**Supply chain social sustainability perceptions
in a selected retail supplier in South Africa: a critical case**

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration

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ABSTRACT

As chair of the WCED, Gro Brundtland was explicit that economic growth needs to be both environmentally and socially sustainable for future generations to thrive. However, social sustainability is the most vague and least researched pillar of sustainability. Recent literature has called for more research into social sustainability, especially in the supply chains of developing countries. Sustainable development in supply chains is an essential step toward achieving the global objective because it connects developing and developed countries. However, supply chains are complex and interconnected systems. Therefore, any social initiatives in supply chains must be studied to understand the resultant unexpected outcomes, trade-offs and tensions.

This mono-method qualitative study was framed using stakeholder theory and explored supply chain employees' perceptions of social sustainability initiatives. The study was interpretive and employed an inductive research approach in a critical case study design, involving 20 participants who were interviewed, triangulating their contributions in terms of publically available secondary data. Five themes naturally emerged from the data that answered the research question and offered additional insights. The findings showed that the supplier's retail clients, who were interviewed, have not been practising social sustainability in their supply chains. However, the retailers have been requiring ongoing audited assurance from a third-party (SIZA) that the supplier conforms to social/ethical standards which align with the retailers' corporate responsibility commitments. In conclusion, this study proposes several models that intend to promote the theoretical and practical application of the concepts that emerged in this study. This study was also able to propose impactful recommendations for business and theory.

Keywords

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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Signature   Date

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

In alphabetical order:

BSCI	Business Social Compliance Initiative
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COVID	Corona Virus Disease (pandemic)
CSR	Corporate Social Sustainability
DoL	Department of Labour of South Africa
DV	Dependent Variable
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ESG	Environmental, Social, Governance
ETI	Ethical Trading Initiative
FSSC24000	Food Safety System Certification Social Management System
GLOBALG.A.P	Global Good Agricultural Practice
HR	Human Resources
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
IV	Independent Variable
LocalG.A.P	Local Good Agricultural Practice
OECD	The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
QC	Quality Control
SA8000	Social Accountability International's social certification
SCM	Supply Chain Management
SCSS	Supply Chain Social Sustainability
SEDEX	Supplier Ethical Data Exchange
SIZA	Sustainability Initiative of South Africa
SMETA	Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit
SSCM	Sustainable Supply Chain Management
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNGP	United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights
WCA	Workplace Conditions Assessment
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development

APPENDICES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The concept of sustainable development stems from economics: in 1789, Malthus questioned the ability of the planet to sustain an exponentially growing human population indefinitely. In essence, sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" and stands on three pillars, namely, environmental/ecological, economic/financial, and social sustainability (Holdgate, 1987, p. 41). In 1972, after further calculations, Meadows argued that human population, pollution, and industrial productivity would reach their limit in the future due to finite resources. In the same year, at their conference on the human environment, the United Nations agreed on the concept now known as sustainable development, even though the term was only formalised in 1983 after the United Nations created the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (Mensah, 2019).

As chair of the WCED, Gro Harlem Brundtland, in her 1987 report, explained that the commission intentionally did not limit its scope to ecological issues. Environmental, social, and economic concerns are interconnected, and Brundtland was explicit that economic growth needs to be both environmentally and socially sustainable for future generations to thrive. The report further accentuates that each nation's environmental, social, and economic circumstances differ, and, as such, each nation must develop its own approach to achieving the global sustainable development objective (Holdgate, 1987). In 2018, a study concluded that depending on the context and point in time of each supply chain, there would be large differences in the social issues experienced by its stakeholders (Mani, Gunasekaran, & Delgado, 2018). The 1987 Brundtland report set the stage for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, where a call was made to the international community to drive sustainable development through its environmental, economic, and social pillars. The conference framed social sustainability through "equity, empowerment, accessibility, participation, cultural identity and institutional stability" (Mensah, 2019, p. 9,10). Although environmental and economic sustainability cannot be achieved without social sustainability, the social pillar "seems complicated and

overwhelming" and requires "understanding the nature of social dynamics" (Mensah, 2019, p. 9, 10).

The United Nations is tasked to achieve global objectives such as sustainable development through governments and large multinational corporations. The estimation is that 80% of all trade passes through a supply chain, amid the authors' indication of the importance of supply chains in the sustainability narrative: "The impact of corporate actions not only affects a standalone company and its society, but the whole supply chain, which extends to multiple continents" (Mani, 2018, p. 260). Moreover, "The supply chain management (SCM) perspective plays a special role in strategies for sustainability since it incorporates an expanded view of the product from the transformation of raw materials to delivery to the end user" (Morais & Barbieri, 2022, p. 1). Supply chains are, therefore, an effective mechanism to drive sustainability, explaining why the United Nations published a practical guide on supply chain sustainability in 2010. In the 2015 edition of this guide, Aron Cramer, CEO of Business for Social Responsibility, opined that the way businesses interact with their suppliers has advanced, shifting away from a heavy emphasis on auditing toward the use of new technology and cooperative initiatives to involve both workers and suppliers in a more equal approach to finding cooperative solutions (UN Global Compact Office and BSR, 2015).

Focal corporations are the supply chain members that provide "…leadership and exercises the greatest control over supply chain decisions and activities" (Morais, 2022, p. 2). Focal corporations (hence, retailers) increasingly require suppliers to comply with their codes of conduct. While ensuring compliance with the social sustainability requirements at first-tier suppliers is challenging, it is almost impossible at lower-tier suppliers. First-tier suppliers are those that trade directly with the focal company, while lower-tier suppliers refer to suppliers that trade with higher-tiered companies but not directly with the focal retailer (UN Global Compact Office and BSR, 2015).

Focal members of supply chains (hence, retailers) have started to pressure their suppliers to comply with social standards (Louw, Vermeulen, Kirsten, & Madevu, 2007; Swanepoel, 2017). Unfortunately, the well-intentioned Western world has developed these standards with very little input from developing nations, and there

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is still scanty research on tensions, trade-offs, and unanticipated outcomes of supply chain social sustainability (SCSS) in developing nations (Golicic, Lenk, & Hazen, 2020; Mani, 2018; Matos, Schleper, Gold, & Hall, 2020; Morais & Silvestre, 2018; Yawar & Seuring, 2017). The body of research on social sustainability itself lags far behind environmental and financial sustainability, which is why recent publications call for urgent research on social sustainability (Golicic, 2020; Mani, 2018; Morais, 2018, 2022). Moreover, all three pillars (environmental, economic, and social) must be realised to achieve sustainable development, not just one or two (Holdgate, 1987; Morais, 2018).The lack of research reviewing the implementation of socially sustainable practices impedes the continuous improvement of social sustainability strategies and tactics, increasing the importance of studying and improving the way social sustainability as a phenomenon is implemented.

This study answers the call for research by investigating social sustainability in a selected supply chain in South Africa known for its concern about environmental issues. The selected supply chain starts with farm employees and ends with the selected retailer in South Africa, specifically focusing on the social sustainability of the supply chain and all the suppliers along such a chain. In this supply chain, the companies must comply with formal social audits, based on conventions by the United Nations (UN) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) and adhere to all South African regulations that may impact employees (The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa, 2020). These audits are expected to be driven by the retailer, who, as the accountable member of the supply chain, should report on social sustainability practices throughout its entire supply chain (Venkatesh, Zhang, Deakins, & Mani, 2020),making the retailer the *focal member* of the supply chain. Arguably, companies' operations and supply chains are complex, complicated, and interconnected systems (Govindan, Shaw, & Majumdar, 2021; Louw, 2007; Matos, 2020; Thorlakson, Hainmueller, & Lambin, 2018).

1.2   RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question that directed the investigation is:

What are the perceptions of different roleplayers in the supply chain of a selected retailer in South Africa concerning its social sustainability strategies

and tactics, considering post-implementation unanticipated outcomes, trade-offs, and possible tensions concerning the adoption of the suggested practices?

1.3   Purpose of the study

As previously mentioned, the sustainable supply chain management guidelines, specifically focusing on social sustainability strategies, have been predominantly developed within Western countries (Golicic, 2020; Swanepoel, 2017). This study aimed to shed light on various stakeholders' perceptions of these predetermined strategies within a South African context by conducting in-depth discussions with various role players in a selected supply chain of a leading retailer. The objective was to identify these strategies' advantages (benefits) and disadvantages (deterrents) from different perspectives and, subsequently, present an integrated, balanced view of their long-term feasibility for all involved parties.

The selected company supplies a retailer widely recognised as a trendsetter in addressing sustainability issues within the South African retail landscape, rendering this study critical in terms of the precedent established and the direction to be pursued for ensuring positive outcomes in the future.

1.4   BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION

The results of this study can inform the continuous improvement of social sustainability practices in supply chains, ultimately contributing to the achievement of the global sustainable development goals. This research is crucial because social sustainability is an essential component of the global objective, and implementing social sustainability standards has become increasingly important in supply chain management. Arguably, the intentions of expecting compliance to social sustainability practices are good but may not be implemented effectively unless more information is gathered from those it is intended to benefit. Currently, there is a lack of empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness of social sustainability initiatives ─ particularly in developing countries. This research aims to address this void.

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1.5 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The social pillar is the most vaguely defined, misunderstood, and least researched component of Social Supply Chain Management and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Golicic, 2020; Mani, 2018; Morais, 2022; Sajjad, Eweje, & Tappin, 2020). Consequently, there have been numerous calls in the literature for more research on social sustainability, especially in supply chains and in developing countries (Ali & Kaur, 2021; Battilana, Obloj, Pache, & Sengul, 2022; Golicic, 2020; Janker & Mann, 2018; Mani, Agrawal, & Sharma, 2015; Morais, 2018, 2022; Wontner, Walker, Harris, & Lynch, 2020). In addition, the literature is still immature in describing the drivers that cause suppliers to adopt a social sustainability approach, understanding that it involves different forms of pressure. Moreover, literature is scarce on lower-tier suppliers and developing country contexts (Venkatesh, 2020). A 2020 review of sustainable operations and supply chain management literature sounded the alarm that there are post-implementation unanticipated outcomes, trade-offs, and tensions associated with the adoption of sustainability, which is still under-researched. This is of particular concern because operations and supply chain management is a highly complex system, and by not understanding the effects of well-intended sustainability initiatives on such a system, the chances of positive outcomes decrease (Matos, 2020).This research is crucial because social sustainability is an essential component of the global objective, and implementing social sustainability standards has become increasingly important in supply chain management. Presently, limited research attention has been devoted to the effectiveness of social sustainability initiatives — particularly in developing countries.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

The nature of the research question of this study is aligned with an interpretivist philosophy, employing an inductive research approach. This study sought to explore and understand employees' perceptions in a supply chain based on their experience of social sustainability initiatives. Therefore, the research was mono-method, qualitative in nature, and cross-sectional, and focussed on a single retail supplier as a critical case study (Morrow, 2007; Robinson, 2014; Yazan, 2015). A case study offered the opportunity to gain deep and rich insights into the contextual perceptions in- and among the bounded case/company in a South African supply chain.

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1.7   STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENT

This document continues with a review of the literature, which circumscribes the salient definitions, research context, and theory. Chapter 3 describes the research question and purpose, followed by Chapter 4, research methodology. The research methodology chapter includes the research design, method, quality control, ethics, and limitations. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 contain the research findings, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations. Toward this report's end are the reference list and appendices.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review, discussing all the relevant constructs in terms of literature published in established journals and focusing on the most recent available literature.

CHAPTER 2:   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the origin and contexts of relevant constructs to define overlapping concepts clearly. It delves into understanding social responsibility, sustainability, and sustainable supply chain management (SSCM), emphasising the social pillar of SSCM, also known as supply chain social sustainability (SCSS). It will also explore the complexities of social auditing in the context of South Africa, a developing country with a rich and challenging history, and its impact on the agricultural sector. This chapter presents the social, economic, and historical backdrop of South Africa, examining how social auditing and CSR initiatives intersect with the unique challenges faced by the nation's agricultural and retail sectors. Finally, stakeholder theory is explained as the chosen theoretical lens for the study.

2.2   RELATED DEFINITIONS

Considerable overlap exists in literature concerning terminologies used to describe the impact of business on society. This may be because various institutions increasingly contribute to the concept through multiple lenses, such as ethics, finance, climate change, human rights, operations, and supply chain management. Subsequently, terminology in the literature is often used interchangeably. Definitions relevant to this study were selected and are described in the following sections.

2.2.1   Understanding' social responsibility' and 'sustainability'

The *social responsibility* of a business was first defined in 1953 as "a businessperson's obligation to make decisions or take actions that follow the desired objectives and values of society" (Wong, Kim, & Lee, 2022, p. 1). However, an article by Milton Friedman in 1970 titled "The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase its Profits" (Battilana, 2022, p. 240) created an inflexion point, which, aided by agency theory, has since guided shareholders and managers to prioritise maximising shareholder value. Social responsibility has subsequently been grouped with economic and environmental responsibility — collectively termed corporate responsibility (Fatima & Elbanna, 2022).

Corporate responsibility is related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) by the overarching concept of corporate sustainability. Scholars have found it hard to conceptualise CSR, which may be defined differently for each industry (Wong, 2022). Nonetheless, there is significant consensus on the fundamental elements by which CSR applies corporate sustainability ─ the triple bottom line, which is also referred to as Profit, Planet, People, and has been defined as "Sustainable development involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity"(Cristobal-Cipriano, Arroyo, & Romualdo, 2022, p. 2). Despite stemming from corporate sustainability, Mani, Jabbour, and Mani (2020) propose that CSR is oriented toward the immediate needs of stakeholders, while sustainability goes beyond this scope by meeting present needs without compromising the needs of future generations.

2.2.2 Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) in perspective

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Holdgate, 1987, p. 41). This seminal definition has since been refined from a business perspective into "the creation of resilient organisations through integrated economic, social and environmental systems"(Ahi & Searcy, 2013, p. 329). Corporate sustainability adopts the same environmental, economic, and social pillars as sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) (Mani, 2015; Quarshie, Salmi, & Leuschner, 2016). In essence, SSCM refers to the actions toward achieving a truly sustainable supply chain (Pagell & Wu, 2009). The significant overlap in sustainability concepts has also led to the CSR triple bottom line being accepted as synonymous with social, environmental, and economic performance in SSCM (Ahi, 2013; Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014; Pagell, 2009; Quarshie, 2016).

A supply chain is "a dynamic process and involves the constant flow of information, materials, and funds across multiple functional areas both within and between chain members" (Jain, Wadhwa, & Deshmukh, 2009, p. 3013). The United Nations define supply chain sustainability as "…the management of environmental, social and economic impacts and the encouragement of good governance practices, throughout the lifecycles of goods and services" and adds that supply chain sustainability is meant to benefit all stakeholders that bring products and services to the market, by

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creating, defending, and increasing long-term environmental, social, and economic value for all (UN Global Compact Office and BSR, 2015, p. 5).

Pagell and Shevchenko (2014) define SSCM as "the designing, organising, coordinating, and controlling of supply chains to become truly sustainable with the minimum expectation of a truly sustainable supply chain being to maintain economic viability, while doing no harm to social or environmental systems" (2014, p. 45). Ahi and Searcy (2013) further reviewed 12 definitions of SSCM to propose the following complete definition:

> The creation of coordinated supply chains through the voluntary integration of economic, environmental, and social considerations with key inter-organisational business systems designed to efficiently and effectively manage the material, information, and capital flows associated with the procurement, production, and distribution of products or services in order to meet stakeholder requirements and improve the profitability, competitiveness, and resilience of the organisation over the short- and long-term. (Ahi, 2013, p. 339)

The following definition is adopted to extend the Brundtland definition of sustainability to this research's supply chain context: "A truly sustainable supply chain could, customers willing, continue to do business forever." (Pagell, 2009).

2.2.3 Supply Chain Social Sustainability (SCSS)

As mentioned, the overlapping domains connected through sustainability converge on the economic, environmental and social pillars that each may have several synonyms used interchangeably in the academic and grey literature. This study will focus only on the social pillar as applied in SSCM.

"Social sustainability is related to the management of practices, capabilities, stakeholders and resources to address human potential and welfare both within and outside the communities of the supply chain" (Morais, 2022, p. 3). Some researchers place SSCM entirely within the CSR domain (Golicic, 2020). The cross-pollination and interchangeability of the responsibility and sustainability concepts in the literature support their convergence to the same three pillars. In 2017, Yawar and

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Seuring reviewed the literature at the intersection of CSR and SSCM and identified the following frequently faced social challenges: labour conditions; child labour; human rights; health and safety; minority development; disabled/marginalised people inclusion; and gender issues (Yawar, 2017). This study considered these social issues as important to the social pillar of SSCM, also bearing in mind the previously defined meaning of sustainability, which refers to the supply chains of future generations. Further, the term supply chain social sustainability (SCSS) refers only to the social pillar of SSCM.

"SCSS is defined as conducting supply chain operations in a way that meets human needs as defined by the people in the communities in which the firms across a supply chain operate, serve, or otherwise affect" (Golicic, 2020, p. 999). This definition was used because it suited the varying nature of social issues between developed and developing countries and across different contexts (Golicic, 2020). The human needs referred to in this definition include, at a minimum, the social challenges mentioned above and, at a maximum, any human needs defined by the people.

This study noted that it is challenging for companies to achieve SCSS (Golicic, 2020), possibly because companies focus on economic and environmental pillars first and then experience diminishing returns on their efforts in the social domain, which require persistence and significant changes in their internal policies and values (Sajjad, 2020). Research is aligned with corporate practice by focusing on the economic and environmental pillars. Thus, the social pillar is still the most vaguely defined, misunderstood, and least researched SSCM/CSR component (Golicic, 2020; Morais, 2022; Sajjad, 2020). Consequently, there have been numerous calls in the literature for more research on social sustainability, especially in supply chains and in developing countries (Ali, 2021; Battilana, 2022; Golicic, 2020; Janker, 2018; Mani, 2015; Morais, 2018, 2022; Wontner, 2020).

2.2.4   Social auditing explained

Focal members in a supply chain (the retailers) are increasingly expected to ensure responsible/sustainable social conduct at their suppliers. A focal company may have several suppliers, and their suppliers may have more suppliers under them. Suppliers in a supply chain are, therefore, tiered/layered. A focal supplier has direct relationships with their primary suppliers, but these relationships are challenging to

maintain with secondary or tertiary suppliers (Venkatesh, 2020).

Social auditing is a mechanism for focal companies to ensure social compliance at primary or secondary suppliers in a supply chain. Social audits satisfy the CSR objectives of focal suppliers in a supply chain concerned with risks to their public image. Moreover, focal brands have used audit reports (in defence) to justify why they had been procuring from manufacturers where unsafe places of work were later discovered(Terwindt & Armstrong, 2019).Therefore, there is an overlap of CSR/SCSS and the risk management and public relations needs of a focal company.

Many social standards exist, and they are often industry-specific. The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa (SIZA) has over 1700 members. Their social standard is significant to South Africa because it enables trade with local and international retailers committed to ethical trade (The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa, n.d.). The SIZA standard is based on South African regulations but goes further by including ILO conventions. The categories of the SIZA standard are: (i) Management systems and business ethics; (ii) Forced; Bonded and Indentured Prison Labour; (iii) Child Labour and Young Workers, (iv) Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining; (v) Discrimination, Harassment and Abuse; (vi) Health and Safety; (vii) Wages, Benefits and Terms of Employment; and (viii) Working Hours(The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa, 2020).

A second social standard affecting some South African suppliers is the Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit (SMETA). Sedex has four pillars, and suppliers can opt for a two or four-pillar audit, depending on the requirements of the focal supplier. SMETA is similar to SIZA in that it includes local law and is based on ILO conventions. The SMETA standard employs the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) base code of labour practice, which, in turn, is based on the ILO standards. The mandatory SMETA pillars are Labour Standards and Health and Safety, and the optional pillars are Environment and Business Ethics (Supplier Ethical Data Exchange [Sedex], 2019).

Therefore, SIZA and SMETA audit standards are similar. This study's scope may include SIZA and SMETA audits as one of the tools used by focal companies toward achieving SCSS.

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2.3 CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

2.3.1 Developing countries

Developed countries constitute less than 15% of the global population but are highly connected to less developed countries via their supply chains. Developed countries spearhead social sustainability based on Western values in supply chains (Golicic, 2020; Swanepoel, 2017). The Swiss-based International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Human Rights Commission have motivated for all social issues considered relevant in SSCM (Yawar, 2017).

The seminal 1987 definition of sustainability by Brundtland can be interpreted differently by each stakeholder, and it is imperative that social sustainability initiatives be adapted to the affected communities (Golicic, 2020). Generally, however, CSR priorities and standards have been led by various groups within developed countries and have sometimes been unsustainably imposed onto stakeholders of supply chains in developing countries (Gugler & Shi, 2009). There is a gap in the research on social issues in contexts outside developed countries necessary for successful SCSS (Mani, Gunasekaran, Papadopoulos, Hazen, & Dubey, 2016; Mani, 2018; Morais, 2022).

2.3.2 South Africa as a developing country

As a developing country, South Africa experiences significant social issues compared to developed countries, such as famine, disease, abjection, and unemployment (Devereux, 2020; Golicic, 2020; Swanepoel, 2017). In addition, developed countries are more stable and have effective governance of more advanced social regulations (Gugler, 2009; Morais, 2022).

For various reasons, South Africa offers a unique contextual insight into social sustainability. Firstly, diverse races and nationalities have converged in South Africa over time, permanently disrupting the native Khoisan people. Present-day South Africa was heavily influenced by centuries of dynamic interactions between conquerors (Xhosa and Zulu peoples), colonisers (Dutch and British), alliances, and wars. Further, the Dutch imported enslaved peoples from Indonesia, Madagascar, India, and East Africa who remained in South Africa, and, over time, settlers from

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many other European countries also added to South Africa's diversity (Ross, 2008).

Secondly, South Africa is well known for intensifying segregation according to race from 1948 to 1993 through the unique apartheid system, which suppressed non-European races — creating a negative international reputation. The effects of apartheid are deeply ingrained in every level of society, with remnants still present today, especially in agriculture (Devereux, 2020). Importers of South African agricultural products, understandably, therefore, increasingly require suppliers to comply with audited social standards (The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa, 2020). One such South African SIZA farm auditor once said: "you know, I don't want to do these ethical audits anymore. The real issue is racism on farms… These audits make no difference" (Swanepoel, 2017, p. 310).

Third, with a Gini coefficient of 63%, South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world (World Bank, 2014). Thus, many South Africans live in poverty, and a small number hold most of the wealth. A SCSS study noted that consumers in developing countries are generally price-sensitive, making it difficult to pay for sustainable products that are often more expensive (Golicic, 2020). Moreover, even when customers intend to support sustainable products, they often choose cheaper options, prioritising affordability (Sajjad, 2020). However, the wealthy South African minority and ethically-motivated consumers may maintain demand for sustainable products, which would be catered for by companies that implement SSCM. Thus, there is an opportunity for insights into social sustainability as it is applied, interpreted, and experienced in a South African supply chain.

2.3.3 South African agriculture and retail

The agricultural industry plays a significant role in the South African economy by creating jobs, ensuring food security, and generating income from exports. In 2021, 2.5% of South Africa's GDP comprised the agriculture sector (World Bank, 2023b), while it also employs around 5.4% of the country's labour force (Maluleke, 2022). Agriculture plays a significant role in South Africa's export industry. Agriculture-related exports include citrus, wine, maize, and wool. Over 5.8% of overall exports in February 2023 comprised vegetable products (South African Revenue Service, 2023). South Africa's agricultural industry supports rural livelihoods and promotes economic growth.

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The significance of food retailers in South Africa has increased noticeably in response to urbanisation that has increased after 1994. In 1960, 46.6% of South Africans were urbanised, increasing to 67.8% in 2021 (World Bank, 2023a). Food retailers compete for urban shoppers through various value offerings, such as their products' continuous availability, quality, and safety (Louw, 2007). Therefore, the minimum requirements to supply a food retailer are becoming harder to achieve, and retailers must procure from farmers/suppliers who support their strategies.

In today's competitive market, it is increasingly difficult for small-scale farmers to enter the food retail supply chain. The certification process for South African crops has evolved, beginning with the introduction of Good Agricultural Practice certifications, such as LOCAL G.A.P. and GLOBAL G.A.P. in 1997, followed by SIZA Social in 2016, and most recently, SIZA Environmental (GLOBAL G.A.P., 2023; The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa, 2023). Before 1997, suppliers could commence their operations on a smaller scale and incrementally adapt to more stringent requirements. However, recent changes require new suppliers to meet comprehensive service-level requirements, certifications, and compliance measures from the outset, which may pose significant financial challenges. This issue is especially pertinent for previously disadvantaged farmers, who, having already faced exclusion during the apartheid era, now confront potentially insurmountable barriers to inclusion in the retail food supply chain (Louw, 2007). Consequently, the question is: To what extent does mandating adherence to a Western-centric social sustainability audit, such as SIZA, before granting access to the retail food supply chain hinder or facilitate the welfare of the South African agriculture community?

2.4 THEORETICAL ANCHOR FOR THE STUDY

2.4.1 Overview

As introduced before, sustainability and CSR are understood differently in different fields and contexts. A systematic literature review towards conceptual framework development confirmed that social sustainability research often lacks theoretical frameworks. When theory is employed, it is mostly "stakeholder theory, transaction cost economics theory, institutional theory, grounded theory, agency theory, paradox theory, resource-based view theory, and resource dependence theory" (Govindan,

2021, p. 5). The field of Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) remains in its nascent stages, leading to a relatively shallow exploration of theoretical frameworks. Consequently, applying various theories, when utilised, spans a broad spectrum, and theories are often combined (Mani, 2018; Morais, 2022).

When considering which theoretical lens would most appropriately support the research question, the literature review allowed for the following assumptions to be made:

- The motivation behind supply chain social sustainability (SCSS) is honourable.
- The strategies and tactics employed to achieve SCSS are well-intended.
- Supply chains are complex, resulting in the following:
- Any change inevitably creates unintended outcomes.
- Unintended outcomes are hard to identify.
- There is an urgent need to understand the perceptions of those SCSS is intended to benefit.
- Studying unintended outcomes will improve SCSS tactics and strategies (Matos, 2020).

The research question considers the perceptions of different role players of SCSS in a selected retail supply chain. This study defines SCSS as "conducting supply chain operations in a way that meets human needs as defined by the people in the communities in which the firms across a supply chain operate, serve, or otherwise affect" (Golicic, 2020, p. 999). Therefore, this study required a theoretical lens that can describe the SCSS role players and the relevance of their perceptions.

2.4.2 Stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory, chosen as the theoretical lens of this study, is one of the most discussed theories in SSCM due to societal pressures on companies to include all stakeholders in their decision-making process (Morais, 2022). The seminal definition of a stakeholder is "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997, p. 854). This definition casts such a wide net on who could be considered a stakeholder that it would be impractical for managers to attend to all their claims. Therefore, many models and definitions have been developed over the years to assist with identifying stakeholders that merit manager attention. Several scholars have attempted to

identify a stakeholder based on the stakeholder's power or how dependent the organisation is on the stakeholder, but those definitions could exclude the communities in which the supply chain operates (Mitchell, 1997). Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) developed a stakeholder identification and salience theory that Morais and Barbieri (2022) describes to prioritise company stakeholders in terms of:

> …the power of influence, the legitimacy of the relationship, and the urgency of claiming. The accumulation of such attributes determines the relevance or salience of the stakeholders, which could be classified into seven types: dormant (powerful), discretionary (legitimate), claimant (urgent), dominant (powerful and legitimate), dangerous (powerful and legitimate), dependent (legitimate and urgent), and definitive (powerful, legitimate, and urgent). (2022, p. 5)

This study gathered interview data from several stakeholder classes. Participants are classed according to their power, legitimacy, and urgency. Figure 1 illustrates the stakeholder identification typology being discussed.
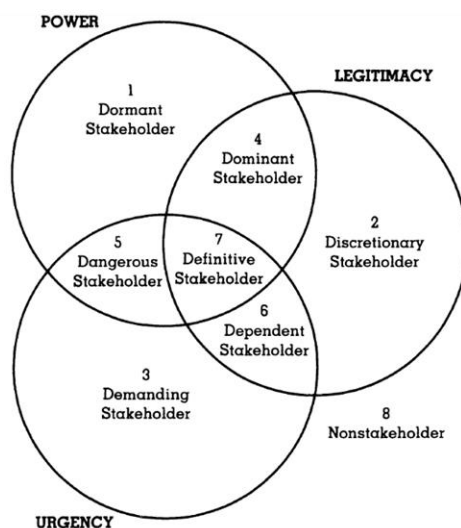
Figure 1: Stakeholder identification typology (Source: Mitchell, 1997.)

Some practical examples regarding Figure 1: An employee would have power and legitimacy but may not have an urgent claim, resulting in the person being a dominant stakeholder (4). Alternatively, a family member of an employee may only have an urgent claim, resulting in the person being a demanding stakeholder (3).

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Alternatively, a representative of the focal company may have power, legitimacy, and an urgent claim against a supplier, indicating a definitive stakeholder (7).

In summary, stakeholder theory can add value to the study by legitimising the perceptions of all stakeholders affected by SCSS implementations and enriching the data by classifying the stakeholders by typology. Further, interviewed stakeholders may or may not correlate to the role players SCSS intended to benefit, which would be critical to analyse and report in this study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature presented in Chapter 2 converged on the urgent need for the research, which led the researcher to create the research question. A typical food supply chain comprises "production, storage, processing, distribution, retail and consumption" (Davis, Downs, & Gephart, 2021). This study focused on one selected South African retail supplier, which performed both functions of food production (farming/growing) and packaging for the retailer. The identity of the selected supplier and its retail clients is not disclosed in the document to comply with ethical regulations, keeping the content anonymous and confidential.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question that directed the qualitative investigation was:

What are the perceptions of different role players* in the supply chain of a selected retailer in South Africa concerning its social sustainability strategies and tactics, considering post-implementation unanticipated outcomes, trade-offs, and possible tensions concerning the adoption of the suggested practices?

The different role players* targeted were:
- From the food production side of the supplier:

Farm labourers, (>4)

The farm manager, (1)
- From a storage and processing side of the supplier:

Food facility handlers (>4)

Food facility manager (1)
- *From an integrated supplier view:*

The owner (1)

The human resources manager (1)

3.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The guidelines for sustainable supply chain management, as implemented in a South African context, with particular reference to social strategies, have originated in Western country contexts (Golicic, 2020; Swanepoel, 2017). This study entailed in-depth discussions with various role players in a selected supply chain of an established retailer. The study aimed to shed light on the various parties' perceptions of the predetermined strategies to indicate the pros (benefits) and cons (deterrents) from various perspectives to present an integrated, balanced view in terms of the viability of the process for everyone in the future in an emerging market context. The selected company has been supplying a retailer generally viewed as a trendsetter regarding sustainability issues on the South African retail scene, making this study critical regarding the example set and route to pursue to ensure positive outcomes.

3.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the research question that flowed naturally from the literature review and introduced the role players that will be targeted. The following chapter will detail the research methodology implemented in this study to achieve the anticipated outcomes.

CHAPTER 4:   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1   INTRODUCTION

When considering the scientific approach most appropriate for answering the research question posed for this study (Chapter 3), the researcher began the investigation with philosophical assumptions concerning the nature of the reality to be investigated (ontology), how and what was known about the phenomenon (epistemology) including prevailing values (axiology), the context and approach to the research (methodology), and the compilation of it (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007, p. 238). This study considered two realities. The first reality concerned the international conventions on social sustainability, and the second was the lived experience of stakeholders who needed to comply with social sustainability initiatives. The literature questioned how international conventions came to know what social sustainability is for everyone despite the general agreement that each nation is unique. There was insufficient literature on what the findings of this study may be. Therefore, the researcher needed to be open to findings that confirm or deny the existence of SCSS (supply chain social sustainability) unexpected outcomes, tensions, and trade-offs, and may also have needed to explore new lines of data.

As mentioned, this study adopted the following definition of supply chain social sustainability: "SCSS is defined as conducting supply chain operations in a way that meets human needs as defined by the people in the communities in which the firms across a supply chain operate, serve, or otherwise affect" (Golicic, 2020, p. 999). Accordingly, the particular time, values, and contexts of the role players would play a crucial role in how they perceived whether their needs were being met. Naturally, an interpretive ontological assumption was the most appropriate approach to study how role players defined their social realities (Andrade, 2009).

The researcher further needed the flexibility to vary the approach to data collection according to the context of each role player, considering: their identity in a post-apartheid South Africa, their role in each organisation, and their power and influence. Although all steps were taken to ensure neutrality, the study had to acknowledge the worldview and biases of the researcher, as this affected several steps in the research and even the relationship with each interviewee. The researcher further needed to

follow through on new or unexpected information encountered during data gathering. Therefore, the study's epistemology was constructivist, which assumed that reality is constructed through role players' interactions with their social worlds and gives rise to multiple interpretations (Yazan, 2015).

When considering the research methodology for this study, employing qualitative research was considered appropriate as it allowed an understanding of different role players' views on the research topic. A qualitative method focuses on deriving meaning from generated data and studying personal experiences that could be described and interpreted in literature. In this study, qualitative research was considered valid to explore unknown factors stipulated in the research problem. Qualitative research can help to create new theories and specifically discover unexpected information, which this study intended to do (Morrow, 2007). Building theory in an interpretive way was done through an inductive thinking process, which started at the data analysis stage when making sense of the meanings of the data (Andrade, 2009; Morrow, 2007).

To summarise, this study assumed an interpretive ontology and a constructive inductive epistemology to build theory through inductive analyses from a qualitative methodology. This chapter will further describe the research design, data collection, data analysis, quality control, ethics and limitations of this study.

4.2   RESEARCH DESIGN

4.2.1   Research strategy

The study employed a case study strategy. A case is "a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries and it can be a person, a program, a group, a specific policy and so on" (Grünbaum, 2007). A case study was an appropriate strategy to address the research question because the tiered companies undergoing social audits were connected through a supply chain. A case study is often the study of a particular issue/phenomenon as evidenced within a bounded system with relevant context (Creswell, 2007). A so-called critical case refers to a strategy often used in immature research topics to establish the need for more research. A case sample can be a critical case if the researcher argues that the presence of a problem/issue/phenomenon in the case implies its existence elsewhere (Etikan,

2016).

4.2.2 Population

The study population represents the maximum potential sample size of a study (Robinson, 2014). The population inclusion criteria for this study were South African supply chains of farmed goods, which were stored, processed, and packaged before being distributed to a retailer that maintained a reputation of social sustainability. It should be noted that the literature describes the type of data analysed in this study as varying over time, and as such, the population was also identified by time, the year 2023.

4.2.3 Unit of analysis

Many scholars argue that a (research) case study is indistinguishable from the unit of analysis, although many found it challenging to make this argument without contradicting themselves at some point (Grünbaum, 2007). A holistic case identical to the unit of analysis was appropriate for a critical case (Grünbaum, 2007). Therefore, the most appropriate case study design was a congenital design, where all departments inside the supply chain case formed one unit of analysis. Therefore, the unit of analysis in this study is the company, which has vertically integrated the farming and processing of the supply chain.

4.2.4 Sampling method and size

4.2.4.1 Considerations

Qualitative studies generally have smaller and purposive samples/selections as opposed to quantitative studies, which have larger, random samples/selections. The researcher noted that "Sample" is more appropriate for quantitative research, whereas qualitative research should favour the term "selection" (Morrow, 2007). However, per conventions, this study utilised the term "sample". Accordingly, the sample of the study is the subset of the population from which data is collected. Therefore, the sample — in this study — represented the population defined by its inclusion criteria. Further, there would have been advantages and disadvantages in selecting a homogeneous or heterogeneous sample; therefore, a balance was to be found supporting the research methodology. A sample that was too homogenous may not have been generalisable to the population, whereas a sample that was too heterogeneous may have reduced the number of significant themes (Robinson,

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2014). In qualitative research, the sample size is informed by the study's aim, purpose, credibility, and pragmatic constraints (Morrow, 2007). A case study design could warrant a sample size of one if the function of the study were to prove that a particular phenomenon was possible (Robinson, 2014). This was an appropriate reason for choosing a case study design because the research question required that the perceptions of an under-researched population be explored in order to describe the presence or absence of unanticipated outcomes, trade-offs, and possible tensions, which may have resulted from SCSS (supply chain social sustainability).

4.2.4.2 Opting for a case study

The selected case (a population sub-group) was expected to have lived experience of SCSS/social audits while connected by the same supply chain. This allowed for data triangulation and learning of differing views on the same issues. The case was selected for its ability to offer salient perspectives on the research question, which is nested in complexity. Moreover, the case was purposively selected as a critical case because, at the time, the focal company was reputed to be the most robust at sustainability implementation in South Africa.

A qualitative case study is "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (Yazan, 2015, p. 148). General characteristics of a case study are that they have a holistic, qualitative focus and study: individuals in their natural environment/context with the researcher having no control over it, the individuals' perceptions/attributions of a topical phenomenon, rich contextual factors, and many sources of data (Grünbaum, 2007). The case — as selected for this study — was a congenital case that consisted of all the departments (farming, packing, maintenance, quality control, human resources, and the director) in the company.

4.2.4.3 Describing the critical case study

Several scholars distinguish different types of case studies. Stake (in Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery, & Sheikh, 2011) put forward three types, namely, *intrinsic, instrumental*, and *collective* case studies. Intrinsic case studies explore a unique phenomenon without intending to build theory or be externally validated. Instrumental case studies aim to deepen the understanding of a specific

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issue or phenomenon, and collective case studies are a variation of instrumental case studies which go further by studying more cases to produce generalisations and be validated externally. In the Yin types of case study designs, *Type 1* is a holistic and single-case design and is comparable to Stake's intrinsic case study. Yin's *Type 2* is also single-case but has multiple units of analysis embedded and is therefore not holistic(Crowe, 2011; Grünbaum, 2007). This research case study was (Stake's) intrinsic, and (Yin's) a type 1 case study. Type 1 and intrinsic case studies were appropriate to the critical case, where an instrumental case study would have illuminated a particular issue. Interestingly, Stake's categories are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, this study was classified as an intrinsic case study for selecting a unique case ─ which is also why it was a critical case (Crowe, 2011).

The researcher employed purposive sampling to include people with relevant perspectives. As this was non-random, the sample was chosen based on the researchers' theoretical understanding of the issue. Purposive sampling strategies include stratified, cell, quota, theoretical, significant case, intensity, deviant case, extreme case, typical case and critical case (Etikan, 2016; Robinson, 2014). A critical case strategy is often used in immature research topics to establish the need for more research. A case sample could be a critical case if the researcher reasoned that the presence of a problem/issue/phenomenon in the case implied its existence elsewhere (Etikan, 2016). Within the sampling strategy to determine the case study, the researcher employed flexible quota sampling by listing the role players/stakeholders who would be ideal at each company to interview (Robinson, 2014).

At the time, the focal company (the South African, Retailer A) expected all tiers of its supply chain to comply with a social audit, and was said to refuse any socially questionable goods, even in emergencies. The retailer envisioned itself as one of the most responsible companies in the world, and had a reputation for its robust sustainability practices. This is why it has previously been a critical case for its robust environmentally sustainable supply chain standards (Thorlakson, 2018). Moreover, it was the opinion of the researcher, who was working in the industry, that the critical case (the supplier to the focal company) was one of the most socially sustainable companies in South Africa. This qualified the chosen case as a critical case because no more significant findings were expected at any less responsible/sustainable

supply chain. This case qualified as a critical case, because:

- The company had an inherent social sustainability culture even before retailers audited for social/ethical compliance.
- The company supplied retailers who marketed themselves as sustainable and as ensuring robust social compliance in their supply chains.
- The company supplies a retailer who has been used by Stanford University in a peer-reviewed study as a critical case for it's robust environmental sustainability standards.
- The company has been complying with all requirements from 13 on-site audits including social, ethical, good agricultural practice, environmental, and food safety.
- It is the researcher's opinion that the company's level of social sustainability is presently among the highest in South Africa.
- Any significant perceptions in this case around retailer-led social strategies and tactics are likely to be present at other South African farms as well.

4.2.4.4 Time horizon

The time horizon of the case was cross-sectional. All interviews were conducted within three days and naturally coincided with observations made by the researcher at the company. Any additional secondary information used was dated as close to the interviews as possible but may have been up to a year older, as with the case of annual reports.

As mentioned in Research question), the different role players/stakeholders targeted at each company were:

- From the food production side of the supplier:
  Farm labourers, (>4)
  The farm manager, (1)
- From a storage and processing side of the supplier:
  Food facility handlers (>4)
  Food facility manager (1)
- *From an integrated supplier view:*
  The owner (1)
  The human resources manager (1)

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In addition, the flexible quota of interviewees is indicated in brackets (…) above.

4.2.5 Case study setting

The chosen case was located in South Africa's Western Cape province and employed individuals fluent in English and/or Afrikaans (the researcher's spoken languages). They supplied farmed goods to the focal company/retailer and had to adhere to audited social standards. To include the community (represented by the participating employees) surrounding the supply chain in this research was critical.

4.3 RESEARCH METHOD: DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

4.3.1 Sources of evidence

There are at least six sources of information in case studies: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artefacts (Creswell, 2007). This study relied on interviews for primary data. Due to the sensitive nature of collecting data on a South African farm, the researcher was not allowed to report on secondary data such as documents and artefacts. The researched did compile an observational journal, which contained some non-confidential and non-identifying information, which can be found in **APPENDIX G:** . However, data triangulation was still done with the wide variety of perspectives of interview participants in the company. Moreover, publically available free data was used wherever possible.

4.3.2 Primary data collection: semi-structured interviews

Initial contact was made with the specific company, explaining the purpose of the study and gaining approval for the interviews (See **APPENDIX D**: . Following ethical clearance, participants within the company were invited to participate voluntarily (See **APPENDIX A:**). With the assistance of the manager of each department, all interview candidates were informed of the study's aims, what the interview would entail, that their identities should not be disclosed to the interviewer, and that they could withdraw consent at any time (Robinson, 2014). The interviewees were not offered a financial incentive because it may have reduced the accuracy of the data and may have elicited distress in an individual who would not otherwise have wanted to be interviewed. The researcher motivated participants by sharing why the study was important (Robinson, 2014).

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The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, in a discreet environment on the company premises that was comfortable for the interviewees. The researcher read out the consent form, and participants were prompted to ask clarifying questions before granting informed consent. Anonymous audio recordings of the interviews were made, and transcribed later. The transcriber completed a non-disclosure agreement prior to receiving the audio recordings (See **APPENDIX B:**). For the interviews to be analysed correctly, the researcher started each recording with "I am starting an interview with Boston..." as an example.

4.3.3 Secondary data collection: observations, documents, artefacts

Non-verbal observations were noted during interviews, which the researcher converted to a write-up afterwards (See **APPENDIX G**:) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher further conducted desktop research to discover publicly available information on each company. As part of secondary data gathering, desktop research was conducted for any relevant publicly available data. The public web pages of the participating company were accessed, and care was taken to ensure all public data was freely available. In order to protect their identity, the company web pages could not be specified.

Moreover, the following web pages were used to conduct desktop research by searching the names of the participating companies as a keyword:

- https://www.google.com
- https://scholar.google.com/
- https://archive.org/web/

Again, care was taken to ensure all public data was freely available. The researcher included only relevant information for data analysis.

4.3.4 Measuring instrument

The semi-structured interview was the measuring instrument most appropriate to the research question and strategy. Semi-structured interviews effectively determined each interviewee's subjective perspectives of their social audit experience. The semi-structured interview was based on two extensive interview guides constructed from

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objective knowledge, which kept the interview relevant, but was unique in that it allowed the interviewees to respond in any way they wished and allowed latitude for the interviewer to probe these responses (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). To ensure the questions were relevant, two interview guides were crafted, one focussed on entry-level employees and one on management. The interview guides progressively reviewed the participant's perceptions and are presented in **APPENDICES APPENDIX E:** and**APPENDIX F:** (Miles, 1994).

4.3.5 Principles of data collection

According to Yin (2018), data collection has to follow four principles. Firstly, multiple sources of evidence must be used to enable data triangulation and credibility. This study used interviews and non-verbal observations. Secondly, the reliability of the study was ensured by systematically organising all data, such as transcripts and notes. Third, the evidence was organised in a traceable way such that anyone following the data could later arrive at the same conclusion (Yin, 2018).

4.4 RESEARCH METHOD: DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Data analysis is the sense-making and interpretation of multiple data sources (Crowe, 2011). In case studies, data analysis describes the case and then the themes inside and between cases (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative data analysis software was recommended to help apply a coding frame to all data (Crowe, 2011). This study employed ATLAS.ti as a tool by importing transcriptions of interviews and all secondary data (Miles, 1994). Before analysing the data, the researcher reviewed it to understand its content, verified the accuracy of each transcript, and replaced identifying data with pseudonyms, sometimes redacting it completely. The researcher also deleted some irrelevant details, such as filler sounds ("uhm"), [NOISE], and [CROSS-TALK] from the *in vivo* transcripts.

4.4.1 Data coding process

Codes are tags/categories/labels that can be applied to the data to organise and group the information around the research question or theme (Miles, 1994). To enable inductive analysis, codes were not created upfront. Instead, the researcher started creating codes when the data became rich with context, and the researcher could begin understanding its various types (Miles, 1994). The researcher identified

open-ended codes while studying the data and revisited all data at least twice to ensure that all codes were applied to the unit of analysis where appropriate, and that the codes were reworked to be accurate, meaningful, and unique. The researcher was aware of the research question concepts but remained context-sensitive and open to other insights in the data that could be inductively coded (Johnson, 2014; Miles, 1994).

Codes could be descriptive (classifying data), interpretive, or explanatory (patterns, causal links) (Miles, 1994). As this was not a multiple case study, the purpose and coding were limited to description and interpretation. However, descriptive codes are naturally more relevant to quantitative studies. As such, the final codes were interpretive. Codes were then combined into manageable code groups to enable meaningful analysis (See **APPENDIX H:** for a list of codes used). Throughout, the researcher identified central ideas to the research question in the data. The researcher aimed to progress to a final coding stage where the central themes in the data could be identified (Creswell, 2007; Johnson, 2014).

4.4.2 Data analysis process

As mentioned, this study assumed an interpretive ontology and a constructive epistemology to build theory through inductive analyses. By actively comparing and interpreting the data, reality was constructed. Inductive analysis is an iterative approach, starting with data collection and following through to its analysis. The researcher must constantly construct reality based on the data and avoid shaping it to existing ideas — which would be deductive (Johnson, 2014). It is recommended that data analysis starts during data collection. This enables an iterative process where the researcher can improve data collection by recognising blind spots and poor strategies (Miles, 1994).

Data analysis started with a thick case description (Creswell, 2007). Themes were developed from code groups according to the most appropriate theme-generating technique. Data saturation occurred when additional interviews no longer added data that was not already known. It was impossible to know when this point would be, but it has been reported to be 15-30 for case studies (Boddy, 2016). Therefore, the homogeneity and saturation point of the farm workers and facility handlers were unknown, even though it was ideal for this study to reach data saturation. One of

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each of the other role players was interviewed because, practically, only one person was filling each position, which suggested the stability of institutional knowledge. A sample size of one very stable case, and case studies in general, could inform theoretical generalisations (Boddy, 2016).

In total, 20 participants were interviewed. **Error! Reference source not found.** below illustrates how many codes were utilised in each interview (red line) and how many unique codes were required to code each interview. Brooklyn's interview utilised 26 of the 38 codes developed, and Alex's utilised another nine. Frankfurt, Windhoek, Gladys, and Bongi's interviews each required one more unique code. All remaining interviews could be coded without requiring any new codes. Therefore, this study did reach data saturation sooner than anticipated. The list of codes can be found in **APPENDIX H:**
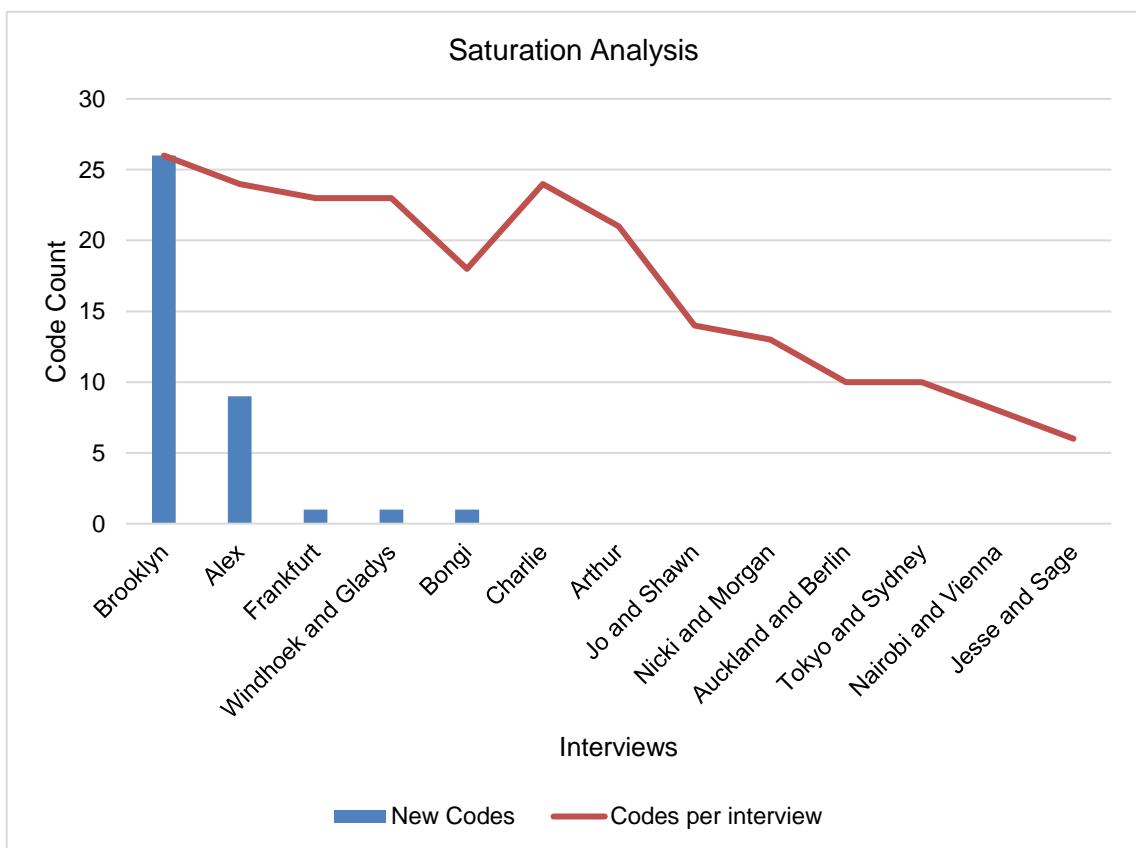
Figure 2: Quantity of new codes developed per interview *

*Participants were given a choice to create their own pseudonym; alternatively, they were given a random pseudonym from a list of world capitals and unisex names to retain anonymity.

4.5   ETHICAL CONDUCT AND QUALITY CONTROL

4.5.1   Ethics

The researcher conducting a study needed to anticipate ethical issues at all stages. A submission was made to the University's ethical committee, and no data was collected without ethical approval (See **APPENDIX C:**   for the approval letter) (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The company where interviews were conducted has given written permission (See **APPENDIX D:**). After obtaining ethical approval for this study, the researcher arranged a suitable time with company management to travel to the farm. The company was informed of the ideal combination of participants/stakeholders for the study. The company allocated a manager on each interview day to introduce possible participants to the researcher. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and voluntary nature. No participant was pressured into consenting. The researcher did not expect or encounter any vulnerable populations (such as minors) employed by the company but did ask to be informed should they exist (Creswell, 2023).

Before collecting data, the potential disruption of interviewing employees was discussed with the HR manager. The study and data use were discussed before interviews to ensure participants did not feel deceived. The researcher considered South Africa's context and that power imbalances may disadvantage some interviewees. Therefore, personal opinions were withheld, the privacy of the participant and others was upheld, and participants were included as collaborators in populating the interview guide and ultimately participating in an important study. The researcher minimised the burden placed on the interviewees as much as possible, such as not interfering with lunchtimes and offering refreshments during interviews (Creswell, 2023; Crowe, 2011). The refreshments were chilled carbonated drinks, juices, and bottled water; the snacks were nectarines and an assortment of cookies. Participants were encouraged to enjoy the snacks during the interview, and some took the initiative to take extra snacks with them after the interview.

All data collection formats were electronic, including digital interview audio

recordings, transcripts, a memo, an observational journal, and public reports obtained. Any data for which signed permission was not obtained was destroyed before data analysis. Data was stored in a Microsoft OneDrive folder. This folder was kept from everyone; only the researcher could access the contents or know the password to log in to the drive. Further, the computer on which this drive was synchronised was password protected and the hard drive was encrypted. Hard drive encryption means that even if the device is stolen, the data cannot be retrieved from the hard drive. The data will be stored for ten years.

The researcher considered all perspectives during data analysis and did not take sides. Further, both positive and negative findings were disclosed. Lastly, to protect the identity and privacy of all participants, no real or identifiable names were used. It was kept in mind that those close to the participants may identify them if they are poorly anonymised (Creswell, 2023; Crowe, 2011).

During the discussion of the research findings, all reporting represented the truth, which included not plagiarising. Care was taken to avoid disclosing information that could harm a participant or the company. The language was unbiased, non-discriminatory, and as straightforward as possible to include the broadest possible audience (Creswell, 2023).

Finally, the funding obtained to support the study's travel, transcriber, sustenance, and refreshments was disclosed, and a final copy of the electronic report would be shared with participants upon request while explaining that the report belongs to the University but is in the public domain (Creswell, 2023).

4.5.2 Quality control of the data collection and analysis processes

In qualitative research, it is vital to include the context of the data. This study employed several validity strategies. Firstly, the researcher declared how the interpretation of the data was shaped by their background, worldview, and biases. Secondly, this study dealt with information by ensuring it was supported by accurate, rich, thick descriptions of the case study setting and the context of the data and by elaborating on the meanings of interviewees, which included interview quotes. Thirdly, the researcher did not exclude contradictory or antagonistic information for discussion, which anchored the evidence in reality (Creswell, 2023). Fourthly, the

researcher considered that there needed to be enough of various types of data to ensure analysis rigour. The rationale behind selecting a critical case was to explore the perceptions of experienced role players to determine whether further studies were needed and not to explain or generalise the findings, which would have been more appropriate to a large, multiple-case study. However, the information was still reliable, and the findings were legitimate when reporting on the lived reality of the case study (Morrow, 2007). Lastly, the study's internal validity was enhanced by triangulating data, which is working toward different sources of evidence to ensure robustness and establish themes (Creswell, 2023; Johnson, 2014).

4.6 LIMITATIONS

This study was limited by the data originating only from one supply chain company in the Western Cape province and needs to be replicated in other provinces where the values and worldviews of the communities affected by a socially sustainable supply chain may differ. Moreover, as a critical case, this study targeted a supply chain known for its robust social practices. Therefore, it should be expected that other retailers' supply chains would be perceived differently by its communities.

Because participation in this study was voluntary, the data was exposed to self-selection bias, which tended to bias the final sample toward individuals who had a higher tendency to care about the particular topic, be more open, patient, and female (Robinson, 2014). All participants were female except the farming manager, the workshop manager, and the owner. Further, this study was representative of the case study community in 2023, and their perceptions will likely change over time.

As the case company was known for its social sustainability, the study should be repeated at more farms to discover more findings. As this was a critical case, all findings can be expected at other farms at a minimum.

Due to the history of South Africa, the community surrounding the company was not homogenous with South Africa. It is recommended that the study by repeated in other provinces where the owners and workers on the farm represent different ethnicities.

The data may have been biased by the researcher being an Afrikaans white male.

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At the case company, all employees in management except the farm manager and QC manager were white. Most participants were English. White, English-speaking men owned most neighbouring farms. Therefore, the researcher represented the race associated with power in the community. Although the researcher actively mitigated this by being friendly, humble, appreciative, and approachable, as expected, participants were cautious concerning what they shared. It is recommended that the study be repeated at companies with black/coloured/Indian ownership and with black/coloured/Indian interviewers.

CHAPTER 5:   RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter starts by contextualising the company studied as a critical case and describing the participants. The theoretical arguments for this company being a critical case are refined with the addition of practical information from data collection. The chapter then conveys the primary data collected from participants in interviews. The interview data initially focuses on answering the research question by establishing what social requirements the participants perceive from their retail clients. Their perceptions of SIZA, the only retailer-led initiative discovered in the data, and how SIZA relates to SCSS are then described. Next, participants' perceptions of their retailers' SCSS are presented, followed by a deeper presentation of SIZA. The relevant secondary data follows this, and finally, additional findings on how the company itself has been acting toward social sustainability.

5.2   CASE DESCRIPTION

The case was a second-generation farm in the Western-Cape. The farm was located in a lush and mountainous area. Neighbouring farms tended to be dairy farms. The nearest city was coastal, a 40-minute drive, with a population of under 200,000. The farm was also a 50-minute drive from a coastal town with under 100,000 inhabitants. There were smaller towns closer to the farm, which was where most of the participants lived. The nearest small town's visual set-up was mainly observed to have gravel roads, electrification, and corner shops. The buildings were a combination of masonry and light material construction. Youth were observed walking in the streets and appeared happy and purpose-driven instead of loitering. Most participants resided in this small town, a 15-minute drive away. The names of places and people were anonymised when transcribing.

The region suffers from poverty, unemployment, high alcohol consumption, and a low rate of education beyond grade 12. The nearby town had previously suffered from youth gangs, but this had effectively been eliminated, according to the website of the youth initiative that Arthur, the owner/director, helped start.

Demographically, it was observed that, racially, the smaller, poorer towns were primarily occupied by coloured people, but also some black people. The owners of farms in the region were the most affluent and mostly white. From observation, it seems that white people in the nearest city were the most affluent.

The case was a business on a farm that grew, trimmed, packed, and labelled fresh products for major retail chains in South Africa (local) and the United Kingdom (UK). The business had a farming division and a packing division. It, therefore, played the role of both a first- and second-tier supplier in a supply chain. The farm further had a sizeable maintenance department, which, although unplanned, was included in the study due to its relevance to this particular farm and to triangulate data. The participants used the words farm, business, and company interchangeably. The word pack house was used to describe the packing facility on the farm from where the harvest is stored, processed, and dispatched.

Politically, participants suggested that service delivery of road infrastructure, schools, housing, and transport was lacking. Participants mentioned actions by a far-left political party in the region and a new workplace union. Participants had the recent memory of a strike organised by the union due to wage negotiations on the property, which turned violent and damaged property.

Interviews were conducted by the researcher in private, in a dedicated room on the farm. Some participants were interviewed in pairs. When a participant was the only one in their role, they were interviewed alone. **Participants were given a choice to create their own pseudonyms; alternatively, they were given a random pseudonym from a list of world capitals and unisex names to retain anonymity.** Some participants shared significantly more than others. Interviewed participants are described in the table below:

Table 1: Profile of the sample

Interview Number	Participant Pseudonymn	Duties	Preferred Language	Presumed Race	Presumed Gender
1	Frankfurt	Farming Manager	Afrikaans	Coloured	Male
2	Auckland	Farm Worker	Afrikaans	Coloured	Female
2	Berlin	Farm Worker	Afrikaans	Coloured	Female
3	Nairobi	Farm Worker	Afrikaans	Coloured	Female
3	Vienna	Farm Worker	Afrikaans	Coloured	Female
4	Tokyo	Farm Worker	Afrikaans	Coloured	Female
4	Sydney	Farm Worker	Afrikaans	Coloured	Female
5	Jesse	Packer	Afrikaans	Coloured	Female
5	Sage	Packer	Afrikaans	Coloured	Female
6	Nicki	Pack house Quality Controller (QC)	English	Black	Female
6	Morgan	Packer	English	Black	Female
7	Charlie	Human resources (HR) Manager	Afrikaans	White	Female
8	Brooklyn	Workshop Manager	Afrikaans	White	Male
9	Alex	Pack house Manager	English	White	Male
10	Bongi	Pack house Quality Control (QC) Manager	English	Black	Female
11	Arthur	Owner/Director	English	White	Male
12	Jo	Packer	English	Black	Female
12	Shawn	Packer	English	Black	Female
13	Windhoek	Farming Supervisor	English	Coloured	Female
13	Gladys	Farming Supervisor	English	Black	Female

In total, 20 participants were interviewed. Nine participants preferred English, and 11 preferred Afrikaans. Ten were coloured, six were black, and four were white. Each pair of farm workers represented different fields/crops on the farm, and each pair of

pack house workers represented different workstations/departments. An effort was made to sample the most extensive variety of participants. The number of participants per duty/occupation was:

- Farming Manager: 1
- Farm Worker: 6
- Packer: 5
- Pack house Quality Controller: 1
- HR Manager: 1
- Workshop Manager: 1
- Pack house Manager: 1
- Pack house Quality Control Manager: 1
- Owner/Director: 1
- Farming Supervisor: 2

This case qualified as a critical case because:

- The company had an inherent social sustainability culture even before retailers were auditing them for social/ethical compliance.
- The company supplied retailers who marketed themselves as sustainable and as ensuring robust social compliance in their supply chains.
- The company supplies a retailer Stanford University used in a peer-reviewed study as a critical case for its robust environmental sustainability standards.
- The company has been complying with all requirements from 13 on-site audits, including social, ethical, good agricultural practice, environmental, and food safety.
- It is the researcher's opinion that the company's level of social sustainability is presently among the highest in South Africa.
- Any significant perceptions in this case around retailer-led social strategies and tactics are likely to be present at other South African farms as well.

The objective that directed the data collection was to answer a particular research question, namely:

"What are the perceptions of different role players in the supply chain of a selected retailer in South Africa concerning its social sustainability strategies and tactics, considering post-implementation unanticipated outcomes, trade-offs, and possible

Although the researcher expected to focus this study on the company's supply to a specific South African retailer (Retailer A), it was found valuable to expand this scope to its other retail clients as well, of which one is based in the UK (Retailer B). Some participants gave long answers which could not be summarised or paraphrased without sacrificing context. The researcher purposefully incorporated detailed quotations of participants to capture these rich contexts densely, ensuring comprehension for both industry experts (who would be interested in niche information) and newcomers (who, whether academics, scholars or laypersons, would be able to comprehend the industry better by being immersed in full quotations which have been introduced and summarised in an easy and logical style).

Next, the data gathered to answer the research question and some additional findings are presented.

5.3 RETAIL CLIENTS' REQUIREMENTS

When the researcher explained the study to the company management to obtain permission for data gathering, they explained that their retail clients' only formal social requirement was to comply with an audit called SIZA. This information was confirmed in several interviews where participants recalled SIZA as the only perceivable socially oriented tactic employed by their retail clients.

> INTERVIEWER/RESEARCHER: …I'm trying to find out more about your perceptions of social standards such as SIZA and SEDEX, but I don't think you do SEDEX here.
> PARTICIPANT: uh-uh [No]
> INTERVIEWER/RESEARCHER: Only SIZA?
> PARTICIPANT: hm [Yes]. We do SIZA. (Bongi, pack house QC manager)
>
> SIZA is die enigste een ... (Frankfurt, farming manager)

Therefore, Retailer A or B required the supplier to comply with SIZA. Moreover, the researcher did not discover any additional retailer-led social interventions from the

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interviews. Thus, complying with SIZA appeared to have satisfied both retailer's social expectations from the supplier.

5.4 PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SIZA

Considering that SIZA constituted the only social expectation from the company's retail clients, participants were asked about their perceptions of SIZA.

5.4.1 SIZA awareness

Participants were asked whether they were aware of when their company receives SIZA audits, which all were.

> INTERVIEWER: Do you know when the SIZA auditors come … to this farm?
> PARTICIPANT 1: Yes. (Morgan, packer)
> PARTICIPANT 2: Yes. (Nicki, pack house QC)

The farming manager gave an overview of what SIZA covers, which correlates with SIZA's scope in the literature review.

> …uh hoe daar opgetree word teen die mense, pay die mense die regte pay skaal, oorwerk die mense hulle nie... hmm al daai goete. Hier is een of twee manne wat op die plaas bly. Ons het self waar hulle gebly het, kom besoek om te kyk, is die plek goed, is hy oukei om daar te bly bly vir 'n persoon om te werk, protective clothings, uh, die health and safety, first aid, fire fighting, al daai tipe goete is wat SIZA na kyk. Al daai goete. En dan sy het ook haar personal seleksie, soos ek gesê het, wat sy dan self mense uitkies [to interview]. (Frankfurt, farming manager)

5.4.2 Interactions with SIZA auditors

Participants were further asked whether they had interacted with a SIZA auditor. Most blue-collar participants have not spoken with an auditor, but some have. Windhoek explained that the auditor gathered and interviewed employees as a group, but Windhoek did not feel she could share openly with the auditor because it was not confidential. She would have shared more had the SIZA interview been confidential, perhaps with only one or two participants at a time.

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PARTICIPANT 1: So, she was actually, basically talk, spoke to all the workers on the farm, including us. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And what was the type of questions that she asked them?

PARTICIPANT 1: What she asked us?

INTERVIEWER: hm [Yes]

PARTICIPANT 1: uh What are we doing on the farm? uh What is our role roles we are playing on the farm? Is it, the safety for the people? um Then he also about the truck drivers and he also ask a few questions and the managers were also there to ask them. I can't remember. Our rights and stuff, yeah. You know your rights. …Your relationship towards the team.

INTERVIEWER: …did you feel in those meetings that you were open to share anything you wanted?

PARTICIPANT 2: uh-uh [No]

PARTICIPANT 1: uh-uh [No]

INTERVIEWER: Why?

PARTICIPANT 1: You can't share anything you want, because like now, we use... talking, when you're talking, there's no manager. There's no boss. There's nobody else here that can say that: "You said it." or [GLADYS] said it, or that one said it, or that one said it. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: So, you feel that those … interviews can be done differently where … you can be made more comfortable?

PARTICIPANT 1: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: to share more?

PARTICIPANT 1: To share more, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

PARTICIPANT 1: Where it is more confidential. (Participant 1: Windhoek, farming supervisor. Participant 2: Gladys, farming supervisor)

Shawn has also been interviewed by a SIZA auditor and shared that although she was comfortable sharing with the auditor, only two interviewees spoke up about things happening in the pack house. The auditor may have received little engagement because the group was so large that confidentiality could not be managed. Shawn seemed positive about having had a forum in SIZA to voice concerns.

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PARTICIPANT 2: … last year, she was spoke to me, and she asked me about the manager: He treat us well? And how about the work we're doing? She she did spoke to me, and I answered the questions, and he asked me when I start working. …I think we were like ten or seven.

INTERVIEWER: And did you feel comfortable to say anything you want to her?

PARTICIPANT 2: Yes, I was. Anything I want to say.

INTERVIEWER: You would have told her anything.

PARTICIPANT 2: Yes, I did.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. That's good. And in that meeting, did everyone tell tell this person … were they open to share with her anything that they thought?

PARTICIPANT 2: Others were two at the time [Laughing]… Only two. …We talk about the pack house anything we are doing there, and they don't tell her.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And do you think that it's helpful to make sure that everyone is happy, that someone like that comes from outside to speak to you?

PARTICIPANT 2: Yes, I was feeling happy, because if my manager was wrong, I'm supposed to tell her. (Shawn, packer)

Frankfurt explained that the part of the audit when the auditor interviewed people was conducted "very anonymously". This showed that it was the perception of management that the auditor was conducting anonymous interviews, but it does not alleviate the concern of Windhoek that there was no intra-group confidentiality. Thus, although the auditor may keep identities or information confidential, the interviewees did not all want to share openly in front of their peers.

Sy praat dan met hulle eenkant om dan te hoor, jy weet, baie anoniem, om te hoor ... jy weet, hoe hulle behandel word… (Frankfurt, farming manager)

All participants above the supervisor level had interacted with one or more SIZA auditors. The packhouse, farming, workshop, and QC managers were generally positive about the auditors. The HR manager was neutral, and the owner was negative.

Alex, the pack house manager, who has been on the farm for two of the three audits (two years apart), experienced significant differences between the last two auditors but also mentioned that the farm had improved, which could explain his perception.

> Um, the first SIZA auditor that we had was a little bit difficult. Um, the second one was, creates um very understandable amicable um but had seen the improvement that that we had undertaken based on the first one. …I had the impression that he was out to, sort of, get his own back. The second one came here, very fair, very amicable, um, and treated everybody with the the greatest respect and he was treated with the greatest respect. (Alex, pack house manager)

The workshop manager, Brooklyn, has experience running a remote site for BHP Billiton, which he says had extensive and cumbersome procedures. He has been at this company for nine years, which means he was already the workshop manager for three years before their first SIZA audit. Brooklyn felt that input from the auditor was reasonable, sensible, and educational, and even though it may be cumbersome and costly, implementing SIZA's requirements has elevated their practices.

> PARTICIPANT: Is education, en nie net vir my wat die goed ken nie. Dis vir mense wat dit nog nooit voorheen van te doen gehad het nie.
> INTERVIEWER: So, jy het nog nooit gevoel … dit dra nie by nie, dit is net moeite?
> PARTICIPANT: Ja, maar die ding is, dit kos ... wanneer dit ons dit verander, kos dit geld en dis moeite, maar ... op die long run is dit 'n goeie, baie goeie ding. Ek dink dis 'n goeie ding. …En special op plase, want plase word alles halsoorkop gedoen. (Brooklyn, workshop manager)

Bongi, the pack house QC manager, has only been with this company for one year, although she has nine years of experience with other audits like food safety. She had not encountered a socially oriented audit before their most recent SIZA audit. She perceived the auditor as sensible, knowledgeable, and patient, resulting in a valued learning experience.

> …she was such a nice ... lady. She was such a nice lady. You know, she

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would explain a question to me like a grade one. Like, I would be like, I don't understand that, I don't know what you're looking for. I didn't know, you know. …It was all new to me, but ... the way she explained to me. Even you'll find that a document that she's looking for — we do have it — but I just don't know that that's what she's looking for. She would explain to me in such a way that I understand that this is exactly what she's looking for. She made the audit so interactive, more a learning curve for me, as well, um, and wherever he was, she was pointing the findings, you could see that, yeah, that's a real finding, you know. She's not just, you know, being difficult or whatsoever. (Bongi, packhouse QC manager)

Charlie has been the HR manager for nine years, with an additional 18 years of HR experience. As such, she has been involved in all three SIZA audits. Naturally, the SIZA scope overlaps with most of her responsibilities, which means that she arguably has the most in-depth knowledge of the SIZA audits at this company.

PARTICIPANT: Ek het nie ... per se, negatiewe interaksies met hulle [SIZA AUDITORS] gehad nog nie.
INTERVIEWER: …voel jy dat hulle positiewe bydraes maak?
PARTICIPANT: Ja. …
INTERVIEWER: …was daar heelwat goed wat die plaas moes aanpas om te voldoen aan SIZA, of het julle meeste van dit reeds gehad?
PARTICIPANT: Omdat die plaas so baie geoudit is deur ander instansies, was meeste van die goed in plek gewees, maar die SIZA-oudit is 'n totale ander ball game, omdat hy so ernstig fokus op die ... dis 'n ethical audit. Dis basically wat dit is. So, vir my voel dit, dis die enigste oudit waaraan waaraan ek deelneem wat actually my toets, my department toets, as ek dit so kan sê. So, um ek het nie 'n negatiewe experience daarmee nog gehad nie. (Charlie, HR manager)

At another stage, Charlie explained that SIZA raised issues which had not been identified by any of the 13 other auditors before. Charlie was then prompted on whether she perceived SIZA to be on a high global standard.

Nee, verseker. ah Ek sê altyd, as ek spot, dan sê ons, ons SIZA oudits, al wat

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hulle nog nie weet nie, is my panty en my bra size. That' that's literally. Daar's nie 'n klippie wat daai ouens nie oplig nie. (Charlie, HR manager)

Arthur is the second-generation owner and managing director of the farm. Arthur tried to understand the SIZA standard when preparing for their first audit six years ago but has since kept his distance and delegated the audit to his managers. It is important to him to achieve a good audit result, a value that all manager-level participants shared, which means he does become involved when SIZA requires the farm to make changes. However, SIZA is one of 13 audit standards the company must comply with, which seems to have contributed to Arthur's negativity toward all audits. During the interview, Arthur's responses tended to be generalised to all audits.

> PARTICIPANT: uh I don't like auditors.
> INTERVIEWER: Even the SIZA ones?
> PARTICIPANT: I don't like hell from all of them. Because I reckon that seventy per cent of the audits that are done today ... So, the SIZA audits, they're fine, they're all good, but they're actually involved with things which aren't too relevant. They've made them all audits. Nothing would change to brand integrity, customer safety, things... And what is happening is that audits ... somebody new comes in and to viabilise their existence, they have to change and add on to things. At the end of the day, everything just becomes more and more and more at a bigger cost and cost and cost, that um makes the cost of product more expensive and the entry level for new people unattainable. (Arthur, owner/director)

> So, this guy here with [RETAILER B]. I didn't even go in the audit. I'll entertain him, chat to him, talk about cycling, paddle, badminton, … politics, sex, religion, I don't do anything in the audits — I am fatigued by all the audits. (Arthur, owner/director)

The context of Arthur feeling fatigued by the audits may indicate that his perception of the other audits has spilt over to his perception of SIZA because: (i) Arthur did have some positive perceptions of SIZA (ii) He could not explain how the SIZA audit included irrelevancies, and (iii) Arthur answered several questions by saying he would not know the answer because he was not involved enough.

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Even though Arthur tried not to be involved in SIZA, he did appreciate how SIZA resulted in better responsiveness by his managers in ensuring workers had intact personal protective equipment.

> …so, the SIZA audit in that sense, does make you go and see and realise where you're wrong or where you're not covering it. And because the farm managers don't see the wood for the trees, and the people don't talk, then they get sick. Who loses? I do. When my staff get sick, it's a cost to me, because your trained person who is good at the job, isn't there. …So, I rather keep my people healthy, the right equipment, but they don't even keep themselves healthy because they even go, even with all the equipments here to the land with broken boots. And so, SIZA audits go and help you inspect what you're doing right and wrong. (Arthur, owner/director)

The interview data conveyed that SIZA auditors were generally viewed as proficient and detail-oriented. However, there were apprehensions concerning their methodology for conducting staff interviews. Further, the participants predominantly recalled SIZA auditors' impacts on health and safety, which, being human needs, are elements of social sustainability. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that participants were explicitly asked whether they perceived the company's adherence to SIZA's standards had indeed contributed to its social sustainability.

5.4.3 SIZA's indications of social sustainability

Participants were asked whether SIZA perceived the farm as socially sustainable. However, most participants did not know SIZA well enough to differentiate company-led initiatives from SIZA-required ones. Charlie was the only participant in a position to evaluate SIZA's impact on social sustainability. Several other participants felt that the company was indeed socially sustainable but had been leading impressive social sustainability initiatives out of its own, meaning that this data could not be attributed to SIZA. Arthur felt that for SIZA to contribute to social sustainability, both the primary and secondary suppliers should be audited.

> INTERVIEWER: …achieving the objective of ensuring social sustainability…?
> PARTICIPANT: The people generally that the auditors should be auditing are

the people who aren't being audited.

INTERVIEWER: Who should they be auditing?

PARTICIPANT: A lot of the secondary suppliers. So, SIZA has a massive role, and it does set a bench guard… (Arthur, owner/director)

Charlie explained that the farm had been making substantial efforts to establish itself as a socially sustainable company regardless of SIZA and perceived SIZA as an ethical audit. Therefore, she objected to the idea that SIZA contributed to the company's social sustainability.

INTERVIEWER: Oukei. En dink jy dat SIZA-oudits het hierdie besigheid gehelp om, indien julle markte aanhou gesond bly, die besigheid kan aanhou funksioneer vir ewig en altyd?

PARTICIPANT: Dat SIZA dit veroorsaak het? Nee.

INTERVIEWER: Oukei. So, SIZA het nie bygedra tot die volhoubaarheid van die besigheid nie.

PARTICIPANT: Nee.

INTERVIEWER: Oukei.

PARTICIPANT: Ag, ons gaan verseker nie daai krediet vir hulle gee nie. ...Not the hell. Not the hell. (Charlie, HR manager)

Alex, the manager of the pack house, posited that the farm had been undertaking numerous measures to attain social sustainability, measures he felt were overlooked by the SIZA auditors. Consequently, he believed that the farm would maintain its social sustainability whether or not it aligned with SIZA. When prompted, he said that the SIZA audit would need to take a lot more into account, including the employees' lives off the property.

…this company will, would probably be able to to operate indefinitely um provided um the owner has got the right people in place um regardless of of the SIZA audit. …um I don't see the SIZA, I don't see the benefit of it driving through the community, and I only see the benefit of the people that actually work here and what they do, what what they're doing. I've been to some of their houses. …I've personally been in there, seeing some of the circumstances in which some of these people live, where there's eight or nine

people living in one house. …I don't see the, that the SI~ that the SIZA audit improve the value of their life. (Alex, pack house manager)

Although it is not the aim of SIZA to audit a community, Alex communicated that SIZA alone was insufficient to achieve social sustainability. This was congruent with the views of Charlie and Arthur, who had described many efforts the company undertook toward social sustainability which went way beyond SIZA. To reiterate, Charlie mentioned that SIZA was an ethical audit, and Arthur felt SIZA was a tickbox exercise which ignored secondary suppliers and the community outside the property.

Although the above participants did not feel that SIZA enhanced social sustainability, some lower-level participants believed that SIZA helped the farm be socially sustainable.

> INTERVIEWER: Now, do you think that the audit that come and, that come and check exactly how the company interacts with people, are helping this company to to be able to exist for ever?
> PARTICIPANT: Absolutely
> INTERVIEWER: So that, in five hundred years, it will still be able to do what it does?
> PARTICIPANT: Absolute, because when I looked um a report from last year to the report to this year, there's a huge improvement. I I feel like there's an improvement year to year. So, that, definitely, you're gonna exist forever.
> INTERVIEWER: Okay.
> PARTICIPANT: There's continuous improvement in the whole system.
> INTERVIEWER: So, do you think that the surrounding community are experiencing better and better lives?
> PARTICIPANT: Yes.
> INTERVIEWER: Um, because of this company?
> PARTICIPANT: Yes, they are. (Bongi, pack house QC manager)

One should bear in mind that Bongi had only been with the company for a year, which meant that she may not have known which social efforts were required by SIZA and which were company-led. However, she did refer to the previous SIZA report, which meant that she was, at least partially, basing her judgement on audit findings the

company has had to correct.

> I've never worked in [THIS] company [WHEN IT] didn't have SIZA. So, I don't know the difference between not having SIZA and then what has changed ever since SIZA, um was implemented in a way. (Bongi, pack house QC)

Many participants struggled to respond to this question despite the creative and relatable ways the researcher tried to explain it. Some participants offered different information instead; some admitted that they did not know the answer, and others simply agreed without supporting their answer, which could mean that they just wanted to move on.

Nicki and Morgan answered that they felt the farm was socially sustainable but may not have understood the question well due to complex communication. It was also unclear whether they felt the farm itself was socially sustainable or whether SIZA helped it become socially sustainable because this detail fell away as the researcher repeatedly tried to explain the question. Further context is that the researcher could not make Nicki and Morgan as comfortable as the other participants. They continued to appear nervous, behaved cautiously, spoke softly, and did not display confidence in their answers. Moreover, they called the researcher Sir, indicating they perceived a significant power distance. It is unknown what caused this distance, but it may have resulted from a perceived difference in age, race, status, or knowledge. They may also have been concerned that the interview could have repercussions, although the researcher was proactive in explaining the research accurately, asking not to be told their real names, obtaining informed consent, being friendly, and offering refreshments. Finally, in the rest of the interview, Nicki and Morgan explained that they based the value of a company on the jobs and wages it provides. Therefore, they may not have considered all the other dimensions that result in social sustainability.

> INTERVIEWER: If this farm is damaging the community, then the farm will not be able to exist for much longer, but if the farm is helping the community, then the farm will be able to keep working forever. So, that's my question. Do you think, do you think this farm is helping the people, or is it hurting the people?
> PARTICIPANT 1: It's helping the people.

> INTERVIEWER: Okay. And is it helping the people enough so that even your children's children's children will be happy?
>
> PARTICIPANT 1 & 2: Yes. (Participant 1: Nicki, pack house QC. Participant 2: Morgan, packer)

When triangulating data gathered from all interviews that presented an array of personal viewpoints, no participant perceived SIZA audits as harmful to social sustainability, which is positive, and most felt strongly that the company itself has been acting toward social sustainability, also a positive indication. The data was insufficient to state whether SIZA enhanced social sustainability, although some participants felt that SIZA could have dramatic impacts on other farms that were not inherently as socially responsible as their company.

Therefore, although social responsibility and social sustainability overlap, SIZA did not seem to enhance social sustainability directly. Instead, SIZA focused on compliance with various South African regulations and international labour conventions. The researcher further explored whether participants perceived their retail clients to employ any other social strategies and tactics, which is to follow.

5.5 PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF RETAILERS' SUPPLY CHAIN SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

The researcher prompted several participants to understand how they perceived their retail clients' supply chain social sustainability (SCSS). When asking Arthur whether he experienced tension between retailers requiring compliance with SIZA and securing the funds to implement the changes required by SIZA, he said:

> Nobody pays you more for SIZA, not a single sausage cent. … We're just so used to it. We do thirteen audits a year. …They all cost you money. (Arthur, owner/director)

Therefore, Arthur did not perceive any financial support from retailers who required him to comply with SIZA, suggesting that the retailers held significant power in the relationship. Moreover, Charlie explained that when the Rand-Dollar exchange rate worsened, their UK-based retailer (Retailer B) refused to adjust prices even though

the company was left with no choice but to enter retrenchment proceedings.

> Ons het getrench laas jaar, né, hm. Ons het ... hoe kan ek dit vir jou verduidelik. Dit was die swakste export jaar as wat ons nog ooit ervaar het, en die Rand Dollar exchange, die pryse wat ons anderkant, wat [Arthur] vas, want jy maak mos prys vas, en dan, jy kan nie adjust rêrig op dit nie. Hulle [Retailer B] het vrede wat in jou, wat in ons klimaat, wat uh aangaan hier by ons. (Charlie, HR manager)

When Charlie was asked whether she felt their largest retail clients should be taking some ownership of the social well-being of employees on their farms, she emotively answered, "What are the chances? (paraphrased)".

> Wat is die kanse dat hulle dit gaan doen? Dit sal great wees as hulle doen. (Charlie, HR Manager)

Charlie's answer is rich in meaning and seems to suggest that she had an established mental model of retailers, which clashed with the idea of them taking some ownership of employee well-being in their supply chains. When prompted, Charlie recalled an instance when employees were striking due to a wage dispute. During this period, Retailer A offered not to penalise the company for being unable to supply according to plan. However, they were not willing to make price adjustments to help the situation either.

> Hulle't ons nie gepenaliseer nie vir dat ons nie kon deliver nie. Dit was die enigste tegemoetkoming nog ooit. Dis nie: 'Ek betaal jou meer vir die produk nie, want die Rand Dollar lyk, exchange rate nie te cool nie', of 'ons verstaan dinge gaan ...' Daar's nie, daar's geen tegemoetkoming van ... van daai ouens sover as wat ek weet nie. (Charlie, HR manager)

Alex recalled that Retailer B recently delayed payments for over four months, resulting in the owner needing to sell several of his personal assets to ensure the farm could keep operating without negatively impacting the employees.

> There has been an occasion in within the last year. Um One of the companies

we supply to never paid us. uh We exported [GOODS] for eighteen weeks to the UK. …They paid very very late. …The owner of the farm was has got multiple [ASSETS 1] and um he had multiple [ASSETS 2] that he actually sold to make sure nobody went short. Nobody was, at that, there was always money available to keep the business running and wages. (Alex, pack house manager)

Therefore, although SIZA compliance had a financial impact, retailers appeared unwilling to support the company financially for supplying them with the SIZA-certified goods. Moreover, the retailers were generally indifferent when the company experienced recent social crises such as the retrenchment and labour strike episodes. Interview data showed an incongruency between retailers requiring SIZA and retailers having a socially sustainable supply chain strategy. The researcher did not encounter any data to suggest that their retailers had any SCSS (supply chain social sustainability) strategies or tactics in effect.

Moreover, Retailer B exhibited conflicting behaviour. It required its supplier to be SIZA-certified (which could be interpreted as socially responsible intent). However, it showed no regard for its supply chain's social or financial sustainability when currency volatility resulted in retrenchments and even went so far as to delay payment by 18 weeks for products it had already received.

Considering the data showed that SIZA compliance was the only social expectation by retailers, the next section will delve deeper into participants' perceptions of SIZA and how it affected their human needs. Human needs is an essential concept because it defines the focus of this study, SCSS.

As mentioned before, this study adopted the following definition of supply chain social sustainability: "SCSS is defined as conducting supply chain operations in a way that meets human needs as defined by the people in the communities in which the firms across a supply chain operate, serve, or otherwise affect" (Golicic, 2020, p. 999).

5.6 PARTICIPANTS' ADDITIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF SIZA

SIZA was the only strategy or tactic the participants perceived to be employed by

their retail clients related to SCSS. Although SIZA has titled their audit "social standard", the standard then described itself as "a converged approach to ethical trade" (The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa, 2020). The constructivist epistemology of this study intended for the researcher to follow through on new or unexpected information encountered during data gathering. Encountering a lack of engagement with social sustainability by both the retailers and the SIZA social standard, the researcher broadened the study's scope to encompass the sole social initiative present in the case, SIZA. Accordingly, the following section will present participants' additional perceptions regarding SIZA, focusing mainly on its influence on human needs, recurrent audits, stress, costs, and the like.

5.6.1 SIZA-issues related to human needs

Sydney perceived a correlation between the company receiving a SIZA audit and the company allowing employees to take leave after being absent on a Monday. Although unconfirmed, the researcher assumes this refers to Section 23 of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, which permits employees to take two days' sick leave without needing to provide a medical certificate.

> Daar het nou een keer iets gebeur, né. Nou, ons het mos, het jy miskien Maandag nie gewerk het nie en voel jy wou die Dinsdag mos 'n leave form ingevul het, hulle mos geweier het daarvoor, en nou dat, die oudit hier gewees het, nou weier hulle nie meer vir dit nie. (Sydney, farm worker)

Similarly, although Nicki had not been interviewed by a SIZA auditor yet, she felt that SIZA audits helped the company care better for the employees with the information employees shared in the interviews.

> If the auditor is coming to visit the company, they ask the employees what you want, what you need. … The company's gonna fix the mistakes. …After the SIZA auditor, it it was March or April. I see the brochures at the, on the wall. It says, if you have more than one year in the company, you can send your details to for provident fund to get the provident fund. (Nicki, pack house QC)

The company had a provident fund before the audit Nicki mentioned. It is unknown

whether the auditor required the informational posters or whether it was a coincidence. However, Shawn communicated the value she perceived in the SIZA interviews and her confidence that SIZA benefited the employees.

Participants also offered several examples of how SIZA increased the health and safety of employees. Charlie detailed how the SIZA auditor discovered asbestos on the farm; this was subsequently eradicated. She articulated that this incident served as an enlightening experience for her, as she was previously uninformed about the health hazards posed by asbestos.

> Daar sien hulle toe nou ook asbestos en vra vir my oor asbestos, en hier sien hulle asbestos. Ek sê: 'Wat van die asbestos?' 'Nee, weet jy nie daar is 'n asbestosbeleid nie?' … ek leer elke keer. (Charlie, HR manager)

When Shawn was asked whether she felt the SIZA scope should include or exclude anything specific, she perceived that SIZA supported their needs and enhanced the turnaround time of requests for personal equipment.

> There's nothing wrong with SIZA, because maybe he's gonna, or she's gonna help us with our needs, like the boots. Maybe we talk to her now, and there's things maybe gonna change. If I like, I go to them and ask for the boots, they're gonna give me a new one. Not about four days like if maybe, if I am going today later, tomorrow morning I get my boots. I think so... (Shawn, packer)

Windhoek shared that she generally perceived positive changes following a SIZA audit and recalled the example where tractor drivers were given better personal protective equipment when spraying pesticides. The drivers also stopped spraying when people were nearby. Therefore, SIZA reduced the chances that people could be exposed to harmful chemicals.

> So, I don't know what they spoke there, what happened there. So, after she left, it was like some things went better, my side, how I see stuff, and how I feel about the company. So, some things went better, and after she came to us, neh. And in terms of on the on on the... at the farm, on the farm, the

company, there were some stuff that changed, neh, like um some of the the the tractor drivers they got clothes uhm for spray tractors. New clothes. They got new mask, they got safety glasses, and everything and glass and stuff. So, that was benefit, that benefited them, as well as us, because now they know that don't spray when there's people next to you, close to you. So, it also benefit us then at the end of the day. (Windhoek, farming supervisor)

Frankfurt shared how the SIZA auditor required the company to have their air compressors pressure tested and their forklifts load tested. He said that they are also inspected by the South African Department of Labour (DoL), who have not mentioned these tests before, but when they did, SIZA had already brought it to the company's attention. These tests could have avoided a catastrophic safety incident.

Hulle (DoL) het nooit gesê compressors moet gepressure test word nie, en nou by die laaste besoek van Departement van Arbeid, ja, ons moet pressure testing doen. Die forklifts moet getest word, jy weet. (Frankfurt, farming manager)

Bongi, who has an Advanced Diploma in Quality Management, started her career nine years ago in Kwazulu-Natal at a food manufacturer. Her duties included visits to the suppliers who grew their vegetable ingredients. She perceived a significant difference between the current farm and the others she has visited.

…looking at farmers that are, would have, that I once in the past to actually audit myself, it's my suppliers, they didn't have SIZA. I feel like it's so disorganised, and the staff are not well taken care of in terms of PPE, like, do the staff have PPE or not, on those farms? It's not a must, you know, but he, you know, he's checking even that do they have? Some staff will be working overtime, like nobody cares that yesterday they went home at eight. They have to be at work in six o'clock the next morning. So, with a company that does have SIZA in place, all those things are considered in all decision-making that uh goes about in the company. (Bongi, pack house QC manager)

As mentioned before, Bongi had admitted that she would not know which of the practices at the company were already in place before SIZA started but correlated

the positive environment she perceived with SIZA's requirements.

> Like farms that I I I've seen in in the past, like it's all disorganised, you know. And then, when I got here, and then I get, because I was wondering how did they end up so good, because farms... um, you know. And then, when I got involved into the SIZA audit, I saw that it's all the requirements of SIZA and they are met, and that's why there's so much improvement. (Bongi, pack house QC manager)

Moreover, Bongi had previously worked for a pharmaceutical company (Cipla), giving her a unique perspective on social practices between the two industries. Bongi explained that Cipla did not undergo specific social or ethical audits, but most of them overlapped with the ISO standards with which they complied. Still, she could see how SIZA's extensive scope could enhance the pharmaceutical industry.

> But with things that I have learned here with SIZA, um, there were new things that I didn't know that it goes to that extent, that, I feel like that company would have benefitted in such a way, uh, that the one that says if, uh, an employee comes to work and you don't have work for them, you're liable to pay them full hours. Automatically, you have to pay them, because they're here, of which that wasn't practised in my previous company. …Things like that was still o~ overlooked. (Bongi, pack house QC manager)

Frankfurt felt that SIZA improved the local community's wellness by improving employees' lives in such a way that the services they provide to the company are sustainable.

> …ek dink die way SIZA na kyk, eintlik goed dit wat hulle eintlik hulle verwagtinge is, is dit eintlik mos iets om die welstand van werkers te verbeter. Ek meen, die eerste punt om na te kyk, hoe harder jy werk, hoe langer jy jy werk om geld te kry, dis goed vir my om dit te doen, want ek wil dit doen vir my familie, maar dit, ek kan ook opeindig aan die einde van die dag, dat ek baie ongesond gaan... jy weet, miskien ek werk lang ure, more kom ek weer werk, is by die werk, maar ek is nie honderd persent aktief nie, verstaan jy? So, ek dink die standaarde wat wat wat wat in SIZA is en wat die verwagtinge

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van SIZA dink ek, dit kan wel 'n baie goeie bydrae lewer om mense se lewe… (Frankfurt, farming manager)

Frankfurt's perception above is significant because it explains some overlap between social sustainability and SIZA. Frankfurt perceived that SIZA enabled employees to remain productive at work to provide for their families by staying healthy and not being overworked, suggesting that SIZA supports rather than detracts from social sustainability.

When Bongi was asked whether the SIZA audits improve the well-being of employees, their families, and the community, she perceived that SIZA enhanced employees' agency in co-creating their work environment.

> The SIZA audit, what I can say it does, um it does a lot change the well-being in such a way, because it's ... they get exposed to the audit itself. They get those questions and they see things differently because most of the time, you find that employees thinking that I just come and work and go home, you know. It's a money thingy, but then ... it actually emphasises to them to say, you know what, this is the place where you spend most of your time. You need to be happy. You need to be... feel safe. You need to be uh I mean, working in a safe environment. So, you, as much as the company is looking for you, you also have to look for yourself. So, that's how uh I feel like, that the SIZA audit has that impact to the employees' audit, human and themselves, and their families. (Bongi, pack house QC manager)

The above response by Bongi was congruent with Shawn, who, as explained before, believed that SIZA helped her obtain the requested new boots faster. In addition, Brooklyn felt that SIZA helped him elevate the workshop to his desired level. Brooklyn had previously managed a 250-person BHP Billiton remote camp in Liberia for three years. Therefore, he could compare the workshop and SIZA to the utmost high standards.

> …dis die moeite werd. Vir BHP Billiton te werk, kontrakwerk te doen, daai mense is top. …hulle kyk so agter jou. Hulle is meer geworry oor jou veiligheid amper as oor die werk. …Hoeveel van die mense het in die ... corporate

wêreld gewerk in daai, met daai klas van goeters? Ek meen, soos ek wat vir BHP Billiton gewerk het, dis top, daai goeters is meer belangrik as om die werk klaar te kry. Dit is groot goed. Jy doen papierwerk vir 'n halwe dag, meer as 'n halwe dag doen jy net papierwerk vir vyftien minute se werk. Dis hoe erg dit is. …In 'n workshop is die plek waar jy loop, ons mag nie dieselfde plek loop nie, want elke ding wat staan het 'n plek waar hy moet staan. Als is gepaint. Die vloere is gepaint. Dis hierdie is daai kleur en daai is daai kleur. Daar pak jy jou, daar mag jy nie loop nie. Daar mag goed staan. Daar mag nie goed staan nie. Dit is ... 'n groot ding. En … ons is daar tussen nowhere en niks nie. Jy wil nie gou-gou ry en gou-gou dorp toe ry en kan 'n ding gaan koop nie. (Brooklyn, workshop manager)

Brooklyn then worked for the case company for three years before their first SIZA audit. This enabled him to contrast the two environments.

Toe ek in hierdie werkswinkel instap, daar waar daai klein deurtjie daar, toe dog ek by myself, waarnatoe het jy jouself ingelaat? …daar was 'n tonnel gewees waar daar nie 'n dingetjie lyk van lig daar nie. …Dit was vir my 'n uitdaging gewees. En ek werk tot vandag toe op daai uitdaging. Daar's baie veranderings wat ek nog wil doen of moet doen, maar elke ding op sy tyd. (Brooklyn, workshop manager)

When asked whether SIZA had similar standards to BHP Billiton, Brooklyn responded that SIZA standards were not as robust.

Ek moet sê dis nie, nee ... ghe, ek moet sê, dis tog nie so erg nie, maar dit is net, al daai goedjies wat hulle nou vir die mense leer wat hulle nou hier opstel, is eintlik wat moes al lankal gebeur het, maar dit maak dit makliker, baie goed makliker en dit maak baie goed veiliger vir baie van die mense. So, dis 'n goeie ding. (Brooklyn, workshop manager)

Brooklyn was then asked about his experience with the SIZA audit earlier in the year, to which he responded that they found little room for improvement.

…die laaste wat hierso was het net hier kom deurgaan om te kyk vir die en

vir daai, het gesê: 'hoor hier, maar dit en daar moet 'n ...' Hulle wil 'n bordjie ophê hier of 'n bordjie ... Hulle is nogal baie impressed met hoe die hele setup is, um, maar dis net hier en daar goedjies wat hulle oor gekla… (Brooklyn, workshop manager)

When Brooklyn was asked why he did not improve the workshop closer to the BHP Billiton level he came from within his first three years at the company, he responded that there was much work to do and that he struggled to get financial support from Arthur. Brooklyn perceived that SIZA's presence was necessary to support him in selling his ideas to Arthur. He was grateful that SIZA required many improvements for which he had been advocating.

…dit het gehelp om die mense hier te laat verstaan. Kyk, ek het, weet wat, hoe dinge moet gedoen word, en ek het probeer dit verander. Party goeters, dit kos geld om dit te verander. Nou, as jy praat van geld, dan gaan [ARTHUR] vir jou vra ... moenie my geld mors nie. So, maar nou kom daai mense daar met dieselfde met dieselfde ding, dan gaan hy twee keer dink daaroor, verstaan jy? So, hulle't my baie gehelp. Goed wat ek wil gedoen hê wat hy nou twee keer dink oor, want dit is, hy dink dit, miskien wil jy nou onnodig geld mors. Maar as hy daai mense kry en hulle sien waaroor dit gaan en hy ... Dan ... is dit 'n ander storie. Dit help. (Brooklyn, workshop manager)

Similarly, Frankfurt explained how Arthur expected non-conformances noted during a SIZA audit to be corrected immediately.

Kyk, die meeste spanning wat ons het is, ons wil altyd 'n audit slaag. ...as die auditor kom en die auditor sê dit is wat ons moet doen, en ons, whatever ons nie het nie, [Arthur] sê: 'Go and buy', en dan terwyl daai auditor hier is, is dit iets wat in vier-vyf ure kan gefix word, dan fix ons. As dit in 'n dag moet gefix word terwyl die auditor hier is, dan is dit. As dit in twee dae. So, ons probeer die meeste, die meeste was. Ek's nie honderd persent seker van die jaar [Inaudible 0:42:44] verander het nie. Dis die signs, jy weet. [Audio cut 0:42:49] signs nie visible was nie, waar sy signs gesoek het, het ons onmiddellik signs georder en ons het signs opgesit en gefokus op, maar terwyl hulle nog en die auditor daar, dan stuur ek foto's deur en ek stuur deur. So, ons probeer soveel

as moontlik van die klein goete te doen terwyl die auditor huidiglik op die plaas is, en dan wat baie groter is, het ons vir sewe-en-twintig dae op die closing, ek dink, ja. En dan probeer ons dan nou uplift in daai een-en-twintig dae om dan die oudit dan ge~ gedoen kry. (Frankfurt, farming manager)

Therefore, SIZA had the influence to secure the necessary funding for improvements, even though Brooklyn, an experienced manager, had been championing these same enhancements for an extended period. This and other examples mentioned suggest that SIZA may play a modulating role in employee issue selling.

In order to elicit another perspective, participants were asked to imagine the impact of imposing SIZA on other farms with which they were familiar.

…party mense is baie snaaks. Hulle wil nie, hulle wil nie sulke goed hê nie. um As hulle te veel problems kry, of te veel dinge gesê wat hulle moet doen met mense, dan raak hulle eerder ontslae van mense en kry 'n masjien om die job te doen. … kyk, ek's nou jammer om te sê, maar boere is ander goeters. Hulle dink anderste as ander mense. Jy moet hom reg benader van die begin af. As jy hom nie reg benader van die begin af nie, het jy moeilikheid. En dis so so so belangrik. Jy moet hom amper laat voel: 'Ja, maar actually moet ek dit doen.' Jy weet, um ... en die groot ding is, hulle moet, jy moenie verwag hy moet alles verander in een dag nie. Jy kan nie. Dit kos geld. Om goed veilig, als veilig te maak, kos baie geld, maar jy moet aanmekaar verbeter, verbeter die hele tyd. (Brooklyn, workshop manager)

Charlie, who had experience offering HR services to the agriculture industry since 1996, was asked whether SIZA increases sustainability on other farms, which may not have been so internally motivated to achieve social sustainability as this company.

Ja. Verseker. …Kyk, ek ek deal met baie boere, né. …So, hierdie ouens sit nie met uh risk policies nie. Jy weet, jou risk assessment byvoorbeeld nie, wat 'n simpel ding is. um Die brandblussers word nie elke jaar gediens nie. …[SIZA] gaan 'n maatskappy forseer om seker te maak daai goed is gedoen.

So, in terme van die, die, the principle as such that they force you to actually go and analyse your own business, dit het definitief 'n positiewe bydrae vir ouens wat nie daai attentativeness het tot: is my werknemers actually veilig nie, jy weet. um Is ... word hulle redelike lone betaal vir hulle skill levels, ensovoorts. So, ja, ek kan, vir ander besighede, ja, maar ek dink ons is right up there with the best of the best. (Charlie, HR manager)

Jo and Shawn shared how other farms in the Western and Eastern Cape discriminated against them and others they knew based on race and that they have not experienced any racism at the case company. They felt that SIZA ensured that everyone was treated equally.

They said those other managers or bosses they they refuse more specially than our … they, everything like, we say: 'can you please help us with wood or …?' They say: 'uh-uh, I'm gonna give those people.' Coloureds or white men. But here, but Mr [Arthur] is not… apartheid. … He don't have apartheid. …He'll never say: 'You're Xhosa or Coloured, you can't...' I, from I think, Sir, if the SIZA auditor was not here, maybe the they they they treat, uh the treated for e management now, maybe the SIZA was not here before, maybe the treatment is not the equal. …Say there was a SIZA, since the SIZA is there, there was treating equal. I think so. (Jo, packer and Shawn, packer. Participants were talking together)

Gladys shared that her brother works on a farm in the Eastern Cape and conveyed excitement at the thought of SIZA being deployed throughout Eastern Cape farms.

GLADYS: Eastern Cape, where my brother is working uh-uh there's no even union there. There's nothing. …It's tough for him there. The Department of Labour they can tell you: "No. You are piece job." For twenty years, you are piece job. …There's no contract. There's nothing. There's no union. There's nothing. …All of them, whole of Eastern Cape farms.
INTERVIEWER: And so, taking something like SIZA and putting it on Eastern Cape?
GLADYS: Yeah! It's gonna be better for them. Because, like this side, we are ready, we got a clue now, but there is darkness. At least we are bright now.

We know what we can see. They (SIZA) must go that side. There is a problem, that side. The Eastern Cape. They don't even know, what's right, what's not right. (Gladys, farming supervisor)

5.6.2 SIZA's effect over time

SIZA audits were conducted three times at the company, two years apart. As part of each audit, the auditor selected some employees to be interviewed as a group. Frankfurt perceived that the concerns arising from these interviews decreased every year. He attributed this to the company correcting all the findings. However, it was mentioned before that a participant did not feel safe sharing in a group, and only two people in that group had engaged with the auditor.

Ek wil net weer noem, al die oudits wat ek nou betrokke gewees het … waar SIZA betrokke is, daar kom definitief 'n baie groot verandering en nou, baie kere dit is maar orals so. Die wet sê mense moet vryheid van spraak hê. Baie kere, wil jy nie net, baie van die werkers het nie vryheid van spraak nie. Nou, as jy miskien inkom, hy wil miskien, hy wil miskien nie met my praat nie, maar as jy miskien nou inkom, dan sal hy liewer vir met jou praat. …En dan, hierdie jaar was, totally verbaas, geen klagtes nie, want ons het onmiddellik ag geslaan op dinge wat verkeerd was. Daarom sien jy in ons lande staan trailers met twee sulke wit tenke op, santiser en seep. Ons het die portable toilets wat weekliks geservice word, en goed. So, ja, so. Ons is redelik daarso. Redelik. (Frankfurt, farming manager)

Therefore, although some were open to sharing information with the auditor, some employees did not feel safe disclosing information to the auditor within a group setting. Moreover, Frankfurt noted that no concerns emerged from the interviews conducted during the last audit. This implies the possibility that the company had addressed all the issues people were willing to vocalise in a group setting. However, additional concerns potentially remained that an auditor could only illicit through private, confidential, one-on-one interviews.

Significant interview data concurred that each subsequent SIZA audit noted fewer non-conformances, indicating that repeated audits can effectively improve compliance. As the case company had already been internally motivated to be

socially sustainable and had also been motivated to demonstrate compliance with SIZA, it is not known whether repeat audits would be as effective on other farms. Alex mentioned that the last audit was more favourable due to the corrective actions the company had taken since the previous audit.

> The SIZA auditors that we've, that I have had, I've been through two SIZA audits. um The first SIZA auditor that we had was a little bit difficult. um The second one was, creates um very understandable amicable um but had seen the improvement that that we had undertaken based on the first one. (Alex, pack house manager)

This corresponds to Bongi, who, as mentioned before, had said: "when I looked um a report from last year to the report to this year, there's a huge improvement. I I feel like there's an improvement year to year" (Bongi, pack house QC manager). It was also mentioned before how Charlie learned from the auditor that asbestos could be harmful; the auditor noted many more non-conformances on that property, which Charlie explained were all corrected.

> Natuurlik was al die findings oor [SECONDARY FARM] gewees en um, ja, ag, fixed né. (Charlie, HR manager)

In addition to the company addressing issues the auditor noted, SIZA significantly affected the company culture. Before, Bongi mentioned that SIZA brought about a sense of "as much as the company is looking for you, you also have to look for yourself" (Bongi, pack house QC manager). Bongi further perceived SIZA as influencing the culture at the company.

> They make sure that you take care of your your employees, you know, and it becomes a routine, or a culture, I would say, or put it that way. …because, at the back of the mind, I I would make an example that if you're just driving on your local road and then you're driving on a national road, you know: There's traffic cops and all, you're more cautious, because you know that there are traffic cops and then ... On your local road, you're like I'm used to this road, but then now, it does change a lot. It it it it makes it to become a habit, and then you get used to it, and then it becomes a culture. And then, I would say,

it does help a lot. (Bongi, pack house QC manager)

Therefore, Bongi suggested that just knowing that another SIZA audit would happen in the future affected the company's behaviour, which, once internalised, formed part of the culture.

5.6.3   Negative perceptions of SIZA

As may be expected of a compliance audit, some perceptions were negative, even *financially related*. It was explained before that the farm had recently experienced severe financial strain. Charlie described that if the company had been audited during that period, they would have had to retrench more people to afford the corrective actions raised at a SIZA audit.

> So, laasjaar spesifiek terwyl ons retrench het, né, was die die kontantvloei ongelooflik tight gewees. So, sou ons toe, gelukkig was dit mos nie, nie ons jaar vir 'n oudit gewees nie. Ons is eers dié jaar geoudit. Soos, maar, sou ons daai jaar geoudit gewees het, kan ek vir jou waarborg dat ons potensieel ekstra mense sou moes retrench ten einde iemand wat besluit, o nee, maar instede daarvan dat julle die chemikalieë op hout pallets sit, moet dit op plastiek pallets wees, want da, iemand kan dalk van die chemikalieë daarop mors, en dan discard julle daai stukkie pellet en iemand braai dalk 'n vleisie op hom later, en dan kry die ou een of ander toxicity ... Ja, benadeel ... hm ... Regtig? As mens so, jy weet, of die die goed wat jy, die signage: Niemand het nog ooit 'n signage issue gehad van al die oudits wat ons deurgaan elke jaar nie, maar hiérdie jaar se ouditeur besluit, vir háár lyk dit, sy, as sy nou daar in die middel van die pakhuis staan, dan is dit nou nie vir haar baie duidelik watter rigting sy moet hardloop nie. So, in stede van net 'n exit bordjie, as jy daar staan, moet die pyltjies teen die mure afhardloop om vir jou te wys, en die mannetjie in die regte direction. So, dan moet jy daai signage gaan aankoop en hom probeer nog opkry voor die oudit klaar is, sodat jy dit nie as 'n recommendation kry, of as 'n ... kom ek stel dit vir jou so, daar was nog nie een oudit waar ons nie, bitter vinnig baie geld moes uithaal om vinnig gou iets te fix nie, sodat ons nie 'n finding kry op dit nie. (Charlie, HR manager)

Charlie perceived SIZA as *harsh,* despite trying conditions. The previous audit was

conducted during the global pandemic, while the company had a larger seasonal workforce than ever before, and the HR officer was simultaneously going through a divorce. Charlie perceived that it was harsh for SIZA to declare a non-conformance when, under these circumstances, some employees had not yet signed contracts.

> Dit was 2020, COVID jaar gewees, né. En, toe gaan sy deur 'n egskeiding, en ons het vir die eerste keer in die geskiedenis van hierdie plaas 'n duisend merk van al die werknemers in diens gehad. En haar lewe val toe uitmekaar uit, en ek en my wederhelfte eindig toe op om 'n duisend werknemers se HR, pay roll, al daai goeters te moet handhaaf, en die SIZA-oudit het plaasgevind terwyl sy nog hier was, né. …En van daai mense se fixed-term kontrakte was nie in plek gewees nie. En ... daar was geen genade rêrig rondom dit gewees dat ons het 'n persoon gehad wat 'n totale emotional breakdown gehad het. Daar was 'n paar mense wat nie kontrakte in plek gehad het nie, en ek het gedink dat daai level is dit, is dit seriously harsh. (Charlie, HR manager)

To add to the context, Charlie, who still did HR consulting throughout the region, facilitated more retrenchments in 2020 than in her 27-year career.

> …ek het meer besighede toegemaak ge~ tydens die COVID, tussen, tydens 2020, as wat ek in my hele lewe as 'n arbeidskonsultant toegemaak het. … En ek bedoel, dit was dit was so erg, dat dit actually traumaties vir my was, want dis een ding om ... vier of vyf of ses deur 'n jaar te doen. Dis 'n ander storie om so 'n magdom besighede toe te maak in in 'n paar maande… (Charlie, HR manager)

Moreover, Charlie, an HR specialist, struggled to *reconcile some of SIZA's findings with South Africa's legal framework*.

> PARTICIPANT: Ek dink dat, ag, van die goed 'n bietjie ridiculous is, hoekom moet die … werkersverteenwoordiger nou op 'n SIZA-papier wees as die foto in elk geval daarop is? Jy weet, daar's sulke klein petty goeters wat ek net dink, regtig, maar … dit kan nooit 'n critical finding wees nie. …Die vorige ouditeur het ook aangedring ons moet … elke jaar, in skrif, bevestig wat die ou se verhogings is. Wat nêrens in die arbeidswetgewing staan nie.

INTERVIEWER: So, daai is waarskynlik n Europese konvensie?

PARTICIPANT: Dis ridiculous.

INTERVIEWER: Dit sal seker van die International Labour Organisation afkom?

PARTICIPANT: Dis ridiculous, maar ek het dit toe gedoen. Dis hoekom ons op platinum-status tans is en nie op gold nie. Ek het dit gedoen.

Windhoek and Gladys demonstrated some *frustration at external standards* being unilaterally imposed on them, which they likened to being told to use a fork instead of a spoon, even though the easy way was the spoon.

And it comes here like, you see, we have a system working. Our business has its own system working, and we have our own reasons why we're working like this. Now, they come from there, they come and change everything. Now, maybe that thing that they come to change, it has its own sta~ stability. Now, they come from there, they change it all. How long is it going to take us to come on a way so to be stable again so that we can be right in the future? (Windhoek, farming supervisor)

Brooklyn felt that, although SIZA was not as robust as BHP Billiton's remote site, around 5% of SIZA *recommendations are inappropriate* in a farming context.

Daar's 'n vyf persent wat hulle moet ook dink aan… Ek dink hulle vergeet partykeer dat dit dit eintlik 'n plaas is. Dit, daar's party goeters wat bietjie anderste werk as wat jy daar in die corporate world is, of as jy … net 'n workshop het. Hierso is is op 'n plaas. Daar's goed wat moet buitekant gedoen word uh wat 'n hele ander storie is, jy weet. (Brooklyn, workshop manager)

However, Brooklyn did acknowledge that, although SIZA standards have sometimes been unachievable, he perceived a benefit from the auditor's insights in that the new ideas helped him think differently, and even though one cannot always "follow the book" on a farm, one should at least try to be as safe as possible.

Kyk, as 'n yster val en hy val, dan val hy, maar dis 'n ander storie as jy weet

daai yster kan val, en jy wil daar onder hom gaan lê. Dis 'n ander storie. So, dit gee vir jou ten minste daai insig dat jy moet whatever jy doen, doen dit veilig. (Brooklyn, workshop manager)

This also speaks to SIZA's *impact on culture — safety culture.* When Frankfurt was asked about outside standards being imposed onto the farm, he felt that the farms that would complain would be the ones who could not see themselves complying with the standards/legislation.

Kyk, mense mag beginne inskryf as hy nie kans sien om saam te werk. As ek weet, ek maak net 'n voorbeeld, ek weet nou nie, of ek dit kan doen nie, maar as ek 'n boer is en ek weet ek bly nie by standaarde volgens wet nie, sal ek baie het om te skryf en te kla en te sê, maar ek stem nie saam met sekere goed hierso nie. (Frankfurt, farming manager)

5.6.4 SIZA enhances attractiveness in terms of employment

Although no participant knew of SIZA before, several participants perceived SIZA certification as a valuable company attribute. In addition to the perceived benefits explained before, most participants strongly felt that SIZA protected them from discrimination and an otherwise unfavourable working environment. Bongi explained that she was apprehensive about taking up employment at this company because the packhouse facility was located on the farm. Besides what she had seen on farms in Kwazulu-Natal, her family in the Eastern Cape had cautioned her not to take the job, but she was pleasantly surprised with the good working environment at the company, which she attributed to SIZA and Arthur. Bongi was then asked whether SIZA had become a criterion by which she would judge future employment opportunities.

PARTICIPANT: Yes, I will look for that now. Definitely, I will look if they have any SIZA on their actual job description, because I know, I'm responsible for audit. They gonna say, SIZA audits, then I'll be like, that's a yes for me, then I'm gonna go there.
INTERVIEWER: And if they don't have SIZA?
PARTICIPANT: No, I'm not gonna go. I'm not gonna go.

Therefore, when farms are certified by SIZA, they may become more attractive to employees.

5.7 SUMMARY OF PRIMARY DATA

The following sections briefly summarise the themes that emerged from the previous section concerning employees' perceptions of SIZA:

5.7.1 Retail clients' requirements

In section 5.35.5, the managers explained that retailers required the supplier to comply with SIZA. No additional retailer-led social interventions were discovered from the interviews.

5.7.2 Perceptions of SIZA

Participants discussed their perceptions of SIZA. In terms of:

❖ **Awareness of SIZA**

Participants were all aware of SIZA audits. Employees at the management level had a good working knowledge of what SIZA entailed.

❖ **Interaction with SIZA auditors**

A SIZA auditor had interviewed some entry-level participants; however, these interviews were conducted in groups too large to ensure confidentiality, which prevented some participants from sharing openly. Many participants perceived feedback from the auditor in a positive and even educational light. Some perceived the auditor more negatively, although this may be a spillover effect from other experiences, such as being audit-fatigued.

❖ **SIZA and social sustainability**

Charlie felt SIZA was not the key driver behind the company's social sustainability. SIZA mainly emphasised workplace compliance, aligning more with social responsibility or ethical procurement than SCSS. However, some participants believed that SIZA could have significant effects on farms that are less socially responsible than their own company.

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5.7.3 Perceptions of retailers' supply chain social sustainability

SIZA compliance was the only social expectation that retailers had, and they appeared unwilling to support the supplier financially for the costs of SIZA certification. Moreover, retailers were generally unresponsive during the company's social crises. Notably, Retailer B delayed payments by 18 weeks for products already received.

5.7.4 Additional perceptions of SIZA

SIZA was the primary approach perceived by participants being implemented by their retail clients concerning SCSS. As there was an initial perceived lack of engagement with social sustainability by the retailers and the SIZA social standard, the research expanded its focus to fully understand the nuances of SIZA as the prominent social initiative in this case. Therefore, section 5.6 delved deeper into participants' perspectives on SIZA, emphasising its impact on areas like human needs, recurrent audits, stress, and costs, among other factors:

❖ **SIZA related to human needs**

SIZA improved the company's adherence to regulations, particularly regarding health and safety. SIZA also enhanced the company's health and safety protocols by improving its responsiveness and funding towards issues identified by employees or auditors. SIZA may promote social sustainability by ensuring employees remain healthy and productive. SIZA could dramatically affect other farms, though some might resist. When prompted, black participants felt that SIZA protected them from racial discrimination and noted that, socially, their company greatly surpassed farms in other provinces with which they were familiar.

❖ **SIZA's effects over time**

SIZA auditors have been finding fewer issues in each audit; however, some employees felt unsafe sharing with the SIZA auditor in a group setting, indicating that not all potential issues may have been voiced. Additionally, SIZA audits influenced the company culture, with employees becoming more proactive in their roles and the impending knowledge of future audits shaping behaviour and, once internalised, the company culture. SIZA brought about a sense of "as much as the company is looking for you, you also have to look for yourself".

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❖ **Negative perceptions of SIZA**

A SIZA audit during a financially challenging period would have led to additional layoffs. Some thought SIZA was harsh in certain contexts, particularly when considering challenges like the pandemic and the HR officer's personal issues. Some expressed frustrations over externally imposed standards, but the audits brought valuable safety insights, and Frankfurt believed that farmers resistant to such standards were those likely to complain.

❖ **SIZA enhances farms' attractiveness as employers**

Several participants perceived SIZA certification as a valuable company attribute, creating a good working environment. Therefore, when farms are certified by SIZA, they may become more attractive to employees.

5.8 SECONDARY DATA: DESKTOP RESEARCH

During the interviews, several participants disclosed the names of the retailers they supply. As expected, the one retailer was based in South Africa and had a reputation for sustainability. The names of other South African retailers were also mentioned, but they are not relevant to the critical nature of the case. However, the researcher discovered that the company also supplies a UK-based retailer, which also has a reputation for sustainability. Therefore, the local retailer (Retailer A) and the UK retailer (Retailer B) were included in a desktop review of public data. A review was also conducted of the selected case company.

5.8.1 Desktop research of the selected case

A Google search of the company and information supplied by Arthur produced several newspaper articles about the labour strike, which were mentioned in the interviews. The articles reported that the strike involved violence (such as car stoning) and intimidation of employees wanting to work. The search further showed that Arthur had been the chairperson of a local youth initiative. Interview data showed that he was involved in the startup of the initiative and continued to support it financially. The sources cannot be disclosed to ensure the confidentiality of this study.

5.8.2 Desktop research of local Retailer A

A Google search containing [Retailer A name] and [sustainability] directed the researcher to Retailer A's corporate web page. The researcher proceeded to download all the non-financial public documents from the website. As it was outside the scope of this study to conduct an exhaustive content analysis, the reports were read for content related to this study. Terms such as "sustainable", "ethic", "social", "audit", "human needs", and "compliance" were searched for within each document to ensure relevant information was not overlooked.

The reports revealed that the term "sustainability" was used generally, and never paired with "social". *Therefore, the concepts "social sustainability" and "socially sustainable" did not exist in the reports.* Rather, the reports used "sustainability" or "sustainable" generally to describe actions or their values.

> …we have embedded sustainability into every aspect of our business and every product we sell, with eight key focus areas: sustainable farming, water, waste, energy, ethical sourcing, transformation, social development, and health and wellness. (Retailer A, 2021)

The word "social" was found to be paired with "responsible", indicating explicitly that *the retailer subscribed to social responsibility as a concept*.

> We believe that consumer demand for products that are more sustainable and produced in an environmentally and socially responsible manner will continue to grow in over the next few years. (Retailer A, 2021)

Further, the documents detailed how Retailer A created an ethical trading programme based on International Labour Organisation conventions and the Ethical Trading Initiative and *created a supplier code* in a similar way:

> These Business Principles draw on recognised international standards that promote responsible social and environmental practices, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Global Compact, to which we are a signatory, International Labour Organization's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, and the Ethical Trading

Initiative (ETI) Base Code. (Retailer A, 2020)

The reports again refer to "social" when explaining how suppliers are audited for social and ethical compliance.

> Suppliers' compliance to our codes is monitored through our social and ethical compliance audits. (Retailer A, 2022)

> All suppliers' factories undergo regular audits against the codes, conducted by independent auditors… (Retailer A, 2022)

Therefore, Retailer A's reports neither contained social sustainability nor supply chain social sustainability information. The reports did mention multiple human needs but did not explicitly employ the term "human needs". The reports also explained how social and ethical compliance is managed down the supply chain. *Instead, Retailer A's reports suggest a practice of "supply chain social and ethical responsibility".*

5.8.3 Desktop research of UK Retailer B

Similar to before, a Google search containing [Retailer B name] AND [sustainability] directed the researcher to Retailer B's corporate web page. The sustainability report was downloaded. As it was outside the scope of this study to conduct an exhaustive content analysis, the website and report were read for content related to this study. Terms such as "sustainab", "ethic", "social", "audit", "human needs", and "compliance" were searched for within the document to ensure relevant information was not overlooked. Moreover, Retailer B's website contained a tool to view all their suppliers. The researcher confirmed that the selected case does, in fact, supply Retailer B.

Retailer B only had one sustainability report, as opposed to Retailer A, which had multiple variations of reports on an extensive range of non-financial topics. Like Retailer A, the report did not pair the concept of sustainability with "social". Retailer B introduced their sustainability report as covering its ESG (environmental, social, governance) scope, and, as explained in the literature review, ESG overlaps with sustainability but has different objectives. The social section of their report included ethical trade and human rights in the supply chain but excluded "human needs",

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which is by which social sustainability is defined. Human rights represent merely one component within the broader spectrum of human needs.

Retailer B explained that they have created a code of conduct for their suppliers, which:

> set out our minimum requirements and expectations of how we and our supplier partners conduct business to uphold human rights along with labour, environmental, ethical and legal requirements in their own operations and their supply chains. We're committed to respecting internationally recognised human rights and the principles and guidance in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights ("UNGPs"). We also support the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises. (Retailer B, 2023)

Therefore, Retailers A and B seemed to have similar expectations of their suppliers, which do not explicitly include social sustainability or human needs. Instead, their documentation suggests that suppliers' social expectations originate from their CSR/corporate responsibility and risk management functions.

5.9   ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

A spontaneous theme emerged from the interviews, which added context to the research findings described before and could stimulate future research: How the company paid attention to employee needs. This theme was significant because human needs were used to measure social sustainability. The researcher believed that the case company was one of the most socially sustainable companies in South Africa. Therefore, exploring the company's innate strategies and tactics is valuable as it may have a theoretical and practical contribution to society.

5.9.1   Proactive awareness of employees' needs

Participants were asked whether their company proactively tried to understand their needs. Surprisingly, none of the participants could recall such an instance, and the human resource manager explained that the company does not have the capacity to learn about the human needs of employees proactively.

…ons het eenvoudig nie tyd nie. So, even as jy nou vir my sê ek moet gaan 'n social study doen oor mense praat en uitvind wat is julle behoeftes … like seriously. It's not gonna happen. …nee, ons is nie social workers nie. Ons loop nie rond en vra wat is jou behoeftes nie. Daar's regtig ander mense wat dit kan doen. (Charlie, HR manager)

The farming manager explained that although the farm has not proactively tried to understand employee needs, he does seek opportunities to connect holistically with employees one-on-one and is always willing to listen and help employees voicing a problem to him.

Ons het nog nie direk nie … Maar as hulle kom met 'n probleem, dan's ons bereid om te luister, en ons tree onmiddellik op en ons help waar ons kan help. Ek sal altyd [Throat clearing] met my ondervinding, en ek het miskien… 'n persoon is miskien 'n moeilikheidmaker of so iets van die aard. So, as ek miskien van die een plaas reis na die ander plaas en daai persoon reis ook dan saam met my, sal ek altyd vir hom sê… Kyk, ek laat nooit niemand… as dit een persoon is, laat ek niemand agter op 'n bakkie sit nie. Ek sê, kom sit voor by. Dan sal ek altyd met daai persoon praat, maar dan praat ek as 'n vriend. Ek praat nie werk nie. Ek praat as 'n vriend. En dan, in ons geselskap, praat ons ook so bietjie religious. Daar's nie net, jy weet wat ek bedoel. So, ja, maar van die van die plaas se kant af, is ons oop wanneer hulle self kom en sê: "Oukei, hier het ek 'n probleem. Hier run ek short. Jy weet, finansieel, kom ons praat oor dit". (Frankfurt, farming manager)

5.9.2 Responsiveness to employee needs

An unexpected finding during data gathering was a pervasive culture of psychological safety in combination with employee-centricity throughout all departments of the case company. Participants perceived farm management as receptive and helpful when approached. All participants were under the impression that they were expected to voice their issues to their superiors.

Ja, … hulle help 'n mens as jy kom om te praat oor dit, maar as jy nou nie gaan praat nie en net eenkant toe staan, gaan hulle mos nie weet om te help nie, maar as jy praat, sal enige bestuur wat onder, wat jy onder werk, dan sal

hulle jou help, of hulle sal eerste wag, en dan die grootbaas vra, en dan kom hulle terug, maar hulle sal luister en help waar hulle kan. (Berlin, farm worker)

Gladys (farming supervisor), who was particularly loyal to the company and especially to Arthur (Owner/director) and perceived the company as her family, was the only one to add that the farm manager (Frankfurt) has tried to manage the strain of employees voicing their needs to him. Based on the context of the entire interview with Gladys, the quote below should be viewed as Gladys placing herself in management's shoes from a place of empathy and ownership.

…[Frankfurt] told us everything: 'Please guys, you see the whole farm. So, if every person: [making baby crying sounds]. What about anothers? What about anothers? You must understand, I'm a lone manager. So, all the farm…' (Gladys, farming supervisor).

However, despite Frankfurt describing his duties as expansive, he did not express any strain from being receptive to employees voicing their needs.

Kyk, ek het verskriklik baie wat ek doen. …land prep, …crop spraying, harvesting, irrigation, uh al daai dinge wat dan daar beplan word. …Van harvesting tot oes, by die pakstoor. Ek is in alles involved. (Frankfurt, farming manager)

The farm had around 500 employees. As such, it could have been expected that management may perceive attending to employee issues as challenging. However, all participants were aligned in perceiving the company management ─ especially the owner ─ as highly receptive and responsive to employee needs.

Ek sal sê as daar miskien nou, maak 'n voorbeeld, daar is 'n probleem so by die huis, by jou huis en so aan, en jy kom vra, dan sal hulle, dan sal hulle nie weier om vir jou daai ding te gaan doen by jou huis. (Sydney, farm worker)

… if you have someone and, on your home, is sick, you can come and ask something or help. They give you. (Shawn, packer)

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PARTICIPANT : If you, if you need the something, you must tell the boss...
Then, Mr [Arthur] will give the something if you need.

INTERVIEWER: …he always says yes?

PARTICIPANT : [Laughing] [nodding yes] (Jo, packer)

Hy help ons goed … As jy rêrig iets op jou hart het, en jy wil kom praat en jy soek hulp en so, dan sal hy altyd help waar jy kan, ja. (Jesse, packer)

As ons behoeftig is, help hulle ons uit met geld. (Sage, packer)

…dis nou al baie keer wat hulle kom en sê, hoor hierso, hulle sukkel, hulle het plate nodig, of hulle het sink nodig om die plek aan te bou of reg te maak, en as hulle met [Arthur] praat, dan laat [Arthur] die goeters kry. um Laat hulle dit afbetaal. Party keer betaal hulle dit nie eers af nie. Hy kry die goed vir hulle. Dis baie min mense wat dít doen, wat dan... kry hy die goed vir hulle. Hy sal nooit argumenteer met iemand wat iets sê, kom sy huis reg te maak nie. Nooit nooit nooit nooit nie. Hy sal jou dadelik help. (Brooklyn, workshop manager)

Indeed, the owner explained that his office is situated adjacent to reception and the human resource office to ensure people can always go to him.

Door's open, next to HR. I haven't got an office upstairs. I'm not inaccessible. (Arthur, owner/director)

Therefore, employees are expected and encouraged to speak up about any workplace or personal issues, indicating efforts to create psychological safety. In addition, a culture of being extremely responsive to employee needs (employee centricity) originated from Arthur, who has made an ongoing effort to communicate that he is available for issues and even expressed anger when employees do not go to him. In fact, Arthur was agitated when recalling how employees whose rain boots had broken did not inform him promptly when their manager was tardy in issuing new boots.

The manager was sick last week and I looked at somebody cutting celery,

and her shoes were broken. I said, but your gum boots are broken. Yeah, but I asked for gum boots. You can't fuckin work like that. You can't work like that. Yeah, but we did apply. I said, but you haven't got. Why didn't you come to me? And they shrugged. Well, the next time they walked into the field, uh they still went with broken boots, because they didn't listen to me, and um I gave them again hell, because the boots were here, and the instruction was, you first come and get your boots before you go to land, because I don't want people working in land with wet feet. But even then, they still weren't prepared to carry out the instruction. The boots were here. They were right here. They were here. (Arthur, owner/director)

Therefore, Arthur expected employees to speak up promptly about any issues, which was the active cultivation of psychological safety. Participants further felt that Arthur would help them whenever he could. Indeed, Charlie described how Arthur not only wanted employees to speak up but would then act swiftly in addressing their needs.

… daar's een ding rakende Arthur. As jy nie die tools het wat jy nodig het vir jou job nie … moet jy dit nie as 'n verskoning ooit gebruik nie, want as jy vir hom sê, ek kort dit, dan maak hy seker jy het dit. As ek nou vir hom sê, luister, daai HR laptop, ek kort 'n nuwe HR laptop, hy gaan nie eers vir my hum of ha nie. Ek gaan 'n HR laptop hê teen Maandag. (Charlie, HR manager)

5.9.3 Efficiencies emerging from psychological safety combined with employee centricity

The culture of encouraging employees to voice concerns, coupled with prompt management responses, seemed to address their human needs effectively and efficiently. Thus, the company was not spending resources helping employees with the wrong things. Participants were asked whether they would have preferred the company to help them with something else rather than what it has been doing, and most responded that they would not, with some providing more detail.

Yeah, I'm trying to think of examples like that. uh-uh. I can't really think of something around that. [No speech] No. um [Laughing]. (Bongi, QC Manager)

Nee, ek kan nie sê dat daar einige iets is wat hulle al vir my al gegee het wat

ek voel… um hulle kon vir my iets beter gegee het nie. I don't think there is there is been ways that I felt like that… (Windhoek, farming supervisor)

Some participants could think of more assistance they would like from the company, such as Nairobi, who wanted the company to procure gas for them and deduct the costs from their wages.

Ons het gaan luister na [Inaudible 0:11:57] of hulle nie vir ons gas kan [koop? 0:11:58], laat koop deur die werk nie en dan hulle mos nou weer van onse pay aftrek, maar ons kry nie terugvoering van die mense af nie. Hulle wil so graag dat die wat in die Kaap bly, dan vra hulle ons het mos nou nie dit nie en ons kan dit nie ook nie nou koop soos in nou nie. (Nairobi, farm worker)

On the other hand, Nicki and Morgan were not interested in any social benefits available from the company and only valued the income they could earn. They had travelled from the Eastern Cape searching for employment and assigned much value to the company for creating employment and paying wages.

One thing, what they pay us. …This farm must help us, like if I come from Eastern Cape and I come here. So, I'm here because I need a job. So, he can give me the job, because I have the reason why I'm I'm coming, I'm coming Eastern Cape from here. So, it's better to us, so that he he can give us the job and work, work as well on what he likes. (Morgan, packer)

The only additional benefit they would also have valued was higher remuneration in the form of annual bonuses to help them cover back-to-school expenses.

I need the bonusses, see, end of the year. …we are working the whole year, whole year, but end of the year, we didn't get the bonusses. … I like the more money, because the festive season … buy uniform for my children. (Nicki, packhouse QC)

Therefore, none of the participants could recall a way in which the company was providing any benefits they did not value. This meant that the company's psychological safety ensured accurate information regarding the employee's needs,

enabling its employee-centric culture to direct company resources to the right human needs at the right time. Moreover, in a virtuous loop, the prompt resolution of employee needs further strengthened psychological safety, effectively replacing any proactive "employee need" studies, which, as mentioned by Charlie, would have been a mammoth task.

5.9.4   Valuing psychological safety and employee centricity

When Berlin was asked what she would have done had the company not been responsive to her needs, she indicated that she would have started looking for alternative employment.

> Dan sal ek nie weer wil gaan werk het nie. Dan sal ek gaan kyk het waar ek kan werk kry waar hulle mens kan help met sulke behoeftes. (Berlin, farm worker)

Similarly, Auckland explained that there was a time when it was vital for her to get a company loan to fund her daughter's matric (and the company did assist her with this), but had the company not been interested in helping her ─ she would have needed to search for an employer who was.

> ...as hulle my nie kon gehelp het nie, dan, so kan die kind matriek doen, want sal ek nie, want ek het nie daai tyd die geld gehad nie. So, as jy my nie gehelp het nie, dan het ek gaan kyk waar ek 'n ander jobbie kan kry waar ek kan gehelp word. (Auckland, farm worker)

Gladys explained that she appreciated being able to share her concerns with Arthur, even when he could not solve all her problems. Moreover, she felt that it was much easier to share concerns with Arthur than a SIZA auditor or a unionist.

> Lekker vir my voel om te sê [Inaudible 0:23:04]. So, is lekker, want julle share. …Is nie nodig om vir iemand te gaan vra om vir jou… ah-ah. As jy iets soek, as jy nie klere, dan sê hulle daar is… Jy voel gelukkig. … So, it's nice to share with someone. (Gladys, farming supervisor)

Windhoek, who was with the company for five years, could not recall a time when

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the company did not take her voiced concerns seriously, adding that it made her appreciate the company.

> I can't say there's been times of, times that my family's life that they don't help us or look into your family. I think this farm, this place is the only place that actually look into your social life or look after your family. It's very important. Even what I like when the boss is talking, he's talking about, I'm looking after you and your family. So, that is is actually very nice. This is what I like also about this place. (Windhoek, farming supervisor)

5.9.5 Social strain on the employer

The interviews evidenced several examples of how attending to employee needs strained the company. Berlin recalled how she had approached the company to assist her with a room to stay in, and although they committed to helping her, they did not have the resources to help more than two employees at the time.

> En toe het ek na die baas toe gegaan. Toe sê hy oor ons vier mense wat nou wag vir dit, gaan hy eers twee kan help, en dan gaan hy die ander twee help, maar ons moenie almal so net druk op hom sit nie. Hy het ook tyd nodig om reëlings te tref daaroor. Dis hoe hulle eintlik... Hulle help waar hulle kan. (Berlin, farm worker)

When asking Berlin to imagine what the company would do if the employees, as a group, required assistance with a human need, she responded:

> Hulle sal help en, maar... nie op daai oomblik almal op een slag kan help nie. (Berlin, farm worker)

Nicki mentioned another perspective: The company could not allow employees to take leave during peak production periods. This created a challenge for Nicki because exactly when her mother became ill was out of her control, although she remains responsible for her.

> Some sometimes it's too difficult lot of time. If my mother is sick, you see, and now it's the export season, neh? Maybe my mother is sick, the management

say, no, you can't sign the leave this time of the year, you see? (Nicki, packhouse QC)

Tokyo explained that management has, in the past, attempted to influence employees by mentioning assistance they have received before.

> Maar, somtyds as hulle nou gehelp het en so, en dan wil hulle jou daai goed voor die kop gooi. As hulle jou nou klaar gehelp het, miskien is daar nou 'n probleem by die huis of so, en dan miskien jy het nou nie vandag kom werk nie, jy kom more kom werk, dan bring hulle dit voor jou kop op. 'Ek het jou gehelp en jy het nie eers kom werk nie' en so. (Tokyo, farm worker)

5.10 SUMMARY OF ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

The following briefly summarises the themes that emerged from the previous section (5.9) concerning the additional primary data findings:

5.10.1 Proactive awareness of employees' needs
The company has not proactively attempted to learn about the human needs of its employees, as this would be too resource-intensive. However, the company had a culture of being open and responsive to employees wanting to raise personal or professional issues (psychological safety).

5.10.2 Responsiveness to employees' needs
All participants were under the impression that they were expected to voice their issues to their superiors (psychological safety), a culture that originated from Arthur, who helped whenever he could.

5.10.3 Efficiencies emerging from psychological safety combined with employee centricity
The company's robust psychological safety ensured that efforts were not wasted, and efficiently, resources centred on human needs were what was required at the time.

5.10.4 Valuing Valuing psychological safety and employee centricity

Participants greatly appreciated the company's openness and responsiveness to their voice, valuing being heard even more than issue resolution itself. In fact, some would have sought alternative employment if the company had been disinterested.

5.10.5 Social strain on the employer

Participants mentioned several instances where the company found it challenging to listen to or address their issues as symptoms of financial and management constraints.

CHAPTER 6:   DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

6.1   INTRODUCTION

The research findings presented in the previous chapter are subsequently discussed in terms of existing literature to answer the research question. Five themes emerged in the data, which determined the structure of this section. The first four themes directly relate to the research question, and the fifth theme developed from the additional findings. The discussions draw on stakeholder theory, the theoretical lens chosen for this study. The discussion creates theory by identifying several relationships, including two models requiring further research.

6.2   ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question that directed this study was:

What are the perceptions of different role players in the supply chain of a selected retailer in South Africa concerning its social sustainability strategies and tactics, considering post-implementation unanticipated outcomes, trade-offs, and possible tensions concerning the adoption of the suggested practices?

The following themes evolved from the findings that addressed the research question:

6.2.1   Theme 1: Addressing Human Needs

Retailers A and B focused on human rights within their supply chains as an extension of their corporate responsibility/CSR, although they neglected the concept of "human needs" — a function of social sustainability. The emerging literature on the "social sustainability" and "SCSS" concepts presents urgent calls for more research (Golicic, 2020; Mani, 2018; Morais, 2018, 2022). Unfortunately, this study has not produced related evidence of these terms at Retailers A and B. *Instead, the Retailers (and SIZA) used "sustainability" as an umbrella term for all CSR, corporate responsibility, ethical trade, human rights issues, and the like.*

The literature indicates that definitions of corporate responsibility, corporate social

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responsibility (CSR, the social pillar of corporate responsibility), corporate sustainability, social sustainability (the social pillar of corporate sustainability), and CSR (corporate social responsibility) overlap and are inconsistent. CSR definitions are more oriented towards stakeholders' short-term needs and are nuanced for each industry (Mani, 2020; Wong, 2022). The social pillar of sustainability has recently, in its broadest form, simply been equated to social equity (Cristobal-Cipriano, 2022), while others still keep social sustainability true to its original Brundtland definition by maintaining that sustainability refers to meeting present needs without compromising the needs of future generations (Holdgate, 1987; Mani, 2020). In 2019, Mensah clarified that social sustainability does not require focal companies to ensure that the human needs of all people in and around their supply chains are met; instead, social sustainability is "providing enabling conditions for everyone to have the capacity to realize their needs, if they so desire" (Mensah, 2019). *Therefore, as a point of departure toward SCSS, retailers would still need to understand which human needs in and around their supply chains were unmet.*

Based on the secondary data (section 5.8), this study has confirmed the overlap between the concepts of sustainability and responsibility that the retailers employ. For instance, despite being titled "Sustainability Report", neither the reports of Retailers A nor B contained reference to "social sustainability". In the researcher's opinion, the content focused on corporate responsibility/CSR. Moreover, the word "sustainability" was employed non-specifically — in the title of documents or to describe the retailer's culture. Furthermore, *the reports did not contain the term "human needs", suggesting that social sustainability, as defined by this study, did not form part of the retailers' frameworks.*

This study expected to encounter auditing as one of the retailers' social mechanisms in the critical case, which is why participants were requested to share their perceptions of SIZA. However, the researcher found it challenging to reconcile SIZA's objectives with the literature due to the same ambiguous and overlapping terminology found both in SIZA and the literature. SIZA assists "growers with ethical labour practice compliance and environmental stewardship" (The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa, 2023), which, despite "sustainability" being in their name, seems more aligned with corporate responsibility than corporate sustainability. Moreover, the applicable SIZA audit guide is titled "Social Standard" but does not

contain the words "social" or "sustainability". Instead, the guide explains that it is a converged standard to replace the ethical trade programs of individual retailers (The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa, 2020). Therefore, *the retailers and their social mechanism (SIZA) seem less concerned about social sustainability in the supply chain, which is why the human needs they were concerned with were predetermined by societal groups (such as the UN, ETI, ILO).*

Although several of the United Nations' SDGs (sustainable development goals) were adopted by the retailers, the researcher perceived their reports as satisfying the immediate needs of the stakeholders rather than aiming to enable conditions for human needs to be met in the supply chains, or ensuring that the retailer could keep operating indefinitely. This perception is congruent with most CSR descriptions, which involve stakeholders' social benefits and social conditions according to society's values and morals (Golicic, 2020). Therefore, *CSR tends to have a short-term focus, while corporate sustainability originated from Brundtland's definition of sustainable development, which had a long-term intent.*

This study further supports the literature, indicating that it is challenging for companies to engage with SCSS (Golicic, 2020). While analysing the secondary data, the researcher found several instances where the retailers referred to environmental sustainability; however, as mentioned, the term social sustainability was avoided. Although this study selected a specific definition of SCSS which was most appropriate to the context, the literature offered several competing definitions.

The social pillar is still the most vaguely defined, misunderstood, and least researched SSCM/CSR component (Golicic, 2020; Morais, 2022; Sajjad, 2020). Therefore, *although the researcher anticipated engagement with social sustainability, it is understandable that retailers have yet to integrate it into their frameworks*. Nonetheless, the *retailers' social initiatives, such as endorsing specific SDGs, are commendable.*

6.2.2 Theme 2: SIZA and SCSS

The findings suggest that the SIZA social audit scope incorporated most of the participants' human needs during this study. Most participants perceived the SIZA audit as meticulous and that an auditor would not overlook an issue within their

scope. This research studied a company that was inherently working towards social sustainability. Therefore, it was expected that the company would be meeting many human needs despite SIZA. However, interview data yielded some examples of human needs which SIZA did not seem to address:

- Some employees who commuted to work required assistance from the company regarding **decent housing and maintenance of their homes.** One participant required the company's assistance finding a nearby room/house at the start of her employment; others experienced maintenance issues emerging from severe weather or fire. These employees had resource challenges, with which the company assisted. As this was a critical case, employees at other South African farms could also be expected to face housing challenges.

- Participants mentioned that, at times, they required **medical assistance** for themselves or their families. This took several forms, such as employees being transported to a private doctor, financial assistance for medical consultations or medications, and off time.

- Employees experienced **financial difficulties** during December and January during the festive season and dealing with schools opening in January when parents had to buy school supplies and uniforms. Therefore, participants experienced a need for December bonuses despite receiving above minimum wages. Employees can negotiate their remuneration through a union, but it may be more efficient for employers to restructure remuneration according to the seasonal needs of the local community.

- Nicki explained that, when her mother fell ill, she was the only one who could care for her. However, the company had to agree for her to take leave, which it could not do due to **peak season commitments**. Although there must be a balance between social and financial sustainability, this example highlights how each nation should develop its own approach to sustainable development (Holdgate, 1987).

As it was not the purpose of this study to review SIZA, the above examples are not exhaustive. However, their presence in a critical case indicated that more examples of SIZA overlooking human needs could be expected at other South African companies, warranting further study. These results were also expected, considering

SIZA's social standard is not based on the concepts of human needs or social sustainability. Therefore, CSR ethical compliance audits should not be confused with social sustainability or SCSS unless they form part of a larger SCSS strategy.

The definition of SCSS adopted by this study was founded on the "human needs as defined by the people" across the supply chain (Golicic, 2020). Therefore, this study set out to learn how the **human needs** of the people in the case were being met. While the social issues identified in the literature (explained above) served as a foundational scope for human needs, the researcher did not set boundaries on the range of human needs the study aimed to explore. The open-scope of human needs was done for these reasons:

- The literature about the full scope of social issues applicable to SCSS was unclear. For instance, Morais (2022) vaguely defined SCSS by "human potential and welfare", while other studies reviewed the most important social issues in supply chains (Morais, 2022; Yawar, 2017).
- The literature suggests that developing countries have not been sufficiently included in formulating the social standards they must comply with (Golicic, 2020; Gugler, 2009).
- Due to the limited research on SCSS, this study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach, ensuring all pertinent data could be analysed and thus aid in developing the subject (Matos, 2020; Morrow, 2007).

The literature clearly presents the standards upon which SIZA was founded, and the researcher found that the retailers referred to the same standards in the secondary data. Moreover, retailers' reports were congruent with the SIZA social audit scope, often referring to human rights, ethical trade, and workplace conditions, confirming that the retailers and SIZA relied on the same standards. Moreover, SIZA included the most common social challenges mentioned in the CSR and SSCM (sustainable supply chain management) literature (Yawar, 2017). This study also used these social challenges as the minimum scope of human needs, namely: labour conditions, child labour, human rights, health and safety, minority development, disabled/marginalised people inclusion, and gender issues (Yawar, 2017).

The SCSS definition adopted by this study extends to "the people in the communities in which the firms across a supply chain operate, serve, or otherwise affect" (Golicic,

2020, p. 999). Data showed that SIZA was not concerned with conditions outside the perimeter of the company it was auditing, as mentioned by Alex: "…I don't see the benefit of [SIZA] driving through the community, and I only see the benefit of the people that actually work here...". This demonstrates a further distinction between SIZA and the concept of social sustainability, which exists "within and outside the communities of the supply chain" (Morais, 2022, p. 3).

Although outside the scope of this study, the participants consistently provided examples of efforts made by the company to enhance social sustainability. Therefore, it was surprising that the participants also provided many examples where the SIZA auditor identified non-conformances. This further explains that social responsibility and social sustainability have different missions. The company had been allocating significant resources toward social sustainability, resulting in less allocated to social compliance, suggesting that the meticulous enforcement of social compliance may hinder progress toward social sustainability. Indeed, participants shared how SIZA compliance required large amounts of money, sometimes to enlarge safety signs, replace wood with plastic, or replace a sand bucket with a fire extinguisher. On the other hand, participants mentioned that Arthur sometimes lacked the resources to address the community's pressing human needs or invest in its long-term social sustainability.

While the SIZA audits did not focus on social sustainability, there was a beneficial overlap in that many (but not all) of the participants' human needs could be met. As a CSR assurance mechanism, SIZA limited the human needs and physical boundary of its audit scope in a way that cannot be equated to social sustainability.

6.2.3 Theme 3: Retailers and SCSS

The SIZA audit was the only social mechanism employed by retailers in the supply chain, with participants perceiving the retailers themselves as indifferent to SCSS.

The findings suggest that SIZA was limited to being a CSR ethical compliance mechanism to assure stakeholders that supply chains were aligned with their values and morals. Accordingly, Retailers A and B required the company to comply with SIZA's audited social standards. Moreover, no other social initiative could be identified during data collection. Therefore, SIZA's social standard completely

satisfied the social requirements of both retailers, which is understandable, considering SIZA was designed as a unified standard to satisfy the ethical requirements of retailers worldwide (The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa, 2020).

Nonetheless, participants were asked to share their perceptions of their retail clients' social sustainability. Social sustainability was explained to participants as a function of the ability of human needs to be met, with the sustainability component explained as working toward operating indefinitely (Golicic, 2020; Holdgate, 1987). All participants with stable institutional knowledge perceived their retail clients as disinterested in social issues. Therefore, though retailers mandated third-party audits for ethical/social compliance, they demonstrated little concern for the company's overall social and financial well-being. Notably, Charlie, the most knowledgeable and experienced participant, viscerally reacted when asked whether retailers should be taking some ownership of the social well-being of employees on their farms. Rich in meaning, her response revealed emotions of surprise and disbelief when presented with the question. The researcher inferred that she experienced some cognitive dissonance because her view of their retail clients conflicted with the question posed to her.

Charlie's reaction triangulated with other participants: Arthur mentioned retailers do not pay "a single sausage cent" more for the products after they became SIZA-certified. Alex shared how Retailer B recently took 18 weeks to start paying for products it had received, requiring Arthur to sell many assets to keep paying wages. Charlie recounted an incident where the company faced losses at the season's fixed price due to volatile exchange rates. Yet, Retailer B declined to avert retrenchments by adjusting the price. Notably, the retailers and, by extension, SIZA require employees in their supply chains to be free to join a labour union. However, when the employees at the company unionised and picketed for better remuneration, both retailers were unwilling to become involved, or to adjust prices.

Therefore, these findings demonstrated that:
1. The retailers outsourced all CSR in their supply chains to external compliance audits (SIZA).
2. The supplier bears all costs in achieving the social standards required by the

retailers' supply chain CSR commitments without the option to recuperate the investment through higher prices.

3. Retailer B required the case company to bear the entire currency exchange risk for the duration of the season.

4. There was a disconnect between retailers requiring workers in their supply chains to have certain rights (notably, unionising and regular employment) and meaningful engagement when workers exercise said rights.

5. Retailers were perceived as indifferent to the overall sustainability of the supplier.

   a. In terms of the supplier's financial sustainability:
      - their financial health and resilience,
      - their ability to pay wages,
      - their ability to offer more during union negotiations,
      - bearing the full brunt of foreign exchange risk without the option to adjust prices should the currency fluctuate unpredictably.

   b. In terms of the supplier's social sustainability:
      - retailers were unaware of the human needs in or surrounding the supply chain,
      - Retailer B was disinterested in the impact it could have on employees in their supply chain should the company not be able to pay them wages,
      - both retailers showed no concern over the long-term (ideally, indefinitely) continued ability of the community to participate in their supply chain,
      - the retailers were not perceived to be willing to take some ownership of the social well-being of employees in their supply chains.

Regarding stakeholder theory, organisations tend to classify their stakeholders to prioritise those with more salience (Mitchell, 1997). This theme suggests that retailers consider suppliers and their employees as stakeholders of low salience. This theme further suggests that **dominant stakeholders** (stakeholders with moderate salience, such as shareholders, investors, governments, and societal organisations) influenced the retailers to assure the ethical treatment of supply chain

employees. Retailers appear to regard the communities surrounding the supply chain as **nonstakeholders**. Therefore, the results suggest a disconnect between retailers reporting to dominant stakeholders how socially responsible they are and being perceived as socially responsible by those in their supply chain.

6.2.4 Theme 4: Perceptions of SIZA audits

This study has established that, although SIZA can be helpful, it should not be expected to assure social sustainability. This may also apply to other social/ethical assurance standards but fell outside the scope of this study. Findings show that auditing by SIZA was an effective retailer mechanism to ensure compliance with the social standard, which aligned with their CSR commitments. Therefore, SIZA does what it does well. While most perceptions of SIZA audits were positive, negative perceptions also existed.

Findings show that, although SIZA auditors were meticulous in identifying issues, they were also educational. The perceived level of education was indirectly correlated to the experience and seniority of the participants. On the most senior level (Arthur), SIZA was regarded a tickbox exercise, providing a "bench guard", but if retailers were working toward social sustainability, they should also require social compliance by lower-tier suppliers. Charlie, a human resources expert, felt challenged by SIZA audits and perceived some of the learnings as valuable but others as inappropriate. Brooklyn, who has world-class occupational health and safety experience, found value in the fresh perspectives auditors offered and appreciated SIZA's influence with Arthur to secure funding for many of the improvements he desired. Bongi, who was the least experienced, received the most value from the SIZA auditor, saying: "She was such a nice lady … She made the audit so interactive".

On the other hand, the SIZA audit may be overlooking issues due to its interview method. As part of the audit, the auditor identified a selection of employees who were invited into a private space to converse with the auditor. Although some participants indicated that they could share their issues in a group setting, others did not feel psychologically comfortable doing so, indicating that they would have shared more if the interviews had been conducted individually. However, because the company demonstrates a high degree of psychological safety internally, employees may have

shared their concerns privately with management. Notably, more issues are expected to remain unshared on other farms where conditions differ. Being a critical case, the findings indicate the need for SIZA auditors to conduct individual interviews on other farms.

Results demonstrated repeated SIZA audits to be very effective at improving compliance in the case company. Indeed, all participants were highly motivated to avoid any findings (or repeat findings) by the SIZA auditor. When the auditor identified non-conformances that could be corrected on the same day, it was done immediately. Any findings that would take more time were also corrected within the grace period. As mentioned, complying with SIZA audits required large sums of money, which the company would have allocated elsewhere and could not recuperate from the retailers. Therefore, SIZA played a significant role in the company investing resources into issues the auditor had identified. Several participants credited SIZA for increased management responsiveness to their requests.

The study's findings indicate that SIZA elevates the urgency of employees' requests to management. Regarding stakeholder theory, SIZA effectively elevated the salience of employee requests, suggesting that external audits moderate the salience of stakeholders aligning with its standards.
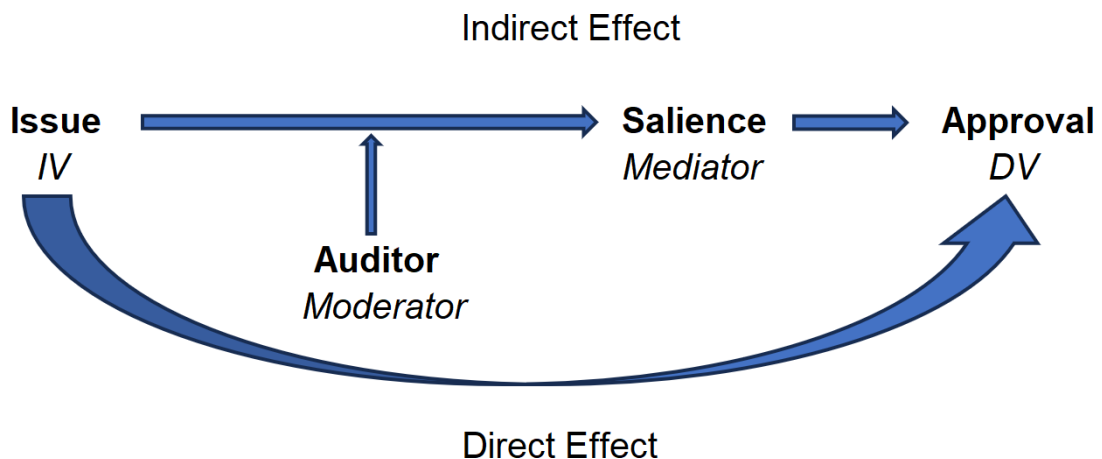
Indirect Effect

Figure 3: Moderating effect of an auditor.
Source: Author's own.

Figure 3 illustrates a proposed model to explain the moderating effect an external

auditor has on the stakeholder salience of an employee regarding aligned issues. In the model **issue**, the independent variable (IV) represents a social/ethical/labour issue/request presented to management. The **direct effect** indicates a pathway where management is aware of the issue, implying that management can address an issue directly if willing. The dependent variable (DV) is the **approval** of the resources required to address the issue.

The **indirect effect** is the pathway when an employee needs to "sell" the issue to top management. The stakeholder class of the employee is the pathway through which the issue is sold to management. Managers prioritise stakeholder claims according to their **salience (mediator)**. According to the stakeholder typology (see Figure 1) employed in this study, employees are dominant stakeholders, indicating moderate salience (Mitchell, 1997). Dominant stakeholders have the attributes of power and legitimacy but lack urgency. The urgency offered by the auditor (**moderator)** either increases or decreases the stakeholder salience, which is the mechanism toward approval.

For instance, if it is important to SIZA that employees always wear appropriate and in-tact personal protective equipment (PPE), it provides the urgency to increase the employee's salience from moderate to high. Supporting examples from the findings include: Shawn felt SIZA decreased the time to receive new boots from four days to one. Arthur explained that SIZA helped his managers prioritise PPE. Brooklyn explained how challenging it was to convince Arthur of the urgency of issues in the workshop until SIZA audits started, which immensely helped. However, this model does not indicate a positive or negative overall effect on sustainability. There may be unexpected outcomes, trade-offs, and tensions resulting from company resources being redirected toward issues concerning an audit. Indeed, Charlie shared how each SIZA audit cost the company significantly.

In addition to SIZA's moderating effect on issue selling, Bongi explained that repeated SIZA audits significantly affected the workplace culture. SIZA increased employees' ownership over workplace issues. Antecedents to this may include increased intra-company dissemination of issues SIZA expects compliance with or education provided by the auditor (while auditing and interviewing selected employees). Notably, the SIZA audits strengthened an existing employee-centric

culture. SIZA's effects on culture may be less pronounced on farms without a culture of safety and employee-centricity. The repeating nature of audits also enhances SIZA's impact on culture. People accepting that SIZA compliance will remain expected may offer one explanation, but knowing of an impending audit could be another. Regardless, once the employees internalise this behaviour, it shapes culture.

Although SIZA ensured robust compliance with its standards, some participants perceived SIZA as excessive. What aggravated this perception was the context that the company was routinely audited by thirteen audit standards, culminating in audit fatigue and a general negative affect toward audits. However, Bongi felt that social standards in the pharmaceutical industry could benefit from some cross-pollination with SIZA because it was more comprehensive than the pharmaceutical industry's standards.

All participants could imagine dramatic impacts if SIZA were imposed onto other farms. Participants suggested that farms in the Eastern Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal provinces were especially far from SIZA's standards, negatively affecting those employees. However, participants cautioned that the farmers must be willing to comply with SIZA to avoid adverse outcomes.

6.2.5   Theme 5: An efficient social sustainability strategy

Data revealed an additional finding which was too significant to exclude from this report. As could be imagined, it would be costly to ensure that a company remained knowledgeable of the human needs in its community. Such mechanisms may include surveys, interviews, studies, audits, and so on.

A significantly cost-effective mechanism the company practises is **psychological safety,** referring to a "safe space". It is the perception that self-expression or interpersonal conflict in a safe space will not have negative repercussions and increases employees speaking up and taking charge (Zeng, Zhao, & Zhao, 2020). Although it was outside the scope of this study to measure perceived psychological safety at the company, the researcher noted its presence. Some of the mechanisms by which Arthur cultivated a psychologically safe environment were his open-door policy (always available) and his office being located next to reception (easily

accessible), which enhanced psychological safety (Zeng, 2020). He is also known for saying, "Come to me" and "Why didn't you come to me?". These are social cues which Arthur maintains and which propagate throughout the employees. Social learning theory may help explain how psychological safety could be achieved among 500 employees (Veetikazhi, Kamalanabhan, Malhotra, Arora, & Mueller, 2022). All participants said management was always available, attentively listened, and promptly resolved issues.

Moreover, findings suggest that psychological safety was practised in combination with a culture of **employee-centricity**. If psychological safety was the company *listening*, then employee-centricity was the company *doing*. Employee-centricity is a broad description of the culture perceived by the researcher. More research would be required to identify it accurately. Practically, an employee-centric culture results in the company actively responding to issues or concerns communicated by employees and the community. Interview data was dominated by accounts of the case company supporting employees, the surrounding community, and nearby farms to meet their needs. Arthur explained that he has a holistic perspective of the socio-economic dynamics in the region and that he believed his actions now ensured the long-term sustainability of the community. This was sometimes in conflict with the short-term needs of his employees. For example, when cattle on a nearby farm were dying in thick mud following heavy rains, Arthur redirected many of his drivers and workshop technicians to urgently construct bespoke sledges, which the farmer could use to save his cows. The conflict was that employees asked Arthur to pay them better bonuses rather than spending money on neighbouring farms. Arthur defended his position by articulating that all businesses in the region were connected by their communities and that it was crucial to the community's financial sustainability and general well-being that as many businesses as possible remain able to employ them.

The findings suggest that most employee needs were indeed met despite one participant expressing a need for bonuses. Most participants perceived an expansive need for jobs in their communities as more important. In fact, many employees travelled far to be employed at the company, creating a conflict between the immediate need for bonuses and the long-term need for employment, which is important to understand in SCSS.

The benefits to the company from cultivating a combined culture of psychological safety and employee-centricity were found to include:

- Ensuring that management was well informed.
- Issues were corrected before they enlarged or compounded.
- The potential impact of personal issues on job performance was mitigated.
- Effectively and efficiently increasing the social sustainability of the company.

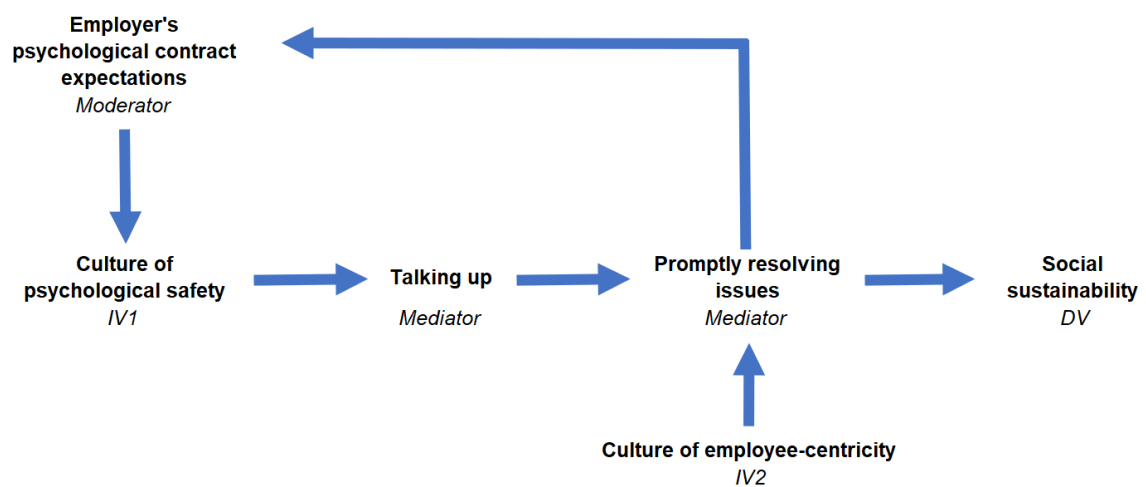Below, Figure 4 illustrates a proposed model to promote social sustainability practically:

Figure 4: An efficient social sustainability strategy
Source: Author's own.

The study concludes that an effective and efficient component of a social sustainability strategy can be achieved by actively cultivating a culture of psychological safety in combination with employee-centricity. In Figure 4, the dependent variable (DV) is social sustainability. This model is not comprehensive; other mediators may also be required to achieve social sustainability fully. However, the company **promptly resolving issues** (mediator) is the mechanism this study found increased social sustainability. The model illustrates that the acts of employees and community members **talking up** mediates promptly resolving issues because the company would otherwise be uninformed on where to allocate its resources. As explained before, a **culture of psychological safety** (independent variable (IV) 1) increases employees' talking up (Zeng, 2020). However, without a **culture of employee-centricity** (independent variable (IV) 2), issues would not be resolved

promptly, if at all. The subsequent **employer's psychological contract expectations** (moderator) can either increase or decrease the remaining psychological safety. Findings revealed that psychological safety can be reduced if the employer creates a psychological contract after resolving an issue. An example would be the company telling an employee: "We helped you, but then you didn't even come to work yesterday".

Therefore, the practical implications of the proposed model are:

- Companies should budget for social sustainability, which should be available for reasonable social issues.
- Companies should actively cultivate cultures of psychological safety and employee-centricity
- Companies should action reasonable requests as soon as possible
- Companies should not expect anything in return for helping an employee/community.
- Companies should remember that they do not need to fulfil every human need. Instead, the objective is to create the conditions for human needs to be met by willing people.

6.3   SUMMARY IN TERMS OF STAKEHOLDER THEORY

This study demonstrated that classifying stakeholder salience to determine their priority may hinder supply chain social sustainability (SCSS) because SCSS relates to stakeholders who would not typically be perceived as a priority by a focal company. Therefore, focal companies would not prioritise SCSS unless the concept gains enough salience through stakeholder attributes. The findings demonstrate that focal companies are unwilling to engage with social issues in their supply chains unless those stakeholders increase their salience by gaining another attribute. Moreover, supply chain companies also perceive employee requests as more salient when they gain another stakeholder attribute, such as from a social compliance auditor.

6.4   SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

The research question that directed this study was:

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What are the perceptions of different role players in the supply chain of a selected retailer in South Africa concerning its social sustainability strategies and tactics, considering post-implementation unanticipated outcomes, trade-offs, and possible tensions concerning the adoption of the suggested practices?

The findings demonstrated that stakeholders within the case company (which included the first and second tiers of the supply chain) perceived their focal companies (retailer clients) as disinterested in social issues in the supply chain. Retailer B demonstrated behaviour which was harmful to social sustainability. Moreover, the retailers have not engaged directly with social sustainability. However, the retailers did require the supplier to adhere to audited social/ethical standards (in this case, SIZA), which aligned with their CSR commitments. Retailers align their CSR commitments with stakeholders such as societal organisations.

The company perceived SIZA audits as meticulous and that it enhanced their culture of health, safety, taking action, and speaking up. Moreover, the SIZA auditor moderated the salience of stakeholder issues it aligned with, affecting approval by management, which was illustrated in Figure 3. Findings suggest that SIZA is more helpful than harmful to SCSS. However, SIZA's mission was not social sustainability due to (1) SIZA limiting the human needs it audited to those prescribed by societal groups and local regulations, (2) SIZA limiting its audit to the physical boundaries of the supplier, and (3) SIZA expecting short-term compliance, possibly at the expense of long-term sustainability.

The study further described how a company director concerned with the community's social sustainability needs to balance its employees' human needs with more strategic needs in the region. Further, the study identified an efficient strategy to help the company achieve social sustainability, as illustrated in Figure 4. This model functions by a combined culture of psychological safety and employee-centricity but cautions that psychological contracts may harm psychological safety. This chapter has identified several possible relationships which require further investigation. The next chapter will resolve the discussion with conclusions, limitations, and recommendations.

CHAPTER 7:   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1   CONCLUDING STATEMENT

This study is a vital contribution to the field of sustainability. This research based the meaning of sustainability on the Brundtland (1987) definition of sustainable development, which naturally extended to Pagell's (2009) definition of a truly sustainable supply chain, and chose Golicic's (2020) definition of the social pillar of a sustainable supply chain. Therefore, this study understood SCSS as "conducting supply chain operations in a way that meets human needs as defined by the people in the communities in which the firms across a supply chain operate, serve, or otherwise affect" with the vision to "continue to do business forever" (Golicic, 2020; Holdgate, 1987; Pagell, 2009).

Sustainability is a function of social, environmental and economic pillars, all three of which are required to achieve sustainability (Holdgate, 1987). However, research on the social pillar lags far behind (Golicic, 2020; Mani, 2018; Morais, 2018, 2022). The generally accepted definitions of sustainability are anchored in the Brundtland definition of sustainable development, emphasising that future generations should also be able to meet their needs (Holdgate, 1987). Therefore, "a truly sustainable supply chain could, customers willing, continue to do business forever." (Pagell, 2009). Moreover, the social sustainability pillar of a sustainable supply chain (SCSS) was defined by the "human needs as defined by the people in the communities" (Golicic, 2020).

The dynamics of social sustainability are challenging and complex to engage with by companies, favouring more tangible environmental and financial systems (Mensah, 2019). Therefore, this study explored the perceptions of social sustainability at a supplier in the supply chains of two reputable food retailers. The focal companies were trendsetters in sustainability and required the case company to adhere to audited social/ethical standards, but it was not known how this related to social sustainability. The company qualified as a critical case and vertically integrated the first- and second-tiers of the supply chain. Because supply chains are complex systems, unexpected outcomes, trade-offs, and tensions should be studied when changes are made (Govindan, 2021; Louw, 2007; Matos, 2020; Thorlakson, 2018).

Moreover, it was known that the social standards of developed countries may, in some ways, be inappropriate for developing countries, resulting in calls for more research (Mani, 2016, 2018; Morais, 2022). The context of this study is key because developing and developed countries are highly connected through their supply chains (Golicic, 2020; Swanepoel, 2017). Moreover, exports are essential to South Africa, of which vegetable products make up 5.8% (South African Revenue Service, 2023). Further, South Africa is one of the most unequal nations and has a history of economic exclusion and human rights abuses (Ross, 2008). Unfortunately, South Africa still experiences significantly more social issues than developed countries, especially in agriculture (Devereux, 2020). Therefore, gathering data from the South African agriculture setting was crucial. Indeed, the selected case was a farm based in the Western Cape that cultivated, stored, graded, packed, and labelled fresh products for various retailers.

The research question that directed the qualitative investigation was:

What are the perceptions of different role players in the supply chain of a selected retailer in South Africa concerning its social sustainability strategies and tactics, considering post-implementation unanticipated outcomes, trade-offs, and possible tensions concerning the adoption of the suggested practices?

Although this research's focus, this study could not find any evidence of retailers' engagement with SCSS. Therefore, it became crucial for the researcher to include the overlapping concept of social responsibility. This study found that the only social expectations from the retailers were that the supplier adhered to audited standards. These standards were found to be congruent with publications by societal organisations and the retailers' reports. Further, the retailers' reports mostly contained social responsibility/CSR content despite being positioned as sustainability reports. However, a high degree of social sustainability was found at the case company, which was invaluable to this study's theoretical contribution.

To answer the research question, this study assumed an interpretivist philosophy and an inductive approach to exploring the perceptions of social sustainability initiatives through a critical case study. A qualitative methodology proved invaluable,

as a quantitative approach would not have produced comparable results.

The findings revealed five themes, summarised below:

Theme 1: Addressing Human Needs
Retailers A and B focused on human rights within their supply chains as an extension of their corporate responsibility/CSR but neglected the concept of "human needs" — a function of social sustainability.

Theme 2: SIZA and SCSS
A beneficial overlap was found between SIZA and social sustainability. However, participants shared human needs which were outside of SIZA's scope. Further, SIZA exclusively audited the company's property and had a short-term compliance horizon. On the other hand, social sustainability considers the ability of people inside and outside the supply chain to meet self-defined human needs (Golicic, 2020). Findings further suggest a trade-off between drastically diverting resources to comply with SIZA's social standard and social sustainability as defined by this study.

Theme 3: The retailers and SCSS
The SIZA audit was the only social mechanism employed by retailers in the supply chain, with participants perceiving the retailers themselves as indifferent to SCSS. Ethical compliance standards (such as SIZA) appear aligned with the CSR commitments of focal companies. Therefore, retailers outsource assurance of their CSR standards to SIZA. Retailers and SIZA derive their ethical standards from stakeholders such as societal organisations. Unfortunately, the sustainability of suppliers and the people in the supply chains are not a priority for retailers, who are generally disinterested unless specific stakeholders gain salience with another attribute. Moreover, the people around their supply chains appear to be nonstakeholders to the retailers. Therefore, the retailers have not been working toward SCSS, but their commitment to ethical compliance is commendable.

Theme 4: Perceptions of SIZA audits
Although social sustainability is not SIZA's mission, its repeated audits were perceived to be a potent mechanism to bring about adherence to its social/ethical standards. Moreover, most perceived the auditors as meticulous yet sensible and

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willing to add educational value. Employees also perceived auditors to moderate their stakeholder salience when selling issues to management that aligned with SIZA. Finally, SIZA was perceived to potentiate the company culture positively.

Theme 5: An efficient social sustainability strategy

The retailers' social compliance auditing was found to be separate from social sustainability, toward which the company has been working. An efficient social sustainability strategy was identified at the case company, which was presented as a model (see Figure 4). The illustration conveys that cultivating a combined culture of psychological safety and employee-centricity mediates social sustainability by promptly resolving issues.

The study further found nuances in stakeholder theory, which help explain why focal companies are not engaging with social sustainability. Focal companies prioritise the claims of stakeholders according to their perceived salience. Findings suggest that the company's overall sustainability was perceived as low salience by its retailers. Further, the retailers perceived employees' ethical/social compliance in the supply chain as moderately salient, but the people around the supply chain were nonstakeholders. The study further identified that SIZA auditors added a stakeholder attribute to employees who were "selling" issues to management, which moderated their salience (see Figure 3).

- **Proposal to clarify confusing concepts**

It is challenging to differentiate between social responsibility and social sustainability. Notably, the Sustainable Supply Chain Initiative, which recognises social compliance standards like SIZA, preferred "social sustainability" (The Consumer Goods Forum, n.d.). Therefore, scholars must urgently provide industry guidance by either unifying sustainability and responsibility into one concept or pragmatically differentiating each concept. Believing in the latter, this study proposes a more explicit relationship between corporate responsibility and SCSS with the conceptual model in Figure 5 below. A description follows the figure.
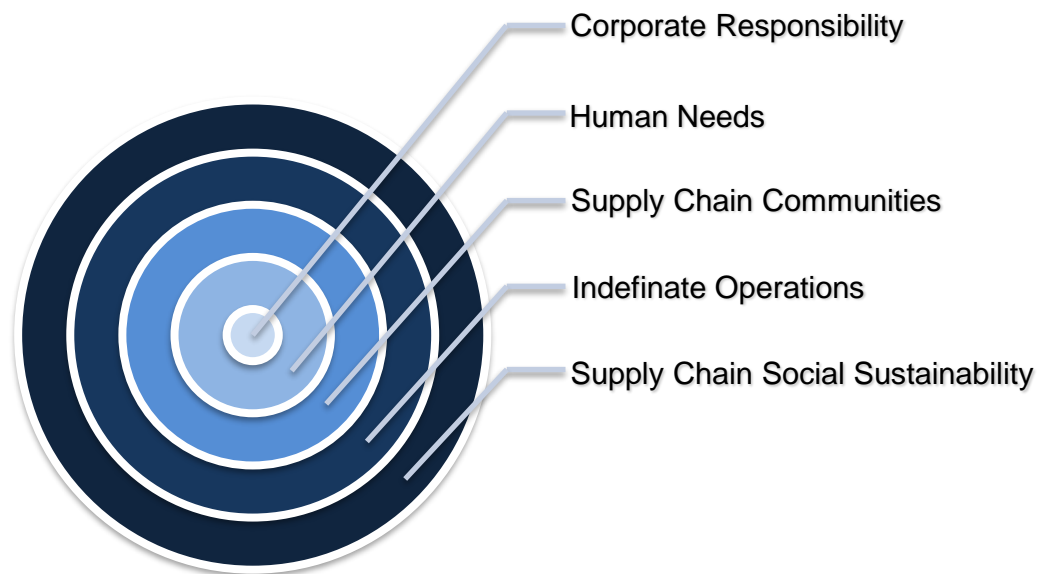
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Figure 5: How corporate responsibility is embedded in SCSS
Source: Author's own

This study found that current frameworks followed by retailers fall under the corporate responsibility umbrella, including corporate adoption of International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions, Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) guidelines, and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Figure 5 demonstrates that these initiatives may lay a foundation toward SCSS (beneficial overlap), but should not be confused with it either. For a focal company to intentionally work toward SCSS, it would first need to expand to consider **human needs**. Next, their boundaries of concern must expand from their suppliers to the **communities** affected by (and affecting) their suppliers. Lastly, the focal company's objective should transition from the short-term concept of assuring people are treated ethically, to the long-term concept of meeting the human needs of stakeholders at all tiers of their supply chains in such a way that safeguards their **operations indefinitely**. It must be added that over-emphasising the core (corporate responsibility) will inhibit the outer layers. Therefore, this study recommends that focal companies transition their mission from corporate responsibility to corporate sustainability.

- **This study's business relevance**

This study demonstrated that businesses lack engagement with issues in their supply chains unless they perceive the stakeholders as highly salient. At the time of this study, the social responsibility of the retailers was congruent with social issues

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published by the UN, ILO, and ETI, and the retailers required a third party (in this case, SIZA) to assure them that these social issues were being addressed by their suppliers.

This study found that repeated SIZA audits can be a highly effective mechanism for retailers to ensure social/ethical compliance at an employee-centric supplier. However, retailers and SIZA should be aware that suppliers divert the resources required to comply with meticulous standards from other budgets, which may result in unwanted unanticipated outcomes, trade-offs, and tensions.

Moreover, this study proposes a clarifying model (see Figure 5) to guide focal companies in supply chains that intend to work toward SCSS. Equally, a model is proposed (see Figure 4) that offers simple and practical guidance for companies to achieve social sustainability where they are based.

- **This study's academic relevance**

This study answered calls for more research on social sustainability in supply chains, especially in developing country contexts (Ali, 2021; Battilana, 2022; Golicic, 2020; Janker, 2018; Mani, 2015; Morais, 2018, 2022; Wontner, 2020). The social pillar is the least researched function of sustainability, resulting in the economic and environmental pillars being better defined and understood (Golicic, 2020; Mani, 2018; Morais, 2022; Sajjad, 2020). This research explored employees' perceptions of social sustainability in their supply chain and revealed that retailers were not practising SCSS. Thereby confirming that the social pillar is also the least practised pillar. However, this study proposed a practical model (see Figure 5) to aid focal companies in aligning their current and envisioned social strategies.

This study further addressed the scarcity of literature on lower-tier suppliers and developing country contexts by identifying independent social sustainability behaviour at the supplier (Venkatesh, 2020), and proposing a practical model (see Figure 4) to aid other companies in achieving social sustainability. Moreover, the study described several unexpected outcomes, trade-offs and tensions not only in the retailer's lack of engagement in SCSS and the potent assurance of social compliance by SIZA but also in the supplier's social sustainability efforts (Matos, 2020). An additional model (see Figure 3) was proposed to describe the moderating

effects a SIZA auditor has on the stakeholder salience of an employee.

7.2   LIMITATIONS

7.2.1   Disclosure of personal biases and worldviews

The researcher promoted reflexivity by remaining aware of his own biases and worldviews. The researcher graduated as an emergency care practitioner, and his prehospital experience offered him a view into the homes of communities that could not meet all their human needs. The researcher then pivoted into secondary agriculture, which included training in agronomy. The researcher has managed a first-tier supplier to reputable retailers for the past decade, requiring compliance auditing. Before conducting this research, the researcher assumed that retailers practised sustainable supply chain management and that some of SIZA's requirements were inappropriate for South African farms, resulting in adverse outcomes that may disadvantage farm workers.

The researcher grew up in South Africa, experiencing the end of apartheid at the age of seven. This background fostered a sensitivity towards imposing requirements on others while appreciating that people need an opportunity to voice their opinions. The researcher adopted a constructivist worldview for this study, co-creating knowledge with participants as they interpreted their experiences within their contexts. Multiple realities were considered, with the researcher consistently reflecting on his impact on the research's neutrality, validity, direction, and interpretation. The researcher ensured that the research was based on participants' perceptions and not his preconceptions.

7.2.2   Summary of limitations

In addition to the limitations discussed in Chapter 4 (see 4.6), it is unknown how transferrable the findings are from the vegetable to other agricultural sectors without repeated studies. Moreover, the researchers' spoken languages, race, and gender may have influenced the perceptions participants were willing to share. Future studies need to emphasise matching the language fluency of the researcher with that of the participants. Although this study selected a farm in a community where English and Afrikaans were dominantly spoken, some participants travelled from other provinces searching for employment. The participants were comfortable conversing

in English but struggled with complex constructs. Nonetheless, their contributions were valuable.

Moreover, it was outside the scope of this study to interview participants representing the focal companies (retailers) or the compliance schemes (such as SIZA). Further research is required on their perceptions of social sustainability.

Additionally, the findings may or may not represent perceptions of other ethical/social/responsible compliance certification standards worldwide, such as SMETA, SA8000, BSCI, WCA, FairTrade, and FSSC24000.

7.2.3   Challenges encountered

Based on the literature, the researcher expected reputable retailers to engage with the concept of social sustainability or SCSS. Instead, the researcher found the retailers to practice compliance with societal standards anchored in CSR. Therefore, this study included the social perceptions of retailers in addition to the social sustainability identified at the supplier.

Furthermore, several factors created challenges for the transcription of the audio recordings. Firstly, the interview room contained very little furnishings, resulting in an echo. Secondly, some participants spoke softly or with thick accents. Third, the room was located near the workshop, resulting in noise from power tools. And lastly, the audio recordings were only made by one device, which occasionally recorded blank segments. Fortunately, by investing additional time and effort to analyse the recordings, these factors did not significantly affect the findings.

Although it would have benefited this study to interview representatives from the retailers and SIZA, there was insufficient project time.

7.3   RECOMMENDATIONS

7.3.1   Recommendations to practitioners

The researcher found himself in the privileged position to be able to study employees who had a good relationship with their employer. It was found that the healthy employee-employer relationship increased employees' and community members'

desire to be employed at the company. This indicates that the employee-centric reputation of the company pays dividends by reducing employee turnover and increasing the quality of candidates applying for vacancies. Therefore, although the value of company management is often judged by their technical, managerial abilities, sustaining a good relationship with constituents should not be underestimated. Employees value perceivable empathy from their employer. In this case, Arthur created a culture of psychological safety and employee-centricity.

Retailers should holistically review the detailed changes audits require from their suppliers to ensure that the standards are reasonable and to mitigate potential unwanted outcomes, trade-offs or tensions. Moreover, retailers should aim toward audited ethical/social compliance by all tiers in their supply chain. Finally, retailers should recognise that for supply chain employees to exercise specific rights (such as collective bargaining), they require active engagement from the retailers themselves.

Retailers should consider whether making their foreign suppliers carry all currency risk is sustainable.

Retailers should refine their non-financial reports to avoid potential greenwashing or obfuscation by: (1) Using the term "sustainability" with clear intent and definition, (2) Not emphasising minor positives, and (3) Avoiding the inclusion of irrelevant information in these reports. Notably, in the context of this study, retailers ambiguously employed the term "sustainability", predominantly featured environmental sustainability content, and padded their reports with highlighted CSR details. It is recommended that retailers dedicate sustainability reports exclusively to environmental, economic, and social sustainability. A distinct Corporate Responsibility report should be considered for responsibility, ethics, and compliance content.

It is recommended that social/ethical compliance organisations adapt their employee interview process to allow auditors to conduct multiple individual interviews. The number of private interviews should be sufficient to ensure confidentiality, preventing others from deducing which employee raised specific concerns.

The Consumer Goods Forum's Sustainable Supply Chain Initiative (SSCI) and other

social/ethical/workplace compliance programs should reevaluate the term "social sustainability" and consider alternative terminology that might be more precise.

7.3.2 Recommendations to academics

Given the under-researched nature of this study's concepts and contexts, conducting pilot interviews is vital to refine the final interview guide. Moreover, it is crucial to interview participants in their primary language, as the study's concepts can be too complex to convey in a secondary language.

For agricultural employees, in-person interviews are preferable. Additionally, this necessitates funding for nearby accommodation, sustenance, and transport. The interview venue is also crucial: a private room on the property, equipped with a table, comfortable chairs, and a plug point, is necessary. Ideally, this room should have sufficient furnishings to minimise ambient noise and ensure quality audio recordings.

A primary recording device, like a laptop with a reputable microphone, is vital regarding equipment. Equally, creating backup recordings with a mobile phone or dictation recorder is essential. From a methodological perspective, interviewers should be mindful not to interject with verbal affirmations before a participant concludes, as such interruptions might influence responses and create transcription challenges.

7.3.3 Recommendations for future research

SCSS is the social pillar of SSCM (sustainable supply chain management). However, retailers do not seem to engage with the concept of SCSS. Therefore, the first recommendation for future research is a qualitative study purposively interviewing representatives from major retailers on their social initiatives and where SCSS features for them. This study can also determine how retailers believe sustainability and responsibility overlap.

Similarly, a content analysis study is recommended to understand better how large corporations employ social responsibility and social sustainability terms in their publications. The scope may extend to the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) to triangulate how corporations are guided in their reporting. The aims of this study should be to determine how corporations decide which non-financial progress to

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report on, under which themes, and to influence the industry on ambiguous reporting.

A quantitative or qualitative stakeholder theory study could be done to test the researcher's proposed model (see Figure 3) of an auditor moderating the salience of an aligned stakeholder.

Subsequent qualitative and quantitative investigations could be done into the moderating and mediating dynamics of psychological safety and employee-centricity on social sustainability, as illustrated in Figure 4.

A qualitative study to describe employees' expectations of employer remuneration and enablement of their human needs to be met through the lens of resource advantage/dependence theory.

7.4 FUNDING DISCLOSURE

The researcher's employer financially supported various aspects of this study. However, the employer posed no risk of bias because the company had no vested interest in the research topic or outcomes.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FOR AN INTERVIEW

I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA. I am conducting research on social sustainability in supply chains and am trying to find out more about your perceptions of social standards, such as SIZA and SEDEX SMETA.

There is no translator. I can communicate in English and Afrikaans. If you are not comfortable with one of these languages, we won't continue with the interview.

I am conducting research on social sustainability in supply chains and am trying to find out more about your perceptions of social standards, such as SIZA and SEDEX SMETA.

The interviews are conducted per the folllowing guidelines and requisites:
- Our interview is expected to last at most 45 minutes.
- To qualify for participation, you must be 18 years or older to participate.
- Your participation is voluntary, so you can stop anytime and withdraw without any penalty.
- Your participation will be confidential, meaning that I am not using your real name, and neither am I using the real name of your company.
- I will be making an audio recording (if you permit me to do so) to save time during the interviews, which will be transcribed.
- I will not share information such as your company's location or products in order to prevent someone in the industry from guessing who you are.
- I will securely store all data for 10 years in case somebody wants to check the information afterwards.
- All data will be analysed and reported by myself without identifiers, only using a code name for every participant.
- The final report may be shared in a research report for academic purposes, a scientific article, conference paper, or another form of public communication but no one will ever be able to identify you or your company.

You are also welcome to an electronic copy of the final report, if you wish to have access to it.

Should you experience emotional discomfort during the interview, please feel free to stop the interview. Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or during your participation. If you have any concerns afterwards, don't hesitate to get in touch with my supervisor or me.

Our details are provided below:

Researcher	Supervisor
Richardt Piek	Professor Alet C Erasmus
26023947@mygibs.co.za	erasmusa@gibs.co.za
072 299 3207	082 784 2467

Signature of researcher: _____ Date: _____2023

I, the undersigned,hereby agree to partake in the abovementioned case study.

Signature of participant: _____ Date: _____2023

APPENDIX B: TRANSCRIBER NON-DISCLOSURE

CONFIDENTIALLY AND NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

It is a condition of engagement that students will assist in preserving all confidential information, ideas and plans; any confidential information or any information in respect of any data gathered, captured or analysed in respect of the research work they undertake in fulfillment of GIBS masters or doctoral degree programmes, in this case the research project titled *Supply chain social sustainability perceptions in a selected retail chain in South Africa: a critical case* conducted by *Richardt Piek.*

The parties under this agreement agree to the following:

1. To apply their best efforts to keep any information confidential which has been acquired or may acquire pursuant to the research work. For the purposes of this clause, confidential information excludes information which:

   1.1 is publicly available or becomes publicly available through no act or default of any Party;

   1.2 was in the possession of a Party prior to its disclosure otherwise than as a result of a breach by any party of any obligation of confidentiality to which it is subject;

   1.3 is disclosed to the student by a person which did not acquire the information under an obligation of confidentiality; and

   1.4 is independently acquired by a student and as a result of work carried out by a person to whom no disclosure of such information has been made;
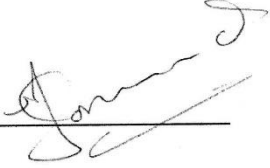
2. No party shall use or disclose confidential information except with the prior written consent of GIBS or in accordance with an order of a court of competent jurisdiction or in order to comply with any law or governmental regulations by which any Party concerned is bound or as may be lawfully requested in writing by any governmental authority.

3. The party undertakes to permanently delete any electronic copies of confidential information received, and destroy any confidential printed documentation or similar material in their possession promptly once they are no longer required, usually on completion of the service contracted by the student.

4. On completion of the contracted service on behalf of the student, the party is to confirm to the student that they are not in possession of any confidential information.

Signed at _GEORGE_ on this _14th_ day of _JULY_ 20_23_.

On behalf of:

Name: _ESTELLE JONKHEID_ Signature: _[signature]_

duly authorised and warranting such authority

Witness: _[signature]_

APPENDIX C: ETHICAL APPROVAL

GIBS ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPLICATION FORM 2023/24

G. APPROVALS FOR/OF THIS APPLICATION

When the applicant is a student of GIBS, the applicant must please ensure that the supervisor and co-supervisor (where relevant) has signed the form before submission

STUDENT RESEARCHER/APPLICANT:

29. I affirm that all relevant information has been provided in this form and its attachments and that all statements made are correct.

Student Researcher's Name in capital letters:	RICHARDT PIEK
Date:	14 Jul 2023
Supervisor Name in capital letters:	PROF ALET C ERASMUS
Date:	14 Jul 2023
Co-supervisor Name in capital letters:	
Date:	02 Jul 2023

Note: GIBS shall do everything in its power to protect the personal information supplied herein, in accordance to its company privacy policies as well the Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013. Access to all of the above provided personal information is restricted, only employees who need the information to perform a specific job are granted access to this information.

Decision:

Approved

REC comments:

Thank you for a very comprehensive and clear application. Good luck with your research.

Date: 18 Jul 2023

APPENDIX D: COMPANY PERMISSION LETTER

Gordon Institute of Business Science
University of Pretoria

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am presently undertaking my studies at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, where I am working on my MBA research project. My research topic centers on the exploration of social sustainability within supply chains, specifically examining the perceptions towards social standards such as SIZA and SEDEX SMETA.

I humbly seek your permission to involve your company in this study. Please note that your involvement will be entirely voluntary, and confidential. I will protect your identity and your company's name by not using any real names during the research and during the compilation of the findings. Details such as your company's location and products will **not** be disclosed, to prevent any potential identification by industry insiders.

As part of my research methodology, I will conduct interviews and record them for transcription purposes. I assure you that any data collected during this research will be securely stored for a duration of ten years to allow scrutiny if needed. All data will be stored without identifiers (names).

I kindly ask for your permission to involve your employees in this process. I understand that this will require them to take time away from their regular duties. Therefore, interviews will be as brief and focused as possible, not exceeding once-off 45 minute sessions per participant. I aim to ensure the least possible inconvenience for the participants, refraining from disrupting lunchtimes and providing refreshments during interviews.

You will have access to the final report for your own records. **The aim is not to criticize, rather to learn from employees' lived experiences.**

All data collection will be executed electronically. This includes interview audio recordings, observation notes, and reports you may grant me access to. **Nothing will be recorded or photographed without your consent.** Please be assured that any data for which explicit permission is not received will be immediately discarded before data

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

analysis. I understand that this process may result in some disruption, and I commit to minimising this to the best of my abilities.

The collected data will be analysed and reported without any identifiers. The final report could potentially be shared across various platforms, including research reports, scientific articles, conference papers, and other media. However, your identity will be uncompromised in any of these contexts.

Lastly, you are invited to request a copy of the final report should you wish to do so.

Your support in this research is greatly appreciated, and I thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Researcher	Supervisor
Richardt Piek (Student 26023947)	Professor Alet C Erasmus
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I, Rozanne Porrill-Compaan_____, am appropriately authorised to grant permission on behalf of my company for the above request.

Position: HR Manager & Labour Consultant_____

Contact number or e-mail: 083 7082038_____

Company name: ███FARMING (PTY) LTD___

Signature: _____

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE 1

BACKGROUND

Interview Guide 1 is aimed at **entry-level workers at first and second-tier suppliers.** These employees would include farm workers and production workers.

INTRODUCTION

"I am conducting research on social sustainability in supply chains and am trying to find out more about your perceptions of social standards such as SIZA and SEDEX SMETA. Social sustainability is about identifying and managing business impacts, both positive and negative, on people. Your company has elected to undergo audits which assess its social sustainability. These audits may also verify that no laws are being broken and that the company has good ethical practices, but my focus is on the social (human) side.

This research is important because it can help companies understand how to meet their community's/employees' needs better.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this case study research. I am now going to ask you a list of questions and encourage you to share your point of view honestly. I am giving you pseudonyms (fictitious name, for example Boston) and will be recording your voice for me to analyse later. When giving an answer, please use your pseudonym."

QUESTIONS

#	Category	Question
1	Warm-up & Employment Experience	1. What duties do you perform in your role? 2. What did you do before you moved into this position? a. Was this at the same company? b. What positions have you held at other companies? c. What do you like (or not) about working here?

"Your company is one of very few that asks auditors to visit here so that management can know how well they are doing for the employees and community. I am trying to understand whether your company can meet the human needs of you, your family, and your community in a better way. I have prepared some questions but this is also your opportunity to add anything from your perspective."

Category	Question
Grand tour questions Category: Social Sustainability -Perceptions -Tactics -Trade offs	Tell me about moments you can remember when your company tried to understand your human (personal and family) needs. Tell me how your company is trying to meet needs that are less important to you than other needs that you would have liked them to pay more attention to. In your opinion, why is the company not focussing on personal needs that are more important to you? How has your company's attempts/efforts to pay attention to your needs influenced your life? Do you think that the way your company tries to pay attention to your needs, makes you and your family better off than if you were working for another company? Explain whether people in your community feel this company cares better for them than other companies.

"A social audit is when an auditor evaluates the impact of the business on the society within which it operates. These auditors may spend one or two days assessing health and safety, minimum wages, forced labour, hours worked, freedom of association, etc. These audits are different to food safety audits like GlobalGAP/HACCP/ISO22000. These audits have lists of things they think are good or bad for you. I would like your opinion on how these audits can help the company to help you better."

Social Auditing	3. Do you know when these auditors visit your company?

Category:	4. Tell me about a time you may have spoken to one of these auditors?
Social Auditing	5. Explain the ways you believe SIZA/SEDEX audits improve your well-being and help your family and community.
-Perceptions	
-Tactics	
-Unanticipated outcomes	6. Are there any benefits you believe you are no longer getting because of these audits, such as a company policy that had to change?
-Trade-offs	
	7. Are there any benefits your family or community are not getting because of the audits?
	8. (Prompt) Seasonal work, school holiday work, housing, loans, transport, permanent employment.
	9. Which important issues are the audits or company overlooking?
	10. Do you feel the audits or company are looking at the wrong things?
	11. Do you think that the audits have helped your company look after your community in such a way that your company can keep doing what it does forever and ever?
	12. (prompt) Does your company need to look after your community in a different way so that your childrens childrens children can still be well and employed one day?
	13. Do you think the things the audits require your company to do resulted in anything that was unexpected or surprising, whether good or bad?
	14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

"Thank you very much for your participation. The final report will become available in 2024. I will now stop the recording and be sure not to include anything that could identify you or your company in my final report."

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APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW GUIDE 2

BACKGROUND

Interview Guide 2 is aimed at managers or owners of first and second-tier suppliers.

INTRODUCTION

"I am conducting research on social sustainability in supply chains and am trying to find out more about your perceptions of social standards such as SIZA and SEDEX SMETA. Social sustainability is about identifying and managing business impacts, both positive and negative, on people. Your company has elected to undergo audits which assess its social sustainability. These audits may also verify that no laws are being broken and that the company has good ethical practices, but my focus is on the social (human) side.

This research is important because it can help companies understand how to meet their community's/employees' needs better.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this case study research. I am now going to ask you a list of questions and encourage you to share your point of view honestly. I am giving you pseudonyms (fictitious name, for example Boston) and will be recording your voice for me to analyse later. When giving an answer, please use your pseudonym."

QUESTIONS

Category	Question
Employment Experience	1. What duties do you perform in your role? 2. What did you do before you moved into this position? a. Was this at the same company? b. What positions have you held at other companies? 3. What do you like (or not) about working here?

Category	Question
Grand tour	Tell me about moments you can remember when your

questions	company tried to understand your employees' (personal and family) human needs, and what could be done to improve them.
Category: Social Sustainability -Perceptions -Tactics -Trade offs	Tell me how you think the company may be trying to meet needs that are less important to employees than other needs they would have liked more attention paid to. In your opinion, why would the company not be focussing on human needs that are more important to employees? How has the company's attempts/efforts to pay attention to employee needs influenced their lives? Do you think that the way your company tries to pay attention to employee needs makes them and their families better off than if they were working for another company? Explain. Explain whether people in the community feel this company cares more for them than other companies.

| Social Auditing | Tell me about your interactions with SIZA/SEDEX auditors.

Explain the ways you believe SIZA/SEDEX audits end up improving the well-being of employee families and their community.

Are there any benefits you believe employees, their families, or the community are no longer getting because of these audits, such as a company policy that had to change?

Which important issues do you think the audits are overlooking?

Do you think that the audits have helped the company look after the community in such a way that, should your market remain in place, the company can operate indefinately?

Do you think the things the audits require your company to do resulted in outcomes that were unexpected or surprising, whether good or bad?

Explain how complying with the audit standard may have resulted in any trade-offs.

Explain how complying with the audit standard may have resulted in any tensions. |

	A lot of the audit standards are conventions that originated from Europe. Do you believe any of these are inapporpriate to the South African, or developing world, contexts?
	Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX G: OBSERVATIONS DURING INTERVIEWS

25 July, 2023

I rented a car at the airport and headed to a guesthouse near the farm. I travelled through one of the lower economic-status suburbs. At least one of those I interviewed the next day lives here. The community looks established and organised. I noticed tarred roads leading to gravel, some RDP homes, corner shops, and people calmy walking down the roads. The streets seemed clean, and some homes were built with brick and mortar, and others from corrugated iron. All the townships in Gauteng I have been to as a paramedic seemed less safe and clean.

The surrounding area is lush, green, and mountainous with grasslands in between, which often had cattle grazing on them. Although the surrounding nature is stunning to the point of being therapeutic, I did not spot a lot of industry. My perception is that jobs would be generated from the local agricultural sector.

26 July, 2023

I arrived on the farm and met the owner, HR Manager, and the Farming Manager, who orientated me. We discussed sampling of the employees. I explained that I could only interview workers who were proficient in English or Afrikaans. He suggested that I interview two workers from each farm team in order for all the views to be represented.

The farm manager made a redundant canteen available to me, and started fetching two new participants from different areas of the farm for me every 45 minutes. I did explain to the farm manager what my study is about and that I will only be interviewing participants who are willing to be interviewed. The canteen had benches, lights and a plug point. I created a space where my belongings were kept on a bench behind me. I set up the middle bench so that one or two participants could be seated across me. There were plates with cookies and nectarines in front of them, along with serviettes. I offered each participant a cold beverage (juice, water, or coke). I also asked each participant which language they preferred and proceeded in that language. I instructed participants not to tell me their real names and explained that these interviews were confidential.

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After seating each participant and making them comfortable with the refreshments and who I am, I explained that I will be looking to my laptop to ask questions and that I had a microphone on the table. I assured them that I was not recording video and only audio, and only with their permission. I many cases I showed them what the audio playback sounded like to ensure they were comfortable with the equipment.

I explained to each participant that should they not wish to participate, they are welcome to return to their duties. All interviews were held in the same location except the owner, whom I interviewed in his office.

27 July, 2023

I proceeded with interviews in the same location. On this day, I interviewed workers from the packhouse. The farm had a facility that adhered to local and UK food safety standards where it packed the farmed goods into final and labelled packaging. The packhouse has two loading bays where finished goods are dispatched to large retailers. Thus, this farm has vertically integrated the first and second tiers of the food supply chain.

The interviews proceeded without incident, much like the previous day.

I interviewed the owner, who is the sole director, in his office. Following the interview, he showed me more of the farm as well as some of the surrounding community. My impression was that he was aware of where different people lived in surrounding settlements. He also noticed a new portion of an established settlement which looked quite shabby and took pictures of it

28 July, 2023

I proceeded with interviews in the same location. I interviewed managers on this day. I was starting to feel that a lot of information I obtained in the first two days was being repeated from different perspectives.

29 July, 2023

I had breakfast with Arthur and left for the airport.

APPENDIX H: LIST OF CODES

1. Farm-Employees-Community-Neighbours

Comparisons between employers

Employee Needs

Employee Voice

Employer expectations in return for benefits

Farm as a Social Business

Financial Benefits

Free Transport

Job Dissatisfaction

Job Satisfaction

Job Scarcity

No work on rainy days

Paternal Benefits

Racism

Repercussions of Legislation

Second Chances

Social Benefits

Social strain on employer

Social Sustainability

2. Retailer-Producer Relationship

Audit Stress

Eurocentricity

Retailers' Financial-Social Misalignment

3. SIZA

Repeat Audits Reduce Findings

SIZA Audit

SIZA audit awareness

SIZA Auditor

SIZA being Harsh

SIZA Benefits

SIZA Child Labour