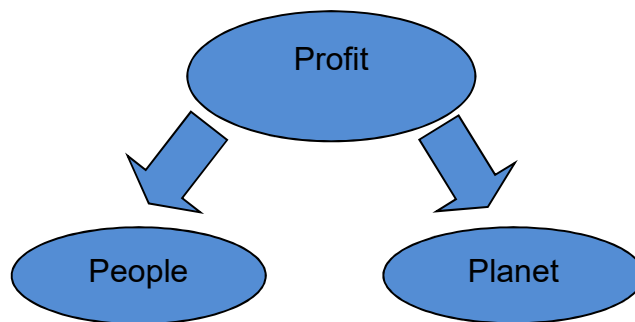


Figure 2.3: Profit as the priority element of TBL (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018:1628)

In this instance, the profit motive is the aspect that receives priority attention within an organization. The reasoning behind this is that the people and planet cannot be developed and maintained without the necessary profits being made to succeed in doing so (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018:1632). This is similar to still focussing on the ‘bottom line’, which has been the main priority of businesses before TBL was introduced in the 1990s.

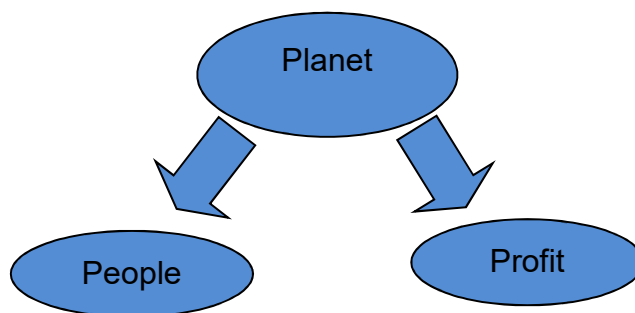


Figure 2.4: Planet as the priority element of TBL (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018:1628)

In prioritizing planet as the most important aspect of the TBL elements, there would need to be a strong level of support from management for this, as extra costs are often incurred when putting conservation practices into place, such as saving water, installing solar panels to save electricity and reducing waste. These costs would have a negative impact

on profits, which may cause a negative reaction from shareholders, who usually hold a shorter-term view of obtaining good results from their investments.

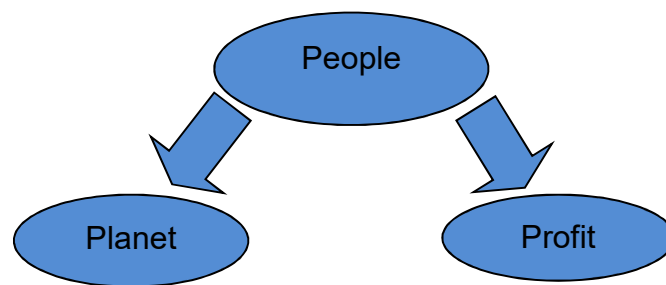


Figure 2.5: People as the priority element of TBL (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018:1628)

When the people element of TBL is considered to be the highest priority, it is based on the logic that social efforts provide economic benefits to the organization in return (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018:1632). This view is based on the fact that organisations do business with or provide services to society and any social actions that are used to give back to society at large will create positive feedback and support from the communities in which the organisation operates.

In a study done on agricultural businesses by Arora *et al* (2016:8), the results indicated that economic goals which serve the bottom line appeared to be the main priority for the decision makers in the businesses. In addition, their study also found that although economic and environmental factors were mentioned with equal frequency, economic considerations remained a consistently higher priority when it came to make making decisions at the agricultural businesses (Arora *et al.*, 2016:12). These results were similar to the findings of Rodriguez *et al* mentioned above, which indicates that prioritization could also possibly occur within an agricultural company.

To overcome the above different priorities in implementing TBL, organisations should avoid considering TBL elements in isolation and realize that the different elements

complement each other (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018:1629). For example, if an organisation is perceived as having a bad track record in dealing with its shareholders and as not having concern for the environment, it could face negative reactions from the media and have fines and penalties imposed on them for non-compliance with environmental regulations. Both these reactions could lead to a decline in the profits of the organisation seeing that consumers may boycott the organisation and the fines and penalties would create extra costs for the organisation to cover.

Similar to the challenge of prioritizing in the implementation of TBL in the company, is the possibility of creating a perception of it being a TBL company, while possibly only focussing on one of the TBL elements. In a study conducted by Shnayder *et al.* (2015:19) it was found that although companies were pursuing TBL, a stronger focus was centred on the people aspect of TBL.

The reasons for this focus on people were as follows (Shnayder *et al.*, 2015:19):

- The objectives were easy to achieve for the researched companies, as they already had a focus and structures in place to improve the people aspect of triple bottom line; and
- It was used to appease their stakeholders.

As can be concluded from the abovementioned study, it would be quite easy to create an image of being an organisation that pursues TBL objectives, but the reality would be that there the focus is mainly on only one element of TBL.

The term *sustainable business practices* refers to organisations also being able to make enough profit to cover their running costs and maintaining themselves as going concerns. Generating profits in relation to incorporating sustainable business practices to enhance the people and planet elements of TBL can create tensions in an organisation since decisions need to be made as to which elements should receive the necessary attention and additionally, the necessary resources – all at the possible expense of decreased

profits. This often involves a trade-off, between choosing one TBL element in favour of another and may require sacrificing short-term financial goals in favour of longer-term social goals (Ozanne *et al.*, 2016:251).

Seeing that the agricultural organisation works with budgets and financial objectives that need to be aimed at, expenses that need to be made for implementing TBL may often be influenced by the bottom line, as profit objectives still need to be considered. This could be challenging for the branch managers of the agricultural company who may wish to expand their people and planet elements but may be limited by the budgetary constraints imposed on their branch. It could also be more difficult for smaller branches to accommodate the same type of expenses required for implementing energy savings at a branch, than is the case with a larger branch that has a larger budget and turnover which it can use for implementing sustainable business practices.

2.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 2 defined sustainability and the associated benefits that could be the result of the implementation thereof, such as enhanced organisation reputation and improved profits. The organisational factors needed to assist in implementing sustainable business practices were also discussed, as well as CSR that requires organisations to function as responsible corporate citizens within society.

The concept *TBL* was also introduced and defined, as well as the necessary implementation of all the factors of TBL simultaneously within organisations. It was also noted that although executives are aware of sustainability, a much lower implementation of sustainability occurs than the awareness thereof. Trade-offs are also a necessary part of TBL implementation, as short-term financial goals may often need to be sacrificed in the interest of meeting longer-term sustainable goals.

Hence, sustainability and TBL are highly important concepts to implement within organisations seeking to do business in a responsible manner both towards the people and the planet, but the implementation thereof is not always as effective as could be imagined.

A discussion of the empirical study that was conducted follows in chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE QUALITATIVE STUDY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter expands on the research methodology used in this study and serves to present the results and findings of the study. It also puts forward the interpretation and discussion of these findings.

The empirical study was performed at the EFS branches of the agricultural company by conducting structured interviews. The population selected was the branch managers at the various branches of the agricultural company. The structured questions posed pertained to the implementation of TBL at the branches of the company in the abovementioned geographical region.

This chapter describes the manner in which the study was conducted, how the data was recorded and how the results were interpreted. The demographic background of the population is described, as well as the target sample that was obtained because of the interviews. Due to the qualitative nature of the research, a point of saturation was reached with the interviews, which led to the sample size being determined.

The data collected during the interviews were analysed by identifying themes that had emerged from the feedback from the respondents.

3.2 GATHERING OF DATA

3.2.1 Research design applied in the study

Due to the nature of this proposed study, which will study the implementation of TBL in an agricultural company, a qualitative study approach was decided on seeing that it was the best-suited form of research design to apply for achieving the objectives of this particular investigation.

Qualitative research refers to the collection and analysis of primarily non-numerical data, which can be words, pictures or actions and can use one of the following examples of research designs (Bryman & Bell, 2016:41-42):

- **Ethnography** – the study and appreciation of human interaction and communities through immersion, direct participation and observation within the community one wishes to study;
- **Phenomenological design** – researching the world through the eyes of those with direct lived experience to discover how they interpret their experiences and make sense of their world;
- **Grounded theory** – developing theory based on the specific data and information collected;
- **Case study research** – an in-depth study of one or more individuals or phenomena in its existing context

The approach followed for this study on the implementation of TBL in an agricultural organisation, is a phenomenological approach, as the respondents' awareness and experiences of the different elements of TBL, namely profit, people and planet at their branches, was determined by means of the interviews.

Bryman and Bell (2016:45) explain that the dependability of the data can be maintained by keeping complete records of all the phases of the research and include the following listed items:

- problem formulation
- selection of the research participants
- signed informed consent forms
- recorded interviews
- interview transcriptions

Keeping the abovementioned records enables the way in which the research was conducted to be reviewed, if required, and provides confirmation of the necessary steps taken to perform the interviews in an ethical manner.

When thematic analysis is conducted inductively, the researcher develops themes in a 'bottom up' manner, directly from the data and without trying to fit them into a preconceptualised theoretical frame (Bryman & Bell, 2016:351).

The following steps will be applied in the process of the thematic analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2016):

- familiarisation with the data;
- developing codes for the themes identified;
- searching for and reviewing themes;
- defining and naming themes; and
- developing the report based on the analysis of the themes.

3.2.2 Reliability of the data

According to Connelly (2016:435), reliability of qualitative research and the transparency of the study are essential for the integrity of the findings. Reliability of a study refers to the degree of trust in the data, as well as the interpretation and methods used to ensure the quality of a study or data. In each study, it is essential that the researchers establish certain procedures necessary for a study to be considered worthy of consideration by readers. Possible criteria include credibility, reliability, affirmability, transferability and authenticity.

To prove the reliability of this study, Lincoln and Guba's matrix was applied. Lincoln and Guba (1985:301) argue that reliability of a research study is important to evaluate the value thereof.

Reliability implies the establishment of the following:

- **Credibility** - Confidence that there is truth in the findings.
- **Portability** - Shows that the findings are applicable to other contexts.
- **Dependency** - Shows that the findings are consistent and repeatable.
- **Confirmability** - It is a measure of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are formed by the respondents and not the researcher's prejudice, motivation or interest.

Connelly (2016: 435) explains that not all procedures are used in each study. Kolb (2012:83) further explains that although it is difficult to prove absolute accuracy of research, various strategies have already been identified in the literature to improve reliability through triangulation. The purpose of triangulation is primarily to improve the

validity and reliability of the results. Heale and Forbes (2013:1) maintain that the term *triangulation* derives from the field of navigation, where a location is determined by using the angles of two known points. This research uses more than one approach to investigate a question or data. The aim is to increase confidence in the findings by confirming a proposal by using two or more independent measures. The combination of findings from two or more strict points of view provides a more comprehensive picture of the results than a single approach alone would provide.

Based on the above, the interviews conducted by the researcher with the branch managers during the course of the study took place on a face-to-face basis but also remotely by means of telephone interviews. This was done to help address sampling bias, due to the fact that the sample was selected on a convenience basis (Kennedy, 2009:2). Another reason for applying different methods of data collection, by varying the manner in which the interviews were conducted, was to implement triangulation in the data collection process (Kennedy, 2009:2). The triangulation increased the reliability of the study.

3.2.3 Population and sample of the study

The population for the study consisted of the managers at the 33 branches of the agricultural company in the EFS area. Managers were selected from the commercial, silo and mechanization branches for the research purposes. The researcher conducted the interviews, and data saturation was reached after ten interviews with the participants. Data saturation occurs when there is enough information to replicate the study when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained and when further coding is no longer feasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015:1408).

A homogeneous population is usually composed of individuals, such as members of an organisation or of an occupation, that are similar in nature and varies less than a more diverse population (Bryman & Bell, 2016:177). Due to the lower variation in the homogeneous population, a smaller sample can be selected for study purposes. In this study, the population is homogeneous in nature as it is composed of the members of the

same agricultural company and which thus allows a smaller sample to be used. For purposes of this study, convenience sampling was used, as the sample was available to the researcher because of accessibility created by the researcher also being employed at the same agricultural company.

3.2.4 Research ethics

This research involved interviews with human participant, and the possible types of risks created by the interview process could be discomfort or inconvenience experienced by the respondent. Other possible risks are those of the respondents' feedback being linked to the identity of him/her in some way. These risks could easily be addressed and reduced by the researcher. It is thus low-risk research due to the following factors:

- the research covers a relatively non-controversial subject;
- the study population consists of adults (18+ years old);
- the research is done on non-vulnerable adult participants, and their identities are kept anonymous for research purposes;
- first-person recordings about the non-sensitive subjects as per informed consent documentation; and
- documented data analyses with identifiable human participants were used.

This study has also been registered and classified by the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee as a low-risk study.

The following ethical concerns were also met by the researcher:

- **Confidentiality**

No records of the identity of the participants are included in the final research. The recorded interviews have only been made known to the researcher, the study

leader and the transcribers. No information has been revealed in any reports that will make it possible to identify the participants.

- **The right to refuse or withdraw**

The decision to participate in this study was completely in the hands of the participant. The participant could refuse to take part in the research at any time without influencing their relationship with the researcher of this study or with North West University. The decision to participate in the interviews has not resulted in any loss of benefits to which the participant is otherwise entitled. In addition, the participant also had the right to request that the interviewer not use any of the interview material.

- **Right to questions and concerns with regard to the report**

The participant had the right to ask questions about the research study and to answer the questions the researcher asked before, during or after the research. If he / she had further questions about the study, he / she could always contact the researcher. Should the participant request it, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to the participant. If there was any other concern about the participant's rights as a research participant, which was not answered by the researcher, the participant could contact the Economic and Management Sciences Research Committee to speak to the study leader. If the participant experienced any problems or had concerns about what had occurred because of the participation, the participant could also report it to the study leader.

Appendix A contains an example of the Informed Consent form used during the course of this current study.

3.2.5 Data collection methods of the study

The data were collected from the ten participants by means of structured interviews. The interviews were recorded either during visits to the branch by the researcher, or in some cases the recordings were done during telephonic interviews with the branch managers. All the branch managers involved with the interviews were afforded the opportunity of completing and signing the required Informed Consent forms.

The list of questions used during the interviews are listed in Appendix B. If there were any concepts or ideas in the questions that the participants were unfamiliar with or uncertain about during the course of the interview, the interviewer elaborated on them to ensure that the respondents understood them and were able to give their feedback accordingly.

3.2.6 Demographics of the population

Table 3.1 contains demographic information regarding the population selected at the agricultural company for purposes of this study. The information was obtained from the Human Resources department and the interviewees (branch managers) in the EFS area, who are currently working at the agricultural company, and were selected if they answered to specific criteria.

Table 3.1: Demographic breakdown of the population

Gender	No.	%
Male	26	79%
Female	7	21%
Total	33	100%
Age	No.	%
18 - 25	0	0%
26 - 30	1	3%
31 - 40	9	27%
41 - 50	16	48%
51+	7	21%
Total	33	100%
Race	No.	%
African	0	0%
White	33	100%
Total	33	100%
Number of years worked at agricultural company	No.	%
0 - 10	14	42%
11 - 20	8	24%
21 - 30	8	24%
31 - 40	3	9%
Total	33	100%

The sample of 10 branch managers was selected from the population as indicated in Table 2 of 33 current employees at the agricultural organisation. The sample group selected, with positions and pseudonyms used for each respondent in the study, is listed below in Table 3.2:

Table 3.2: Pseudonyms and positions

Respondent	Pseudonym used	Position	Department
Respondent 1	R1	Branch manager	Silos
Respondent 2	R2	Branch manager	Silos
Respondent 3	R3	Branch manager	Silos
Respondent 4	R4	Branch manager	Silos
Respondent 5	R5	Branch manager	Commercial
Respondent 6	R6	Branch manager	Mechanization
Respondent 7	R7	Branch manager	Silos
Respondent 8	R8	Branch manager	Commercial
Respondent 9	R9	Branch manager	Silos
Respondent 10	R10	Branch manager	Commercial

3.2.7 Racial demographics of the sample group

The following table represents the racial demographics of the sample group:

Table 3.3: Racial demographics

Race	No.	%
African	0	0%
Coloured	0	0%
Indian	0	0%
White	9	100%
Total	9	100%

No other races were represented in the sample used for this study. This is also representative of the population from which the sample was selected, where there are currently no other races represented at branch manager level. This race composition of the branch managers is unique to the EFS branches of the company, since other races are working as branch managers in the other divisions of the company. One of the reasons being that there has been a low turnover in managers at the EFS branches, with 42% of the managers already having worked between 0 and 14 years as branch managers at the agricultural company, while the rest of the managers, 57%, have already worked as branch managers in the EFS region of the company for 11 – 40 years.

3.2.8 Gender demographics of the sample group

Table 3.4 gives an indication of the ratio between male and female respondents in the sample group:

Table 3.4: Gender demographics

Gender	No.	%
Male	8	80%
Female	2	20%
Total	10	100%

In the population selected, 79% were males and 21% females. In the sample group, the males comprised 80% and the women 20% of the total sample. These figures are in line with the population's percentages and are an indication that the sample is a good representation of the overall gender composition of the branch managers at the EFS division of the agricultural company.

3.2.9 Age composition of the sample group

The age composition of the sample group is summarised in Table 3.5 below:

Table 3.5: Age composition

Age	No.	%
18 - 25	0	0%
26 - 30	0	0%
31 - 40	6	60%
41 - 50	2	20%
51+	2	20%
Total	10	100%

The majority of the participants fell within the 31 – 40-years-old category, with the last two categories being equally represented at 20% each. This differed from the population that was representative of branch managers in the 41 – 50-age-category. Even though the sample group's age composition was generally younger than the population's age composition, there were no notable differences in the answers provided by the respondents due to their age.

3.2.10 Number of years worked by the sample group

Table 3.6 provides a summary of the number of years worked at the agricultural company as branch managers:

Table 3.6: Years worked

Number of years worked at agricultural company	No.	%
0 - 10	2	20%
11 - 20	4	40%
21 - 30	3	30%
31 - 40	1	10%
Total	10	100%

The highest percentage of branch managers had between 11 and 20 years of experience in their respective fields of business at the EFS branches of the agricultural company. The population of the branch managers in the EFS that had 11 – 40 years' work experience as

branch managers at the agricultural company was 57%, whereas 80% of the branch managers in the sample had between 11 – 40 years of experience as branch managers. This indicates that the sample involved in the interviews had more experience with number of years worked and experience gained also did not have a noticeable effect on the feedback received from the respondents in the study.

3.3 RESULTS

This study on the implementation of TBL in an agricultural company is qualitative in nature and the researcher obtained data by conducting structured interviews with branch managers in the EFS division of the company. The researcher recorded the interviews and had the responses to the questions transcribed for purposes of this study.

With a view to obtain themes for this study, the transcribed results were drawn into Atlas ti for coding purposes. Themes were then identified from the transcribed answers and codes allocated to each theme using Atlas ti software. The themes that then occurred most after the coding process, were selected for discussion in relation to the literature research performed for this study.

The results per theme are firstly summarised below, followed by the discussion of the themes in the next section. The themes are listed in descending order, from the ones that most often occurred to those that occurred the least times in the transcribed interviews:

3.3.1 The role of leadership in the implementation of TBL

This theme was mentioned most often by the respondents because a very low awareness of TBL prevailed among the interviewed branch managers. Only one out of the ten branch managers was aware of the concept *TBL* and its three elements of profit, people and planet. Another aspect of awareness that was tested was how well known the agricultural

company's environmental policy was to the branch managers. Out of the ten branch managers interviewed, there were only four who were aware of its existence.

3.3.2 The equal implementation of all aspects of TBL at the agricultural company

Due to the low awareness of TBL that emerged from the feedback of the managers, the concept was explained to them so that they could answer the rest of the interview questions with the necessary awareness of what TBL entails. Further, during the course of this study, the respondents were first asked whether all the elements of TBL were being implemented at their branches. The responses were an exact split between 50% who stated that all the TBL elements were being implemented and 50% that not all the aspects of TBL were being implemented. Respondents 6 and 7 stated that only profit and planet were currently being implemented at their branches, respectively.

When it came to determining which aspects of TBL should receive more attention for implementation at the branches, the following responses were received:

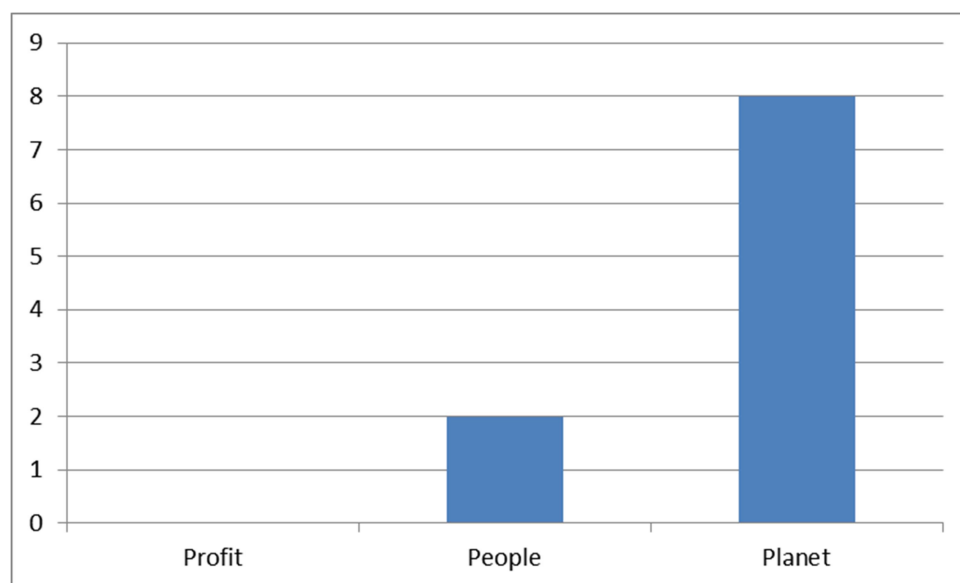


Figure 3.1: Responses to what aspects of TBL should receive more attention at the branches

The results indicate that most of the branch managers believed that planet should receive the most attention at the branches, with eight out of ten giving the same answer. As part of the feedback on improving the planet, the following suggestions came up most from the branch managers (see table 3.7):

Table 3.7: Branch managers' suggestions for improving planet aspect of TBL

Suggestions given	Number of times mentioned
Reducing use of electricity	4
Recycling	3
Going paperless	2

Reducing the use of electricity was the suggestion made the most by the branch managers to improve the planet aspect due to the potential cost savings that could be attained. Recycling and going paperless were the next most often made suggestions for reducing the impact on the environment at the branches. Respondents 2 and 5 also referred to the recycling initiative and installation of solar panels at the head office of the agricultural company, as examples of what more can be implemented at the branches.

Next up in the TBL aspects that can be improved upon at the branches was the people aspect, with Respondents 8 and 10 indicating that it should receive more attention. When it came to profit, none of the managers indicated that profit should receive more attention at the branches.

In contrast to the above scenario, the following feedback was received as to which aspect of TBL is currently being focussed on the most by the agricultural company:

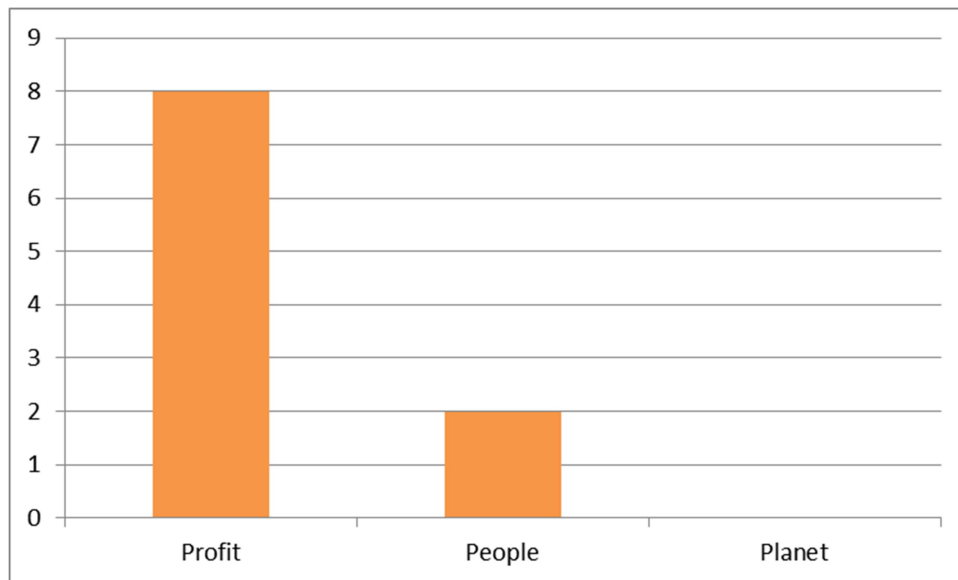


Figure 3.2: Responses to what aspect of TBL is currently receiving the most attention at the agricultural company

It is obvious from Figures 3.1 and 3.2 the two scenarios are exactly reversed. The branch managers indicated that, at this stage, the profit aspect is receiving the most attention at the agricultural company and that the branches should give more attention to the planet aspect. The people element received the same rating in both instances, with only one respondent giving people as the same answer to the two different questions posed.

An underlying aspect that also influences whether all the aspects of TBL will be implemented at the agricultural company is that of costs. When it came to answering the question as to whether costs would play a role in the extent to which TBL is implemented, ninety percent of the respondents indicated that costs would definitely be a factor.

3.3.3 Challenges in implementing TBL at the branches

The managers had different answers to what they expected would be challenges when it came to the implementation of profit, people and planet at their branches. The responses are summarised in the table below:

Table 3.8: Areas of challenge for branch managers

Area of challenge	Number of times mentioned
Profit	5/10
People	4/10
Planet	4/10

The challenges identified in the area of profit, was sustaining profits in the face of competition faced by some of the branches, as well as being able to diversify product ranges to improve turnover and to expand into the black market at the branches. When it came to challenges in the people element of TBL, branch managers identified the need for improved staff training to be able to deal with a wide range of products that are often used by the customers of the agricultural company in their farming activities. Challenges identified under the planet aspect of TBL were the same as mentioned under the feedback on how the planet aspect can be improved (see Table 3.7).

3.3.4 The approach of the agricultural company to the implementation of TBL at the branch level

When it came to establishing from the branch managers, which approach the agricultural company should follow to implement TBL at the branches, Respondents 2 and 10 stated that the head office should take the initiative in this regard. The same number of branch managers, namely Respondents 9 and 10, stated that the branches should take the initiative in implementing TBL at the branches. Respondents 2 and 10 also suggested that the branch managers should have brainstorming sessions with their senior managers, to develop ideas that could be practically implemented at the various branches.

3.3.5 CSR at the branches of the agricultural company

During the course of the interviews, Respondents 5 and 6 mentioned aspects of CSR that could be implemented at the various branches in the EFS area of the agricultural company. This was the lowest number of occurrences of all the themes identified during the course of the study.

The following suggestions were made for improving CSR at the branches:

- The branches should identify where they could become more involved in their local communities such as getting involved with schools or homes for the elderly; and
- Start recycling at the branches and extend it to the communities in which the branches are located by making the branches collection points where the public can come and drop off their recycling goods.

3.5 DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the implementation of TBL in an agricultural company. To this end, the themes and their results are discussed in the following section.

3.5.1 The role of leadership in the implementation of TBL

In the course of studies done by Høgevold *et al.* (2015:430), it was found that the adoption of TBL begins with a simple shift of defining the objectives of management from shareholder profits to maximising stakeholder value. Management will thus also have to fulfil a leadership role in indicating how the new objectives for adopting TBL are to be implemented within the company. Poveda and Young (2015:8) also listed the development of new cultures within and outside the organisation that are needed to implement sustainable business frameworks such as TBL. In order to shift an organisation's

objectives to a stakeholder-value-based one and the creation of a new sustainable culture in an organisation, Rauter *et al.* (2017:150) found that leaders play a central role in initiating sustainability-related activities within an organisation.

The abovementioned factors found in other studies were not present in the feedback received from the branch managers during the interviews for this study. Within the agricultural company at present, a need therefore exists for a shift in defining the objectives of management to more sustainable practices at the branches, as well as the need for integration and change management for the implementation of all the aspects of TBL as a sustainability initiative (Sroufe, 2017:315). This was also affirmed by the comments received from the respondents with regard to the question as to whether more leadership is required at the agricultural company for the implementation of TBL at the branches. Of the branch managers interviewed, only three managers were happy with the level of leadership concerning TBL implementation at the agricultural company. One of the branch managers also mentioned that only a few key players in the management of the company currently are aware of the TBL concept and that the concept should be made more known to the staff and branches, to gain buy-in from the employees at the agricultural company.

3.5.2 The equal implementation of all aspects of TBL at the agricultural company

In following the TBL approach as a sustainable business framework, it needs to be understood that it embodies three inextricably linked pillars, namely environmental integrity, social equity and economic prosperity (Hogevold *et al.*, 2015:430). In other research conducted by Venkatraman and Nayak (2015:196) on the integration of sustainable business practices, it was found that companies should consider all the elements of TBL, namely profit, people and planet, to be equally important due to the fact that organisations try to achieve economic, social and ecological goals independently, resulting in silos. Owing to its holistic nature, the implementation of sustainability requires a holistic approach to ensure that environmental, social and economic challenges are dealt with jointly (Rauter *et al.*, 2017:144). One of the biggest challenges is that businesses

have mainly focussed on the bottom line for a long period of time and this could lead to the main incentive to implement sustainable business practices being profit orientated (Hogevold *et al.*, 2015:13). Tensions may also arise in the implementation of TBL as stakeholders at an organisation may be torn between pursuing competing objectives and being in conflict with other stakeholders in terms of priorities (Ozanne *et al.*, 2016:254).

These abovementioned tensions may also lead to another challenge in the implementation of TBL, known as prioritization where all the elements of TBL, namely profit, people and planet are not regarded as being equally important (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018:1627). When profit is prioritized over people and planet, the reasoning is that profit needs to be maintained so that people and planet can be developed with the profits that have been generated by the organisation (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018:1632). This is a dilemma that is often brought about by the decisions that managers and stakeholders have to make in terms of weighing the social and environmental concerns against economic results (Garcia *et al.*, 2016:183).

During the course of this study, it was found that the elements of TBL were not being implemented on an equal basis at the branches. This was evident because profit was the most focussed on aspect by the branch managers and planet would require the most attention at the branches. These findings are also in agreement with the concept of prioritization, in that not all of the elements of TBL were treated as being equally important at the branches. The agricultural company and its branches in the EFS area are still mostly focused on the bottom line and costs were also indicated as a factor that will influence the extent to which TBL is implemented, especially with regard to the current situation where profit is the main aspect being focussed on by the company.

In a study conducted by Shnayder *et al.* (2015:19) it was found that although companies are pursuing TBL, there was more of a focus on the people aspect of TBL. This was because the objectives were easy to achieve for the researched companies and it was used to appease its stakeholders.

The findings in this study differed from those of Shnayer, as the people aspect was only second on the list when it came to implementing all the aspects of TBL at the company. At the agricultural company on which this study was done, there was a much stronger focus on the profit aspect, and the people aspect came in at a much lower second place, than profit. The people aspect was still implemented more at the branches though than the planet aspect.

3.5.3 Challenges encountered when implementing TBL at the branches

Business sustainability has been found to be dynamic rather than static and that it should be seen as a continuous process requiring flexibility and adaptation (Hogevold *et al.*, 2014:361). TBL will need to be approached as a continuous process requiring flexibility in the allocation of resources to enable all the elements of TBL to be implemented in an organisation. In their research, Rauter *et al.* (2017:144) found that the attitude companies adopt towards sustainability would determine whether they are catalysts or barriers with regard to supportable business practices.

The findings on the challenges currently being faced by the branches of the agricultural company are supported by the abovementioned studies, as a dynamic approach will need to be taken to address the different challenges, and adaptations will need to be made to overcome them. If one considers the challenge of profit sustainability, where branches are being threatened by competitors in the areas where they operate, adaptations such as an increased range of products may need to be implemented to provide a competitive advantage to keep customers doing business with the branches. The attitude adopted when addressing the challenges will also determine whether these challenges will remain barriers or become catalysts to supportable business practices. If the more senior management of the various branches react positively to the suggestions to improve the planet aspect at the branches, such as recycling and going paperless, positive changes will occur at the branches with regard to sustainable business practices.

3.5.4 The approach of the agricultural company to the implementation of TBL at branch level

Rauter *et al.* (2017:150) found that leaders play a central role in initiating sustainability-related activities. However, it was also found that leaders cannot do it on their own and rely on employees to assist in implementing the ideas, which requires a collaborative process to implement changes for sustainable business practices. Implementing sustainable business practices is also a time consuming, since current business practices have to be adapted to new practices (Rauter *et al.*, 2017:150).

The responses from the branch managers in this study, concerning the role leadership should play in initiating sustainable activities differed from Rauter's findings that leaders played a central role. In this study, only two of the branch managers indicated that the head office should play a stronger role in initiating more TBL activities at the branches, while another two stated that the branches should take the initiative. What was similar to Rauter's findings on leaders that need to rely on employees to help implement the ideas and that time is required to implement sustainable practices, was that two managers suggested that brainstorming sessions should be held with the senior managers to get ideas for TBL implementation at the branches. These brainstorming sessions would require time from all the relevant parties to participate and from the employees to implement the workable ideas afterwards.

3.5.5 CSR at the branches of the agricultural company

CSR refers to the good that companies are expected to do in the course of being a good citizen and entails the commitment of business to manage and improve the economic, environmental and social implications of its activities at firm, local, regional and global levels (Naidoo, 2016:377). One of the desired elements of CSR is that of being philanthropic, which is that society would like businesses to be good corporate citizens that give back to help develop and support communities (Buchhotlz & Carroll, 2012:34-37).

This desired aspect for an organisation to be philanthropic, was highlighted by two of the branch managers who stated that their branches should get more involved in giving back to their communities. Their suggestions of expanding recycling to the communities in which their branches are located and supporting places such as local schools or homes for the elderly both are initiatives that are in line with the desired philanthropic aspect of CSR.

3.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the results determined by the study. The demographic profile, was discussed, which specifically refers to the participants' race, gender, experience and age reflected in this study. This chapter also served as the descriptive section of the empirical study conducted to investigate the implementation of TBL at the agricultural company. The second part of this chapter presented the empirical themes and results collected and observed during the data collection and data analysis phases of the study. The focus of this chapter was the thematic analysis and the description of the results that emerged from the structured interviews. The results were also discussed and summarized during the course of the chapter.

In the following chapter, conclusions and recommendations are made and submitted for the study. This chapter also describes the discussions of the study and possible future fields of study.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of the empirical findings obtained from the qualitative research study was discussed in Chapter 3. This chapter utilises the results of the theoretical and empirical research to draw conclusions and make recommendations.

In this chapter, the conclusions concerning the study objectives will aim at determining whether the objectives formulated in Chapter 1 were achieved, as well as highlight the important aspects of the findings. The conclusions of this chapter are based on the objectives formulated for purposes of this research. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research as well as an overall summary of the study.

4.2 CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE OVERARCHING AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

4.2.1 The overarching aim of the research

The main aim of the research was to investigate the implementation of triple bottom line in the selected agricultural company, specifically with regard to the various branches located in the EFS. As was discussed in Chapter 2, the successful implementation of TBL in an organisation requires a holistic approach and the implementation of all the aspects of TBL in equal measures, to implement it as a sustainability initiative (Sroufe, 2017:315).

The following points indicate to which extent the main research aim was achieved during the course of the study:

- During the interviews, it was found that only a few of the branch managers had come across the concept of *TBL*. The respondents indicated that senior management should demonstrate better leadership with regard to the implementation of TBL at the agricultural company's branches. Reasons cited for this were the lack of awareness of TBL at the branches and that executive managers should play a stronger role in initiating sustainability-related activities in their various divisions.
- The empirical findings indicated that TBL was not being implemented holistically at the agricultural company's branches. When it came to indicating whether all the aspects of TBL are being implemented at the branches, consensus among the managers was lacking as to whether or not all the elements of TBL were being implemented at their branches. According to the branch managers the aspect that was currently being most focussed on was the profit aspect of TBL. In contrast to this, the TBL aspect that needs the most attention at the branches according to the empirical findings was the planet aspect. A further indication that TBL was not being holistically implemented at the agricultural company was the presence of prioritization in the participants' feedback. Prioritization occurs when one of the elements of TBL, namely profit, people or planet, is not regarded as being equally important. As mentioned before, the profit motive was still the most important aspect in the minds of the branch managers. People and planet were still regarded as less of a priority in comparison to profit at the agricultural company.
- The participants interviewed also indicated that costs definitely played a role in the extent to which TBL is being implemented at the agricultural company. This finding is in line with the results that showed that profit is still a priority in the agricultural company, which leads to the branch managers being very aware of costs, as profits that need to be made are negatively influenced by extra costs at the branches.
- The branch managers also mentioned definite challenges they still encountered when it comes to the implementation of TBL at their respective branches. Challenges were mentioned regarding all three aspects of TBL, which varied from

competitors that could affect profit sustainability at the branches, to improved staff training in order to better deal with wide product ranges and the implementation of recycling, power saving measures and going paperless at the branches when processing transactions.

- When it came to the approach the agricultural company should take with regard to the implementation of TBL at the branches, an equal number of managers stated that the head office should take the initiative as opposed to those that said that the branches should be taking the initiatives when it comes to implementing TBL.

In the interest of reaching the overarching goal, the following objectives were formulated as part of the study. These objectives were evaluated as outlined below:

4.2.2 Objectives of the research

- *To define the terminology associated with sustainable business practices and TBL by conducting a literature review* – This was achieved in Chapter 2 with the literature review, in which the background to sustainability and TBL was provided and the definitions thereof were expanded on. This would enable a better understanding of the aforementioned terms in the rest of the study.
- *To highlight the challenges encountered when implementing TBL in organisations and other factors that may also influence the application of TBL in an organisation* – Challenges encountered when implementing TBL were also described in the literature review in Chapter 2. The challenges were highlighted and elaborated on to assist in indicating the tensions that arise when implementing TBL, the prioritization that may be a result thereof and the fact that businesses have mainly focussed on profit for a long period of time.

- *To investigate the current situation concerning the implementation of TBL within the agricultural company's various branches in the Eastern Free State (EFS)* – This objective was achieved by compiling a list of structured questions that assisted in determining what the current situation is at the agricultural company and its branches located in the EFS area, concerning the implementation of TBL.
- *To gather relevant and useful data and transform it into useful information by using qualitative empirical studies concerning the agricultural company's implementation of TBL* – The data was gathered by means of structured interviews with the branch managers of the agricultural company in the EFS. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Themes were then developed according to the coding of the data from the interviews conducted with the respondents. The findings were summarised and discussed in Chapter 3 as part of the empirical findings.
- *To evaluate the information and make suggestions for the improved implementation of TBL at the agricultural company's various branches in the EFS* – The requirements of this objective are achieved as set out in Chapter 4, in which the conclusions and recommendations are discussed and elaborated on, based on the empirical findings of the research performed for this study.

4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The empirical studies found that the implementation of TBL was not consistent throughout the branches of the sample selected for the study. Furthermore, challenges were identified in this regard. The following recommendations are made to assist in implementing TBL at the branches of the agricultural company in the EFS:

- Senior management of the various branch divisions, namely the commercial, silos and mechanization branches, should determine a strategy for the implementation of TBL at the branches. As part of the strategy, goals should be listed that should be

accomplished at the branches in the next five years. The goals should be set up specifically for each of the elements of TBL, namely profit, people and planet.

The steps to reach these goals and implement TBL at the agricultural company, can include the following:

- Profit – some of the profits should be allocated to the elements of TBL, to provide resources for the active pursuit of TBL within the organisation
 - People – the agricultural company should ensure that there are fair and favourable business practices towards employees and the community, for example by providing employees with fair remuneration and benefits such as pensions and medical aids and assisting the communities with projects such as sponsoring schools and welfare organisations
 - Planet – the agricultural company should employ steps such as preventing soil and water pollution, doing waste segregation and recycling and taking steps to reduce electricity consumption by using solar energy alternatives
- As part of the process of creating the five-year strategy, brainstorming sessions should be held with the various branch managers. This will serve a twofold purpose, namely to increase awareness of TBL among the branch managers as well as to grant them the opportunity of putting forward ideas to be generated by the managers collaboratively.
 - The ideas to be applied at the branches that are decided on should then be incorporated into the planned five-year strategy. Once the strategy and ideas have been finalised, it should be converted into a policy of the agricultural company and circulated to the branch managers who can then further manage the implementation thereof at their respective branches.

- As part of the TBL strategy and policy, it would be necessary to allow the branch managers to allocate the necessary resources to the implementation process. Branch managers should be allowed to budget for the TBL implementation process at their branches so that the financial costs required for the sustainable practices to be implemented can be approved by senior management. This will assist in managing the tensions that may arise because of pursuing competing objectives within the company.
- The implementation of TBL is a continuous process requiring flexibility and adaptation and should be approached as being a continual process (Hogevold *et al.*, 2014:361). In order to implement this continual process and monitor how TBL is being implemented at the branches, the branch managers should give feedback at their branch managers' meetings that are held in the course of the year. The feedback at these meetings will indicate whether the ideas are bearing fruit at the branches and, on the other hand, whether ideas have been stated in the policy that are ineffectual. New suggestions can be made and considered for implementation.
- Reporting on the implementation of TBL at the branches should be given to the branch managers as well as to executive management on an annual basis, to indicate how successful the implementation was for the past year. As part of the reporting process, the branches with the best progress in TBL implementation can be awarded a prize as recognition of their efforts.
- As part of the strategy for TBL implementation, each branch can also be allowed to indicate how they would like to become involved in their communities as part of their CSR. The branches can also give feedback at the branch managers' meetings during the year, as to what actions they implemented at their chosen institution or place selected for CSR purposes.

4.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following factors were identified as limitations to the study:

- **Geographical limitation**

The study is limited to the geographical location of one agricultural company's branches located in the EFS area. Due to this, findings may differ in the other locations of the company with branches located in Limpopo as well. Caution should then be exercised when generalising the findings.

- **Size of sample population**

Although the sample size reached a point of saturation, it is still a limitation in terms of the study. The conclusions cannot be generalized, but still provide insights for further research.

- **Time**

The timeframe in which this study had to be completed, limited the number of managers that could be interviewed at the agricultural company. If more managers could have been interviewed, a better representation of the implementation of TBL in the agricultural company could have been obtained.

- **Method of data collection**

Qualitative research involves the feelings and perceptions of people within a specific company and cannot be generalised to another company.

- **Demographic limitation**

In the sample of branch managers selected for the EFS division at the agricultural company, there were only white managers in the population that could be selected to participate in the study. Due to this current situation, the data from the sample group does not reflect the perceptions of managers from other races.

- **Limited awareness of TBL within the company**

Another limitation in the study was the fact that the respondents did not have a knowledgeable background to TBL and what it entails. This limited the depth of feedback that could be obtained with regards to the implementation of TBL at their branches.

4.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A stronger focus on and awareness of sustainable business practices prevails in the current-day business environment.

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions can be made in the interest of future research:

- This same study could be performed on the implementation of TBL at the Limpopo division of the agricultural company
- Investigation into sustainable business practices in the agricultural industry in South Africa
- Reporting on sustainability practices at agricultural organisations in South Africa
- The role of management in the management and implementation of TBL at an agricultural organisation

4.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter dealt with how the objectives of the study were achieved and what conclusions could be drawn concerning the empirical findings. The conclusions highlighted the current situation at the company with regard to the implementation of TBL at the agricultural company's branches in the EFS.

Recommendations were also made as to how the branches could deal with the challenges of implementing TBL with assistance from senior management. The limitations of the study were mentioned and recommendations were made for future studies in this field.

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APPENDIX A



Ethics informed consent form

North-West University
SOUTH AFRICA

-
MBA Study
FIELD OF STUDY: Management - Financial
RESEARCHER: PA Brussow

CELL:Landline number at **087 358 8514** or cell no. **083 459 1358**

Email: **pbrussow@mighty.co.za**

Dear Interviewee

This **Informed Consent Statement** serves to confirm the following information as it relates to the MBA mini-dissertation on: **Investigating the implementation of triple bottom line in an agricultural organisation**

This study has been given ethical consent by the North West University:
NWU-00682-18-S4

This Informed Consent Form has two parts:

- **Information Sheet** (to share information about the study with you)
- **Certificate of Consent** (for signatures if you choose to participate)

Information Sheet

Purpose of the research

The sole purpose of this study is to obtain information from experts (such as yourself) employed and/or operating in the agricultural industry in an attempt to determine the nature of your everyday experience related to the research topic.

Type of Research Intervention

This research will involve your participation in an interview which will be recorded for transcription purposes and should take about half an hour of your time. The interview will be kept anonymous.

Participant Selection

You are being invited to take part in this research because we feel that your experience as an employee in the company can contribute much to improving sustainable business practices in the company's daily activities.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not and your choice will have no bearing on any other work-related evaluations or reports.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation is likely to help us improve the implementation of sustainable business practices in the company.

Confidentiality

No information about the interviews will be shared with the company and the information that we collect from this research project will be kept private. It will only be used for the purposes of this research project.

Fictitious names will be utilized when quoting statements in the dissertation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

If at any point during the interview you should feel uncomfortable, you will be provided with the opportunity to make your discomfort known or immediately have the option to end your participation.

Any confidential information that prohibits the researcher to publish it in the final dissertation should be communicated during the interview

Part II: Certificate of Consent **

I have been invited to participate in the research about sustainable business practices at VKB Agriculture (Pty) Ltd.

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study

Name of Participant_____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE ON INVESTIGATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE IN AN AGRICULTURAL COMPANY

MANAGEMENT LEVEL (Please select one): Executive ☐ Middle ☐ Branch ☐

1. Have you ever heard of the idea of Triple Bottom Line?
2. If you have heard of Triple Bottom Line, or have had it explained to you, please give your opinion on the following:
 - a. Are all the elements of Triple Bottom Line currently being implemented at your branch/division?
 - b. What areas of Triple Bottom Line do you think need more implementation at your branch/division?
3. If you think of the current situation at the agricultural company, which aspects of profit, people and planet are mostly focussed on by the company and why would you say so?
4. Are there any specific challenges or issues that you can think of in implementing TBL at the branches, with specific regard to:
 - a. Profit
 - b. People
 - c. Planet
5. Do you think costs would play a role in the extent to which TBL is implemented in the agricultural company?

6. How do you think Triple Bottom Line's implementation should be approached by the agricultural company?
7. Do you think that there should be more direction or leadership with regard to implementing TBL at the branches?
8. Have you ever heard of the environmental policy of the company that has been drawn up?

APPENDIX C



14 November 2018

I, Ms Cecilia van der Walt, hereby declare that I took care of the editing of the Mini-dissertation of Mr PA Brussow titled *Investigating the Implementation of Triple Bottom Line in an Agricultural Company*.

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