

Sustainability practices and well-being in an agro-industry

Práticas de sustentabilidade e bem-estar em uma agroindústria

Prácticas de sostenibilidad y bienestar en una agroindustria

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Abstract: This article analyses corporate sustainability practices in a rice agro-industry in south-central Rio Grande do Sul. Using a qualitative approach and a case study, participant observation was conducted over two and a half years, identifying gaps that affect Quality of Life at Work (QLW). The analysis was based on ESG pillars, the social indicators of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI – series 400), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Eleven gaps were detected in three areas: (1) health and safety, (2) development and inclusion, and (3) participation and organizational culture. The results point to a lack of structured policies in critical areas such as health, training, equal opportunities, and active listening, compromising well-being, performance, and institutional reputation. The study contributes to the debate on sustainability and quality of life in the agro-industrial sector.

Keywords: Corporate Sustainability; Quality of Work Life; ESG; Agroindustry; Sustainable Development Goals.

Resumo: Este artigo analisa práticas de sustentabilidade corporativa em uma agroindústria de arroz do Centro-Sul do Rio Grande do Sul. Por meio de uma abordagem qualitativa e de um estudo de caso, realizou-se observação participante ao longo de dois anos e meio, identificando lacunas que afetam a Qualidade de Vida no Trabalho (QVT). A análise baseou-se nos pilares ESG, nos indicadores sociais da Global Reporting Initiative (GRI – série 400) e nos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS). Foram detectadas onze lacunas em três eixos: (1) saúde e segurança, (2) desenvolvimento e inclusão, e (3) participação e cultura organizacional. Os resultados apontam a ausência de políticas estruturadas em áreas críticas, como saúde, capacitação, igualdade de oportunidades e escuta ativa, comprometendo o bem-estar, o desempenho e a reputação institucional. O estudo contribui para o debate sobre sustentabilidade e qualidade de vida no setor agroindustrial.

Palavras-chave: Sustentabilidade Corporativa; Qualidade de Vida no Trabalho; ESG; Agroindústria; Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza las prácticas de sostenibilidad corporativa de una agroindustria arrocera ubicada en el centro-sur de Rio Grande do Sul. Mediante un enfoque cualitativo y el método de estudio de caso, se realizó una observación participante durante dos años y medio, identificando brechas que afectan la Calidad de Vida en el Trabajo (QVT). El análisis se basó en los pilares ESG, en los indicadores sociales de la Iniciativa Global de Reporte (GRI – serie 400) y en los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS). Se detectaron once brechas agrupadas en tres áreas: (1) salud y seguridad, (2) desarrollo e inclusión, y (3) participación y cultura organizacional. Los resultados evidencian la falta de políticas estructuradas en áreas críticas como salud, capacitación, igualdad de oportunidades y mecanismos de escucha activa, lo que compromete el bienestar, el desempeño y la reputación institucional. El estudio contribuye al debate sobre sostenibilidad y calidad de vida en el sector agroindustrial.

Palabras clave: Sostenibilidad Corporativa; Calidad de Vida Laboral; ESG; Agroindustria; Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, growing concern about the environmental, social and ethical impacts of business activities has encouraged organizations from a wide range of sectors to adopt sustainable and responsible practices. In this context, the concept of ESG (environmental, social and governance) has gained prominence as a strategic benchmark for corporate performance, as it incorporates dimensions that transcend traditional financial indicators. The adoption of practices aligned with ESG principles has been recognized as fundamental to strengthening governance, environmental protection and the promotion of social well-being within and outside companies

In particular, the 'Social' dimension of ESG includes aspects related to safety, health, diversity, equity and, above all, Quality of Life at Work (QLW). The literature shows that the perception of organizational justice, opportunities for professional development, work-life balance, and access to spaces for listening and participation are central components of a positive work experience. Therefore, strategic QLW management has been recognized as an integral part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being)

Agribusiness in Brazil is very important to the national economy, given that the state of Rio Grande do Sul is a major rice producer. However, despite its economic relevance and capacity to generate jobs, there are reports of problems, including poor working conditions, a lack of appreciation policies for workers, and a lack of sustainable strategies in rice production and the rice processing industries.

In this context, the contribution of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), one of the most recognized international methodologies for preparing sustainability reports, is also noteworthy. In particular, the GRI 400 series offers a set of indicators that enable organizations to assess and communicate their practices related to employment, occupational health and safety, training, diversity, equal opportunities and community relations. These indicators are particularly relevant when seeking to diagnose and improve quality of life at work, as they directly address factors that affect employee well-being.

Given this scenario, this study aims to analyze how corporate sustainability practices can contribute to employee well-being in a rice agro-industry

in the south-central region of Rio Grande do Sul. It is based on the premise that organizational gaps in occupational health, professional development, inclusion, and participation directly affect not only workers' quality of life but also the company's productivity, capacity for innovation, and institutional reputation.

The choice of a qualitative approach and participant observation as a methodological strategy enables a detailed examination of everyday work experiences, allowing us to identify practices, omissions, and contradictions that would not be captured by quantitative instruments alone. The analysis is structured around three reference frameworks: (1) the ESG pillars; (2) the GRI 400 series indicators; and (3) the SDGs, offering an integrated reading between organizational diagnosis and global sustainability commitments.

By highlighting these connections, this article seeks to contribute to the construction of more humanized, resilient and responsible organizational models. The expectation is that the results will provide managers, researchers and policy makers with concrete elements to think about corporate sustainability not only as a market strategy, but as an ethical commitment to human and territorial development in the context of Brazilian agribusiness.

2 METHODOLOGY

The present study is characterized as qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research, using case studies as its main method. The objective was to gain an in-depth understanding of how sustainable practices and ESG principles can affect employee well-being at a rice agribusiness in the south-central region of Rio Grande do Sul (RS).

The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth analysis of the organizational context and the experiences of workers, considering the meanings attributed to institutional practices and working conditions. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2006), this type of approach is appropriate when seeking to interpret phenomena in their natural environment and complexity.

The study was based on participant observation, carried out by the first author during a period of approximately two and a half years working in

the company, in the administrative and operational sectors. This experience enabled an empirical survey of organizational gaps in employee well-being, people management, and the implementation of sustainable practices.

As technical procedures, a literature review was also conducted on the topics of ESG, SDGs, Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) indicators, and QLW, with the aim of supporting the analysis and proposing connections between the empirical data and conceptual frameworks. Data analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing for the identification of empirical categories (gaps) based on direct observation of the company's daily activities. Subsequently, these categories were related to ESG principles, GRI 400 (social) indicators, and the most relevant SDGs, with the aim of structuring improvement proposals aimed at promoting organizational well-being.

In addition to the empirical analysis, this study sought to establish a theoretical foundation that would allow the interpretation of observed practices in light of well-established models of corporate sustainability. The choice of the ESG, GRI, and SDG frameworks was complemented by conceptual contributions from authors addressing the integration between sustainability and people management, such as Barbieri (2004), Limongi-França (2007), and Irigaray and Stocker (2022). This theoretical–empirical triangulation aimed not only to describe the observed gaps but also to understand their structural causes and organizational implications, as recommended by Flick (2018) for qualitative research anchored in interpretive paradigms.

Accordingly, data analysis was guided by a constructivist perspective, which views organizational practices as expressions of specific values, norms, and cultural patterns. This approach enabled a contrast between empirical findings and theories on QLW, internal social responsibility, and sustainable people management, revealing both convergences and tensions between sustainability discourse and its actual implementation in corporate routines.

3 RESULTS

Quality of Life at Work (QLW) is intrinsically linked to ethics and the promotion of dignified, motivating environments. According to Limongi-França (2007), QLW encompasses dimensions such as physical and emotional safety,

work-life balance, recognition, and psychosocial support. These factors directly impact professional performance and satisfaction, as well as workers' overall health, with significant effects on their personal and family lives.

Perceptions of organizational justice, professional development, work-life balance, and listening spaces are central to a positive work experience. Their absence compromises institutional performance, leading to higher turnover, reduced team cohesion, and resistance to organizational change (Fabiano *et al.*, 2023). For this reason, strategic QLW management has been recognized as an integral part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 5 (Gender Equality) (Trevisan; Veloso; Dutra, 2020), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities) (Souza, 2023).

Researchers such as Silva (2023) demonstrate that QLW transcends remuneration, involving factors that impact health, motivation, and institutional belonging. Environments promoting well-being effectively retain talent, prevent absenteeism, and stimulate innovation, all critical for competitiveness in today's scenario.

Agribusiness is a primary driver of Brazil's economy, with Rio Grande do Sul leading as the nation's largest rice producer. Despite this economic weight, the sector frequently faces reports of poor working conditions and a lack of sustainable people management strategies. Addressing these gaps is essential for integrating social sustainability into organizations (Pereira; Coronel; Feistel, 2023).

Drawing on two and a half years of participant observation within the rice agro-industry, the present study uncovered eleven critical organizational gaps. These deficiencies directly impact employee well-being and reveal a systemic absence of structured social sustainability policies, underscoring a significant misalignment with global ESG standards. These gaps were grouped into three interconnected areas of analysis: (1) Occupational Health and Safety, (2) Development and Inclusion, and (3) Participation, Indicators, and Sustainable Culture.

The analysis was enriched by cross-referencing practices (or lack thereof) with international sustainability benchmarks: the social indicators of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI – 400 series), the SDGs, and the three

pillars of ESG. Each thematic axis is discussed in depth below, along with theoretical connections.

3.1 Area 1: Occupational health and safety – between formal obligation and daily non-compliance

One of the most significant issues observed in the agro-industry was the lack of awareness and commitment to occupational safety. Despite the company providing the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE), including helmets, safety glasses, ear protection, masks, and fall-prevention gear, many employees routinely neglected or misused them. This behavior was not isolated; it reflected a broader organizational culture in which safety procedures were perceived more as formal obligations than as genuine preventive measures. Daily routines involved exposure to mechanical noise, repetitive tasks, heavy lifting, and working at height, all of which contributed to an environment of constant risk for occupational accidents and illnesses.

The absence of regular and effective safety training reinforced these practices. Many workers performed their tasks based on habit or peer imitation rather than technical guidance. Supervisory oversight was also limited, resulting in weak enforcement of safety rules. This permissive culture normalized non-compliance, turning occupational safety into a secondary concern rather than a shared organizational value. Under the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI 403) framework, organizations are expected to implement systematic protocols for hazard identification, risk assessment, and incident investigation. In the analyzed agro-industry, these essential components were found to be critically underdeveloped, reflecting a reactive rather than a preventive safety culture.

Additionally, field observations revealed a lack of visible leadership engagement in promoting a safety culture. Supervisors rarely led by example in the use of PPE, which reduced workers' motivation to adopt these practices consistently. As Benites (2014) notes, leadership plays a decisive role in shaping organizational attitudes toward compliance and accountability. Without managerial commitment, even the best-designed safety policies fail to generate behavioral change at the operational level.

To strengthen occupational health and safety, theoretical and empirical studies (Rocha *et al.*, 2024) emphasize that preventive culture must be integrated into everyday routines. Regular training sessions, interactive workshops, and internal campaigns could help rebuild the perception that safety is not only a legal requirement but also a shared responsibility. Clear communication channels, safety audits, and incentive systems, such as recognition for teams maintaining accident-free records, can further consolidate these practices.

Aligning these measures with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being; SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth), as well as the social pillar of ESG, would enable the company to measure progress through concrete indicators such as training frequency, PPE compliance rates, and incident reduction. In doing so, occupational safety becomes not merely a compliance issue but a strategic dimension of corporate sustainability, directly enhancing worker well-being, reducing operational risks, and strengthening the company's social accountability.

3.2 Area 2: Development and Inclusion – The erasing of the human dimension in management

The second area revealed a critical lack of policies and actions focused on professional development, inclusion, and the appreciation of human capital. Despite operating in a sector that demands constant innovation and efficiency, the company shows limited investment in capacity-building and personal development programmes. During participant observation, it was noted that the existing training is mostly informal and operational, focusing on immediate technical needs without continuity or connection to a broader career development plan.

This lack of structured opportunities has created a perception of stagnation among employees, who see little prospect for internal growth or recognition of their skills. Workers reported that professional training is rare and not extended to all departments equally, with limited access for lower-level positions. Such a scenario leads to low engagement and a weakened organizational climate, since employees feel undervalued and

excluded from the company's strategic goals.

Additionally, leadership in the production area is concentrated among members of the same family, a structure that, while traditional in small and medium-sized agribusinesses, reinforces a perception of favoritism and limits opportunities for career progression based on merit and competence. This leadership profile reduces employees' sense of purpose and belonging, contributing to feelings of alienation and lack of motivation. It also suppresses diversity in decision-making, which is crucial for the development of inclusive and innovative management practices.

The absence of diversity and inclusion policies further aggravates the issue. There are no formal mechanisms to ensure equal opportunities regardless of gender, race, or educational background. This omission is inconsistent with the ESG principles and with the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 5: Gender Equality; and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth), which call for inclusive work environments that promote equity and human development.

From an analytical standpoint, this condition reflects a managerial logic that remains centered on production and control, in which the human dimension of work is undervalued. The focus on operational outcomes overlooks the potential of training and inclusion as tools for innovation, retention of talent, and organizational resilience. According to GRI 404 (Training and Education) and GRI 405 (Diversity and Equal Opportunity), investment in professional development and equal access to opportunities are indicators directly linked to the social performance of companies.

To overcome these gaps, the company could establish a structured programme for continuous education, integrating technical training, financial literacy, and literacy initiatives aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of workers. Partnerships with local institutions and professional education entities could help implement accessible learning opportunities. Furthermore, the adoption of transparent promotion criteria, mentoring initiatives, and leadership training would strengthen governance and build a culture based on merit and equity.

Ultimately, addressing development and inclusion from a sustainability perspective requires more than isolated initiatives; it demands a cultural

transformation where human potential is recognized as a central element of corporate sustainability. By integrating training, equity, and participation, the company can evolve from a reactive management model to a proactive, people-centered approach aligned with ESG principles and long-term competitiveness in the agribusiness sector.

3.3 Area 3: Participation, Monitoring and Sustainable Culture – The invisibility of internal voices

The third area of analysis revealed a significant absence of participation and feedback mechanisms, reflecting a weak internal culture of communication and sustainability monitoring. Despite the company's discourse on collaboration and commitment to collective goals, daily practices reveal a highly centralized management model in which most decisions are made exclusively by the directors and the human resources department. Employees have limited access to decision-making processes and lack formal opportunities to express opinions or contribute ideas that could improve work routines and sustainability initiatives.

Participant observation revealed that employees often feel unheard and disengaged from the company's strategic direction. In informal conversations, several workers expressed the desire to share suggestions but also mentioned a fear of retaliation or disbelief that their voices would have any real impact. This "silent culture" reinforces a perception of distance between management and employees, weakening trust and collective responsibility. The absence of a structured communication system prevents valuable operational knowledge from those who know the production processes best from being transformed into innovation and continuous improvement.

The lack of internal participation also limits the effectiveness of sustainability practices. Most environmental or social actions are introduced unilaterally by management, without consultation or co-creation with employees. As a result, initiatives that could have been enriched through collective input often remain superficial and short-lived. The absence of a participatory dynamic contrasts with ESG principles, especially the "Governance" dimension, which emphasizes transparency, stakeholder engagement, and accountability.

In addition, there is no systematic monitoring of sustainability and well-being indicators within the company. Only operational aspects, such as those related to Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), are evaluated. Without data on occupational health, satisfaction, inclusion, or training, it becomes impossible to measure progress or identify areas that require improvement. This gap demonstrates the absence of a governance framework capable of aligning sustainability goals with daily management practices.

To address these deficiencies, the company could establish structured spaces for dialogue and participation, such as internal surveys, regular meetings, or a sustainability committee including representatives from different departments. Such mechanisms would allow for the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the decision-making process and enhance a sense of belonging among employees. Additionally, implementing anonymous suggestion channels, digital platforms, or periodic feedback reports could strengthen trust and accountability across all organizational levels.

Monitoring tools aligned with GRI 102 (Organizational Governance), GRI 403 (Occupational Health and Safety), and GRI 413 (Local Communities) could be introduced to evaluate communication, engagement, and the social impact of internal practices. These indicators would provide a measurable framework for monitoring progress in participation, well-being, and sustainable culture. Integrating such tools into company management would not only increase transparency but also elevate sustainability from a reactive posture to a strategic organizational value.

Furthermore, campaigns and internal awareness programmes could play a key role in fostering a culture of sustainability. By promoting education on responsible consumption, energy efficiency, recycling, and environmental preservation, the company could transform individual attitudes into collective commitment. These actions align with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and would help build a long-term sustainable mindset among employees.

Ultimately, participation, monitoring, and sustainable culture are interdependent. Without open communication and data-driven evaluation, sustainability risks becoming a rhetorical commitment rather than a real organizational practice. By integrating listening mechanisms, participatory

governance, and monitoring indicators, the company can create a virtuous cycle of engagement, accountability, and improvement, consolidating its position as a socially responsible and resilient agribusiness.

4 DISCUSSION

The gaps identified are not merely operational failures but reveal structural weaknesses that limit the organization's ability to consolidate social sustainability. The absence of systematic practices focused on safety, equity, development, and organizational listening compromises not only the health and motivation of workers but also productivity, innovation capacity, and institutional legitimacy in the face of increasingly attentive stakeholders to ESG criteria.

Analysis of the data collected on Area 1 (Occupational Health and Safety) reveals that the shortcomings identified in the agro-industry are not isolated operational failures, but symptoms of a management structure that still separates economic performance from human well-being. The triangulation of field evidence and international frameworks allows for the following inferences:

- Safety Culture vs. Formal Compliance (GRI 403 & ESG – Social): Resistance to PPE use and a lack of regular training demonstrate that workplace safety is treated as an external legal obligation rather than a value intrinsic to the company's governance. From the perspective of the Social Pillar of ESG, this disconnect undermines the integrity of human capital, distancing the organization from the health and well-being targets set out in SDG 3.
- Career Stagnation and Talent Management (GRI 404 & SDG 8): The prevalence of informal training and the lack of structured career plans create a sense of invisibility among employees. When comparing this reality with GRI indicator 404, it becomes clear that the company neglects skills development as a strategic asset, which directly undermines SDG target 8.6 on promoting decent work and economic growth.
- Family Structure and Barriers to Inclusion (GRI 405 & ESG – Governance): The concentration of leadership within family clans limits merit-based advancement and stifles diversity of thought. This governance structure (the 'G' in ESG) creates a glass ceiling that prevents the effective imple-

mentation of equal opportunities policies (GRI 405) and gender equality (SDG 5), resulting in an organizational culture that is closed to feedback and innovation.

This theoretical convergence suggests that the social sustainability of agribusiness depends on a shift from reactive management (focused on avoiding fines or immediate accidents) to proactive and people-centered management. The adoption of GRI indicators and SDG targets should not be viewed merely as an exercise in transparency, but as a diagnostic tool to break cycles of disengagement and strengthen institutional legitimacy in the eyes of the market and the local community.

From a theoretical perspective, the results align with Barbieri's (2004) *Integrated Corporate Sustainability Model*, which argues that the balance among economic, social, and environmental dimensions depends on the internalization of ethical and humanistic values within management practices. In the case studied, the absence of structured policies for development and active listening reveals a dissociation between declared commitments and daily practices, a phenomenon previously described by Irigaray and Stocker (2022) when discussing the rhetorical nature of certain ESG initiatives in Brazil.

This gap between discourse and action reinforces Limongi-França's (2007) argument that quality of work life represents an indicator of an organization's social maturity. From this viewpoint, the study expands the understanding of how the "S" (Social) and "G" (Governance) dimensions of ESG are (or are not) materialized in traditional productive contexts such as the rice agribusiness sector.

By contrasting the empirical results with previous research (Christ *et al.*, 2024; Bezerra; Magalhães, 2024), this study contributes to refining the debate on sustainability in the agro-industrial sector, demonstrating that the effectiveness of ESG policies depends less on formal adherence to global indicators and more on the organizational capacity to promote internal cultural transformation.

Similar results have been reported in other studies in the agro-industrial context. Christ *et al.* (2024), for example, when analyzing sustainability reports in the sugar-energy sector, identified gaps in the measurement and

implementation of social indicators, highlighting that the agri-food sector still treats the social dimension of sustainability as secondary. Similarly, Bezerra and Magalhães (2024) point out that, in many Brazilian companies, precarious working practices or even practices analogous to slavery persist, reinforcing the need for more robust policies for human protection and valorization. These findings are consistent with the results of this study, suggesting that the observed reality is not an isolated case but part of a broader pattern of neglect of the social dimension of sustainability.

On the other hand, the literature also shows that companies that invest in QLW are able to generate tangible and intangible positive impacts. Research such as that by Limongi-França (2007) shows that health, safety and participation programmes increase engagement, reduce absenteeism and strengthen the psychological capital of teams. Therefore, by integrating the GRI 400 series indicators, aligning with the SDG goals (3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12, 13 and 16) and adopting ESG-compatible practices, the agro-industry studied could strategically reposition itself as a benchmark for sustainability in the rice sector (Santos Junior, 2024).

Table 1 systematizes these connections and reinforces that the adoption of global standards should not be understood simply as a regulatory or accountability requirement, but as an opportunity for organizational transformation.

Table 1 – Identified organizational gaps and their relationship with ESG, SDGs and GRI

Identified gap	ESG pillar	Related SDGs	GRI (400 series)
1. Irregular and unmonitored use of PPE	Social	SDG 8.8	GRI 403: Occupational Health and Safety
2. Lack of training in safety and accident prevention	Social	SDG 3.9 SDG 8	GRI 403: Occupational Health and Safety
3. Lack of health insurance and psychosocial support	Social	SDG 3.4	GRI 403: Occupational Health and Safety

Identified gap	ESG pillar	Related SDGs	GRI (400 series)
4. Lack of adequate spaces for rest and physical recovery	Social	SDG 8.5	GRI 403: Occupational Health and Safety
5. Absence of training and continuous development programmes	Social	SDG 4.4 SDG 8.6	GRI 404: Training and Education
6. Lack of inclusion and equal opportunity policies	Social	SDG 5.5 SDG 10.2	GRI 405: Diversity and Equal Opportunity
7. Lack of action against discrimination and harassment	Social	SDG 5.1 SDG 10.3	GRI 406: Non-Discrimination
8. Disregard for work-life balance	Social	SDG 3.4 SDG 8.5	GRI 401: Employment
9. Lack of communication channels for employees	Governance	SDG 16.7	GRI 402: Labour Relations
10. Failure to use well-being or QLW indicators	Governance	SDG 8, SDG 16	GRI 401 GRI 403
11. Lack of sustainability campaigns or internal culture	Environmental Social	SDG 12.8 SDG 13.3	GRI 102-16: Values, Principles and Culture

Source: elaborated by the authors.

A systemic analysis of the eleven gaps identified reveals that the shortcomings of the agri-food industry do not operate in isolation, but form a feedback loop that undermines social sustainability. The interdependence between the areas of analysis can be understood through the following key links:

- The Link Between Centralized Governance and the ‘Culture of Silence’: Highly centralized management and the prevalence of family-led leadership (Area 2) are directly reflected in the absence of channels for active listening (Area 3). This isolation in decision-making generates a sense of devaluation, resulting in a communication barrier in which employees, feeling unprotected by inclusion policies, choose to remain silent for fear of retaliation.
- The Impact of a Lack of Training on Risk Perception: The lack of continuing education programmes (Area 2) goes beyond the issue of technical

qualifications and affects operational safety (Area 1). Without a solid, dialogue-based educational foundation, the use of PPE comes to be seen merely as a bureaucratic imposition rather than a life-saving practice, which explains the routine negligence observed on the shop floor.

- **The Invisibility of Data as a Barrier to a Sustainable Culture:** The lack of monitoring and well-being indicators (Area 3) makes it impossible to address health and safety issues. What is not measured is not managed; therefore, the lack of QWL metrics perpetuates the invisibility of workers' demands, preventing sustainability from moving beyond rhetorical discourse to become an institutionalized practice.

This network of interdependencies demonstrates that isolated interventions, such as purchasing new safety equipment or conducting occasional training sessions, will be limited in effectiveness unless the centralizing organizational culture is addressed. Refining management requires the company to understand that improvements in safety are intrinsically linked to strengthening channels for participation and ensuring transparency in governance.

Among the gaps identified, it is important to highlight the interrelationship between them. The lack of regular training, for example, not only increases the risk of accidents (GRI 403), but also limits professional development (GRI 404), directly impacting motivation and talent retention. Similarly, the lack of listening channels (GRI 402) reinforces feelings of exclusion and mistrust, reducing the effectiveness of any diversity and inclusion policies (GRI 405 and 406). This systemic view indicates that gaps should not be addressed in isolation, but as part of a mechanism that, if neglected, perpetuates cycles of disengagement and poor performance.

This research highlights a recurring phenomenon in Brazilian agribusiness: the disconnect between corporate sustainability narratives and day-to-day experiences on the manufacturing floor. Although the organization may use global frameworks such as the SDGs and GRI guidelines to shape its external image, empirical data reveals that these concepts have not yet permeated its people management culture.

- **Sustainability as an Institutional Facade:** In the present case study, the formal adoption of ESG principles is merely rhetorical, with the 'Social'

aspect being neglected in favor of purely productivity-based metrics. This gap suggests that, for many medium-sized agribusinesses, sustainability is perceived as a market requirement (compliance) rather than an ethical commitment to human development.

- **Failure to Implement Care Policies:** The shortcomings in the implementation of PPE use and the provision of ongoing training demonstrate that well-being is not viewed as a strategic investment, but as an operational cost to be minimized. This practice supports the argument that the agri-food sector still treats the social dimension as secondary, maintaining working structures that border on precariousness under the pretext of technological modernization.
- **The Challenge of Participatory Governance:** The analytical findings of this study indicate that true social sustainability requires a break with autocratic and centralized management models. Without mechanisms for active listening and genuine participation (GRI 402), global objectives (such as SDG 8) become abstract goals, lacking any connection to workers' identity and sense of belonging.

Unlike approaches that focus solely on documentary compliance, this study demonstrates that the effectiveness of ESG policies in agribusiness depends on the humanization of processes. The critical point lies in understanding that 'institutional reputation' (cited as a concern for the company) is a volatile asset if it is not anchored in an organizational culture that recognizes human capital as the central pillar of long-term resilience and competitiveness.

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider that the application of international instruments, such as the GRI and the SDGs, faces barriers when transposed to the realities of small and medium-sized agribusinesses. Financial constraints, cultural resistance, and lack of oversight can hinder the effectiveness of these practices (Irigaray; Stocker, 2022). This finding reinforces the importance of adapting such global benchmarks to the local context, prioritizing measures with greater viability and immediate impact, such as basic training, the creation of communication channels, and the inclusion of awareness campaigns.

In terms of time frame, it can be suggested that the impacts of adopting sustainable practices would manifest themselves on three levels:

(1) “In the short term”: greater safety at work and reduction of accidents through regular training and proper use of PPE; (2) “In the medium term”: increased motivation and retention of talent, driven by development programmes, inclusion and work-life balance; and (3) “In the long term”: consolidation of institutional legitimacy and competitive differentiation in the agri-food market, strengthening the company's resilience in the face of social and environmental pressures.

Therefore, the results of this study reinforce that integrating sustainability into everyday business does not only mean complying with regulatory or market standards. It is also a strategic investment in the future of the organization and its workers, capable of strengthening the company's reputation, generating shared value and contributing to human and territorial development in Brazilian agribusiness.

5 CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to examine how corporate sustainability practices, particularly through the lens of ESG principles, can promote employee well-being in a rice agro-industry in the south-central region of Rio Grande do Sul. Based on participant observation and qualitative analysis, eleven structural and operational gaps were identified related to occupational health and safety, professional development, inclusion, work-life balance, and the absence of listening and participation channels. The results indicate that although the company has productive potential and operates in a sector crucial to the regional economy, it still lacks robust, integrated internal policies that prioritize employee well-being. The absence of organized actions affects both the quality of life of employees and limits the company's performance, talent retention, and compliance with market demands for responsible and sustainable enterprises.

The identified gaps were linked to the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) indicators, the United Nations SDGs, and the ESG pillars, showing that corporate sustainability is not limited to environmental or governance practices but depends directly on people-centered management.

As a practical suggestion, the research proposes the implementation of active listening mechanisms, such as internal surveys and suggestion

channels, investment in continuous training, and occupational health programs, as well as the development of an inclusion and diversity policy. The inclusion of these components can strengthen the company's culture, reduce operational risks, and align the organization with both national and international social responsibility standards. From an academic perspective, this research contributes to the debate on the integration of sustainability and quality of work life within the context of Brazilian agribusiness, which remains underexplored in this context.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings reinforce and extend classical models of corporate sustainability by showing that, in medium-sized agro-industrial companies, the social dimension of ESG remains underdeveloped compared to its environmental and economic counterparts. This study thus refines existing knowledge by demonstrating that employee well-being and quality of work life are structural conditions for organizational sustainability rather than merely desirable outcomes.

Furthermore, the contrast between practice and theory suggests that the effective incorporation of SDGs and GRI indicators requires more participatory governance and the recognition of human capital as a central axis of sustainability strategies. This reflection broadens the theoretical and empirical discussion of ESG within the Brazilian agribusiness context, offering insights for comparative studies and the design of socially responsible management models. For future studies, it is suggested to expand the investigation to other agro-industries, apply quantitative methods, and conduct surveys with workers and employees in order to validate and deepen the perceptions presented here.

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