

SUSTAINABILITY AND TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE: AN OVERVIEW OF TWO INTERRELATED CONCEPTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between ‘Sustainability’ and ‘Triple bottom line’ (TBL) as two related concepts that are used interchangeably in the literature. A comprehensive review of the relevant literature was conducted and revealed an inconsistent use of the term sustainability with respect to social, environmental, and economic lines. On the other hand, consistency in terms of referring to the three lines simultaneously is built into the structure of TBL as the concept is clearly based on the combination of social, environmental, and economic lines. The purpose of this paper is not to support an argument that favours the use of one term over the other, but to provide an overview of the presence of both terms and their interconnectedness in the literature. It also explores ‘Sustainability’ and the ‘Triple Bottom Line’, as tools to examine, appraise or measure the effects of business activities on the

economy, social equity, and environment. In the light of this, researchers in the business, management, and sustainability fields are encouraged to pay particular attention to how they use these terms in their studies for better understanding by other researchers.

Keywords: Triple bottom line (TBL), Sustainability, Overview, Concept, Economic, Social, and Environmental.

1.0 Introduction

The traditional and dominant focus for external corporate reporting in Nigeria has been to provide information about an organization's financial (or economic) performance. However, in recent years many corporations have been providing greater amounts of information about "non-financial" aspects of their operations. This is because it has become a common knowledge that we are consuming the natural resources on which we rely at a rate much faster than they can be replenished. Addressing these issues require us to address the choices we make every day as individuals, organizations and Government, including how much and what sort of energy we use, our approach to producing and managing our waste. With the shift in societal focus towards environmental longevity, businesses are encouraged to look at the big picture and see their impact on the world around them. A fundamental philosophy propagated today is how imperative it is that

businesses address all values in reporting in order to lessen the chance that their activities will cause harm to global resources, not only for today's population but for future generations. This conscious awareness and modification of policies and procedures has been named Sustainable Development (WCED, 1987).

Scientists, economists, governments and business acknowledge that current and predicted imbalances in natural systems (such as fresh water shortages, energy supply limits, global climate change, and population increases) will adversely affect economic systems and human quality of life if not addressed. Sustainability is a powerful approach for examining these issues; consequently, it is attracting serious attention by leaders of nations, industry and communities. The number of sustainability-related trends such as global water needs, changes in global climate, and energy demands has created an uncertain business environment in which new issues, legislation, stakeholder expectations, and technologies must be considered. This has led to the growing demands from stakeholders for more extensive information about the operations and financial standing of businesses has encourage some companies to include information on sustainability on their annual reports. The recognition that there are limited resources to be utilized by today's businesses, as well as future generations, is a driving force behind incorporating additional reporting by companies on sustainability factors.

Based on this premise, the objective of this paper is not to support an argument that favours the use of one term over the other, but to provide an overview of the presence of both terms and their interconnectedness in the literature. It will also explore 'Sustainability' and the 'Triple Bottom Line', as tools to examine, appraise or measure the effects of business activities on the economy, social equity, and environment.

2.1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability is a big concept like "justice" or "freedom", and like these concepts, it is easier to understand than to succinctly or concisely define. However, hundreds of definitions exist and often times share similar tenets or views. One often quoted definition is the Brundtland report, of 1987 which defines sustainability as the "development that meets the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987). Sustainability can also be defined as: (i) An overarching conceptual framework that describes a desirable, healthy, and dynamic balance between human and natural systems; (ii) A system of policies, beliefs, and best practices that will protect the diversity and richness of the planet's ecosystems, foster economic vitality and opportunity, and create a high quality of life for people and, (iii) A vision describing a future that anyone would want to inhabit.

Central to these definitions is sustainability's applicability to three elements of life: economic or financial considerations, environmental protection and stewardship, and community and individual human well-being: the triple bottom line of sustainability. This means improving the economic and social quality of life while limiting impacts on the environment to the carrying capacity of nature. In this framework, ideal solutions to any type of challenge will generate long-term benefits in all three areas.

Triple Bottom Line Accounting on the other hand (TBLA) refers to a method of measuring the economic, environmental, and community service impacts of an organization rather than the traditional practice of measuring just the financial bottom line. John Elkington (1994), coined 'triple bottom line (TBL) as a new term to advance his sustainability agenda. He wrote: "Sustainable development involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity. That companies aiming for sustainability need to perform not against a single, financial bottom line but against the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1998). Elkington's definition intended to go beyond previous constructions of "sustainable development (SD) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) to encompass an approach that emphasizes economic prosperity, social development and environmental quality as an integrated method of doing business. This definition implies a shift away from the emphasis

of organizations on short-term financial goals to long-term social, environmental, and economic impacts.

In the early 1990s, following trends in other countries, some companies started offering information about their environmental performance. Initially, the information was provided (voluntarily) in the annual report and tended to be self-mandatory. From about the mid-1990s, the standard of environmental performance reporting arguably improved as various environmental reporting guidelines were issued internationally. The growth of this broader “world sustainability” viewpoint can be seen in the number of companies that have begun reporting on more than just financial operations. Large corporations such as Weyerhaeuser Company, The Boeing Company, PricewaterhouseCoopers, The Procter & Gamble Company, Sony Corporation, and Toyota Motor Corporation, have joined with many others to create the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD, 2010), which focuses on creating a pathway to a world that will “require fundamental changes in governance structures, economic frameworks, and business and human behaviour.” This council states that “the changes are necessary, feasible and offer tremendous business opportunities for companies that turn sustainability into strategy” (WBCSD, 2010). A move toward additional sustainability reporting can be seen in companies and governmental entities in a variety of countries. Table 1 below

lists a few of the different countries that are either adopting this new philosophy for their governmental entities or encouraging companies to adjust their business philosophies.

TABLE 1: COUNTRIES PROMOTING TBL REPORTING

Australia	New Zealand
Britain	South Africa
France	Switzerland
Japan	United States
Canada	Germany.

Source: Centre for Promoting Ideas, USA.

A number of reasons have been advanced as to why corporations or organizations are making greater social and environmental disclosures. The various reasons are: managers reacting to legal requirements, their believe that it is economically rational and that the economic benefits from disclosure might offset any associated costs; or they might simply accept that the organization has an accountability to various stakeholders

for how it uses the environmental resources that have been entrusted to it.

Since there is no universally accepted way that organizations report social and environmental information, much experimentation is occurring as accounting bodies throughout the world look at forms of reporting. At the “radical” end of the experimentation, some organizations have attempted to monetize the environmental costs and benefits (or externalities) arising from their operations. This was promoted by the European Union, which in 1992 issued a documented title “Towards Sustainability” as part of its *Fifth Action Programme* (EU Report, 1992).

2.2 REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The major challenge observed from the comprehensive review of the relevant literature conducted revealed an inconsistent use of the term sustainability. Key to sustainability is the concept of the triple bottom line which means that business success is no longer defined only by monetary gains but also by the impact an organization’s activities have on society as a whole.

In recent years a deal of attention has been directed to “triple-bottom-line reporting”, defined by Elkington (1997) as reporting that provides information about the economic, environmental and

social performance of an entity. The notion of reporting against these three components (or “bottom lines”) is directly tied to the concept and goal of sustainable development. Triple bottom line reporting, if properly implemented, will provide information to enable others to assess the sustainability of an organization’s or community’s operations. The perspective taken is that for an organization or a community to be sustained, it must be financially secured, as evidenced through such measures as profitability; it must minimize, or ideally eliminate its negative environmental impacts; and it must act in conformity with societal expectations. These three factors are obviously highly inter-related.

Triple Bottom Line Accounting (TBLA) or sustainability accounting focuses on the value to society that is created or destroyed by an organization's activities or business. Richardson (2004) identifies two high level components of the TBLA framework. First is the restatement of traditional accounts to highlight financial flows that are sustainability related; second is additional accounting undertaken to show the financial value of economic, environmental, and social performance upon external stakeholders. Richardson highlights the danger inherent in accounting for only those items that can be reduced to monetary value and the difficulties of converting environmental practices and performance into financial values, much less the extension to the sphere of social performance

and impact. She also stresses that financial valuation of economic, environmental, and social bottom lines places these factors into silos that allows them to be traded-off against one another. Richardson argues for moving beyond this thinking to a systemic approach that focuses upon qualitative processes such as diversity, learning, adaptation, and self-organization rather than defining and setting of financial, environmental, and social performance targets to be achieved and perhaps traded-off against one another.

In terms of implementing TBL, Adams, Frost, and Webber (2004) determined that there are no generally or widely accepted accounting standards or metrics to measure environmental or social performance. Mintz (2011) acknowledges that while managers' attention to the social and environmental impacts of their organizations has increased, it is difficult to develop standard accounting similar to those in financial accounting. He recommends that organizations develop Key Performance Indicators (KPI) or quantifiable measures linked to their own missions, goals, and stakeholder expectations. Rogers and Hudson (2011) caution that while businesses need to internalize their social and environmental impacts; they also need to instill the realities of the economic environment into their environmental and social policies.

Also the research by Kearney (2009), done on 99 sustainability-focused organizations across 18 industries that

were part of the Dow Jones Index to examine the impact of environmental activities on the performance of the organization and also to determine whether organizations with sustainable practices are more likely to withstand the economic recession . The research was for a period of six months and the analysis was done in two phases: a three-month phase and a six-month phase. The analysis revealed that during the current economic recession, organizations with practices are geared towards protecting the environment and improving the social well-being of the stakeholders while adding value to the shareholders have outperformed their industry peers financially. The financial advantage has resulted from reduced operational costs (energy and water usage, etc.) and increased revenues from the development of innovative green products (Kearney, 2009).

According to Slaper and Hall (2011), the challenges of putting the TBL into practice relate to the measurement of social and ecological categories: Finding applicable data and determining how a project or policy contributes to sustainability. A challenge with the triple bottom line is that it is difficult to compare the people and planet accounts in terms of cash and the way the profit account is measured. As such, the three separate accounts cannot be added or combined, and must be considered separately. Despite this, the TBL framework enables organizations to take a longer-term perspective and thus evaluate the future consequences of decisions.

Critics of TBL include Norman and MacDonald (2004) who question whether the paradigm of TBL is anything but a marketing strategy. They argue that, prior to the TBL model, the belief in attaining CSR had already led to a broader movement sometimes referred to as Social and Ethical Accounting, Auditing, and Reporting (SEEAR), producing "a variety of competing standards and standard-setting bodies, including the Global Reporting Initiative, the SA 8000 from Social Accountability International, the AA 1000 from Accountability, as well as parts of various ISO standards" (p. 247).

Despite criticisms of TBL and Elkington's original definition, the TBL concept continues to be important in thinking about sustainability and its application to management in both for-profit and public spheres.

3.0 INTERRELATION OF TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE AND SUSTAINABILITY ACCOUNTING

3.1 Sustainable Development

Brundtland report, Hart and Milsten (2003) define sustainability development as the expectations of improving the social and environmental performance of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their social and environmental needs. The terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' are frequently used today in public arena. Sustainability has been at

the center of international discussions related to trade and development for over two decades. In 1987, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (World Commission) provided what has become a widely-used definition of sustainability as the ability of a society to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Sustainable development therefore, focuses on incorporating a forward thinking approach by businesses toward shearing up world sustainability. A company whose mission is to be sustainable does not merely make the statement; it takes appropriate actions needed to move toward this goal and preserves those actions to continue on this path. It is vital to seek input from different internal and external persons to gather ideas on how the company can make use of nature's resources without exploiting those resources. The need for well-being and the opportunity for innovation are key attributes to re-building the corporate environment. These changes, which are necessary for sustainable survival, may not encourage enthusiasm in the short-run; nevertheless, in the long-run, they will become essential 'building blocks' by which the company thrives.

To create a company whose mission is true sustainability, all engaged individuals need to have a better understanding of what 'sustainability' entails. The spotlight

needs to move from the financial bottom line to a more encompassing viewpoint of the company's impact on the world. Once this information is shared, it is then necessary to begin looking at the community to realize what environmental concerns are being voiced by the public. To align with these socialistic movements and to move away from individualism is preparing for long-term sustainable success (Rogers, 2001).

The lack of rigid framework for sustainability, presented a unique challenge in the literature: the use of the term sustainability seems not to be consistent as there is no clear standards that stipulates lines that constitutes sustainability. A sample of the results of the literature review on sustainability studies compiled and presented in Table 2 below shows that some sustainability studies discussed one line only (Bibri, 2008; Blengini & Shields, 2010; Iles, 2008; McDonald & Oates, 2006; Yan, Chen, & Chang, 2008). Other studies combined two or more lines (Collins, Steg, & Koning, 2007; Dewangga, Goldsmith, & Pegram, 2008; Frame & Newton, 2007; Kirchgeorg & Winn, 2006). Only a handful of studies referred included the economic line whether independently or in conjunction with the other two lines (Collins, Steg, & Koning, 2007; Kirchgeorg & Winn, 2006).

Table 2. Summary of Sustainability Studies

Sustainability study topic	Line	Author(s), year
Innovation in sustainability marketing	Environmental/green	Iles, 2008
Towards sustainability	Environmental	Peattie, 2001
Sustainable corporate performance	Environmental Social Economic	Collins, Steg, & Koning, 2007
Sustainability reporting	Environmental	Blengini & Shields, 2010
Promoting sustainability	Social Environmental	Frame & Newton, 2007
Sustainability and consumer perceptions	Environmental	McDonald & Oates, 2006
Sustainability and product constructualization	Environmental	Yan, Chen, & Chang, 2008
Sustainability and marketing	Economic Social	Kirchgeorg & Winn, 2006
Corporate sustainability and marketing	Social/CSR	Bibri, 2008
Sustainable society	Social Environmental	Dewangga, Goldsmith, & Pegram, 2008

Source: Centre for Promoting Ideas, USA.

3.2 Triple Bottom Line

Referred to as “a brilliant and far-reaching metaphor” (Henriques, 2007), the TBL concept was coined in 1994 and used in 1997 by John Elkington (Elkington, 1997). Prior to the late 1990s, the term was not significantly known. Triple bottom line otherwise known as TBL or 3BL is an accounting framework with three parts: social, environmental (or

ecological) and financial. Many organizations have adopted the TBL framework to evaluate their performance in a broader perspective to create greater business value.

In traditional business accounting and common usage, the “bottom line” refers to either the “profit” or “loss”, which is usually recorded at the very bottom line on a statement of revenue and expenses. Over the last five decades, environmentalists and “social justice” advocates have struggled to bring a broader definition of bottom line into public consciousness by introducing full cost accounting. For example, if a corporation shows a monetary profit, but their asbestos mine causes thousands of deaths from asbestosis, and their copper mine pollutes a river, and the government ends up spending taxpayers’ money on health care and river clean-up, how do we perform a full societal cost benefit analysis? It is on this basis that the triple bottom line adds two more “bottom lines”: social and environmental (ecological) concerns. With the ratification of the United Nations, TBL standard for urban and community accounting in early 2007 became the dominant approach to public and private sectors full cost accounting (Global Reporting Initiative, 2006).

Triple Bottom Line (TBL) reporting is a method used in business accounting to further expand stakeholders’ knowledge of the company. It goes beyond the traditional, financial aspects and reveals the company’s impact on the world around it. There

are three main focuses of TBL: “people, planet, and profit (“Global Reporting Initiative,”2006).” It is a “concerted effort to incorporate economic, environmental and social considerations into a company’s evaluation and decision making processes” (Wang & Lin, 2007). This type of reporting establishes principles by which a company should operate to concentrate on the total effect of their actions (both positive and negative.).

3.2.1 Economic Line

The economic line of TBL framework refers to the impact of the organization’s business practices on the economic system (Elkington, 1997). It pertains to the capability of the economy as one of the subsystems of sustainability to survive and evolve into the future in order to support future generations (Spangenberg, 2005). The economic line ties the growth of the organization to the growth of the economy and how well it contributes to support it. In other words, it focuses on the economic value provided by the organization to the surrounding system in a way that prospers it and promotes for its capability to support future generations.

3.2.2 Social Line

The social line of TBL refers to conducting beneficial and fair business practices to the labour, human capital, and the community (Elkington, 1997). The idea is that these practices provide value to the society and “give back” to the community.

Examples of these practices may include fair wages and providing health care coverage. Aside from the moral aspect of being “good” to the society, disregarding social responsibility can affect the performance and sustainability of the business. Recent examples in the industries have revealed that there are economic costs associated with ignoring social responsibility. Simply put, the social performance focuses on the interaction between the community and the organization and addresses issues related to community involvement, employee relations, and fair wages (Goel, 2010).

3.2.3 Environmental Line

The environmental line of TBL refers to engaging in practices that do not compromise the environmental resources for future generations. Sustainable development is considered the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs”,(Brundtland Report 1987). It pertains to the efficient use of energy resources, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and minimizing the ecological footprint, etc. (Goel, 2010).

Sustainability has been a buzzword for well over a decade. In the late 1990’s, John Elkington coined the phrase triple bottom line as a method for measuring sustainability. The most frequently seen factors used in performance

measurement are: economic, environmental, and social ("Global Reporting Initiative," 2006; Wang & Lin, 2007). In the literature, there is no real consensus as to the exact dimensions used for the performance measures. Some other dimensions used are community improvement, environment, entrepreneurship and education (Sher & Sher, 1994) and stakeholder engagement, organizational integrity, and stakeholder activism (Painter-Morland, 2006). In all instances, performance is being measured based on the impact of companies on society as a whole, both now and into the future.

Since TBL involves additional reporting, businesses will need to incorporate additional information in the reports provided to better communicate with stakeholders. The particular information reported should be re-evaluated periodically to ensure the expectations outlined in the reports are being met. When a constraint is reported and is causing less than satisfactory results, it is important for the company to discover the processes or procedures that are giving unsustainable results and correct them. This way they continue to operate towards meeting their sustainable goals.

The research by Goel (2010), with objectives (1) study the concept of TBL and its benefits, (2) analyze the link between TBL and sustainable development, and (3) develop a comparison between the TBL indicators and the sustainable reporting indicators. Despite the insignificant research on TBL,

the studies found have all referred to the economic, social, and environmental aspects simultaneously can be used to simplify the interrelationship between triple bottom line accounting and sustainability accounting.

Advantages of Triple Bottom Line

TBL is a societal and ecological agreement between the community and businesses. In presenting information about the company's impact on issues impacting sustainability, there will be both positive and negative items that emerge. TBL reporting incorporates presenting what the business is doing well, along with areas that need improvement. Reporting in this way demonstrates a drive towards increased transparency, which can mitigate concerns by stakeholders on hidden information. Also, including TBL reporting demonstrates to stakeholders that the business is taking accountability to a higher level. This reporting maintains and raises expectations of companies and improves "global clout" (Ho & Taylor, 2007).

"An undeniable case for action has been mounted effectively by senior scientists around the world, with growing acceptance by governments and the wider community" (Rogers, 2001).

Evidences of diminishing natural resources have made consumers more aware of the impact businesses are having on the world; however, the corporate world's lack of desire to

change has led to minimizing capital stocks. Without change, the state of the world's economy, society, and natural resources will be insufficient for "not-so-distant" generations. Larger companies are beginning to adjust business processes to utilize more responsibly the finite resources that are available, as well as to report on the impact of these changing policies and procedures.

Everyone involved in the process of TBL, including employees and external stakeholders, can increase their knowledge of the company and expand their relationships with other stakeholders in the company. Participating in a learning environment is beneficial and necessary for a business to meet the goals of sustainability. The process of building a sustainable environment can lead to other revelations on how the business world can lend a helping hand in protecting the natural resources that are quickly evaporating.

Uniting the employees of a business toward a common set of goals, especially ones that have a broader impact than just efficiency and profit, could outweigh the risks of additional public scrutiny and substantial policy adjustment. Being united creates a more resilient front. The possible initial negative exposure could be weathered because the stakeholders have learned to forge a strong sense of business purpose and identity.

Finally, one can argue that companies have a social responsibility to be accountable for the resources that they use and waste. Reporting on a company's sustainability gives a benchmark for the future.

Disadvantages of Triple Bottom Line

Several arguments are currently being made against Triple Bottom Line Reporting. With any new regulation or procedure, there is always resistance. This can be explained with "fear of the unknown" or ethnocentrism. The feeling in some companies is that ultimately nothing will change; whereas other companies are more concerned with nothing staying the same. They also tend to be uneasy about the control that will have to be relinquished. Other arguments are the amount of additional time that will be involved, differing expectations, and risks that may be entailed from implementation of this approach.

According to studies, one worry is the possibility that a company's actions might not support their intentions. The companies declare that they intend to take on the challenges of becoming more socially and ecologically accountable, but the only proof of that is "mere pieces of paper or pretty plaques on the organization's wall" (Mitchell, Curtis, & Davidson, 2008; Painter-Morland, 2006).

In many cases, companies have allowed appropriate reporting to be influenced by corporate supremacy. This indicates that, to some extent, abiding by the guidelines of TBL can be difficult to maintain.

For Triple Bottom Line Reporting to be completely effective, the corporate environment has to be eradicated and rebuilt. Firms tend to be hesitant toward substantial change. With traditional financial regulations driving reporting, companies have structured their policies and operations around these requirements. To change the very infrastructure that the company is built on will require stepping out into unknown territory, and for a prosperous company, that may be too much of a risk. One thing is certain; implementing new policies to this degree will require an extensive re-adjustment of a company's operations (Rogers, 2001).

If TBL is added to a company's report process, the additional time could initially negatively affect their bottom line, increasing the task complexity of their operations (Skouloudis, Evangelinos, & Kourmousis, 2009). Not only is the scoring of the company to determine how well the operations are matching the goals time consuming, but also the execution of new procedures and training required to prepare employees for the new tasks can be expensive. Companies, which already have overloaded employees, will need to add additional responsibilities in order to incorporate and measure these new

procedures. Additional work is additional stress on their labor resources. An individual's stress associated with work creates multiple problems not only for that person but also for the company in poor health, absenteeism, decreased job satisfaction, and an unstable emotional state.

As a company strives to meet the goals of sustainability, opponents may focus on the ethical problems uncovered through the process. Accusations by critics could lead to poor company perception while the company undertakes a shift to a new more socially sound environmental focus. Critics are typically "slow to praise and quick to criticize" (Mish & Scammon, 2010). With this potential initial backlash, companies might be hesitant to embrace a sustainability agenda, or become extremely introverted during the shift toward TBL reporting.

4.0 Incorporation of Triple Bottom Lines

Businesses have full control over what is put into their reports, but a considerable amount of the authority comes from external stakeholders, whose input is vital. The Sustainability Committee considers input from internal and external stakeholders and determines the significant topics to report (Mitchell, et al., 2008). The TBL report itself should be led by the mission and vision statement of the company. These statements should outline the businesses goals for short and long-term. Information determined to be important must be

included. A company should not withhold information on the basis of its undesirable results. Once the reporting standards have been set, information based on those guidelines should be continuously reported so that the report is dependable and relays the information consistently.

One of the purposes of sustainability for any business is to reduce or eliminate its cost of poor quality. Measuring the cost of poor quality is a vital part in TBL reporting (Isaksson, 2005). In order to avoid any self-serving bias when undertaking this task, the company needs to have an evaluation done by a committee. One of the ways this can be handled is to use a section of the Board of Directors to preside as a "Sustainability Committee of the Board" (Painter-Morland, 2006). This will broaden the perspective for changes that need to be made to create a higher level of sustainability. After reporting topics have been decided, a review should be undertaken by individuals who were not involved in the gathering process. All collected information needs to be checked for accuracy and the data organized into the TBL report. Details that are not vital to the report should be excluded and any jargon avoided. The report should be straightforward and understandable by the stakeholders, both employees and stockholders.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examines the interface between 'Sustainability' and 'Triple bottom line' (TBL) as two related concepts that are used interchangeably in the literature. As the popularity for Triple Bottom Line Reporting grows and more competitors from different markets choose to address the social and ecological issues at hand, the standards by which the companies operate should be raised to meet higher needs. The struggle to retain all resources possible for future generations while still utilizing enough to survive today must be part of the evolutionary process into sustainability. With new technologies that are being developed and different issues that will be discovered, these standards of operating businesses should never be stagnant.

As previously stated, TBL reporting has three dimensions: people, planet, and profit. The social dimension includes the company's impact on its employees and the social system within its community. When looking at the environmental dimension, companies need to look at the qualitative and quantitative effects they are having on their local, national, and international resources. The last, but certainly not the least, economic dimension includes the company's financial performance, the flow of capital, and their economic involvement in society.

By adopting TBL reporting, businesses understand that they are held to specific principles that are developed by

internal and external forces. For this reason, they will need to focus on the impact that their operations have on the community. This change of mindset will, typically, be followed by changes in ordinary, everyday operations to increase transparency. Today, accountability in the corporate world is a necessity. This requires companies to extend their information beyond financial data; TBL connects the financial reporting with the business's everyday activities in a way that provides a broader awareness of the impact of the business upon society. Information should be constantly and accurately recorded to confirm the advantages of taking the steps to become a sustainable company.

However, a comprehensive review of relevant literature conducted revealed an inconsistent use of the term "sustainability" with respect to social, environmental, and economic lines. On the other hand, consistency in terms of referring to the three lines simultaneously is built into the structure of TBL as the concept is clearly based on the combination of social, environmental, and economic lines.

Research findings from survey on relevant literature show that researchers are unmindful of the choice of lines that make up sustainability, hence, inconsistent use of the term. However, researchers should be encouraged to pay particular attention and state those lines that comprise the term "sustainability" in their works. Where a researcher chooses

to use sustainability in light of the social, environmental, and economic pillars (or lines), the work should clearly states that for better understanding, so as readers or other researchers would have basic knowledge of those lines that comprise sustainability as used by the author.

Also, accountancy profession should rise up to the challenge of setting a standard as to the lines that should be used as benchmark for consistent reporting on sustainability in the annual reports of entities.

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