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Practices adopted by commercial restaurants to promote social sustainability

Práticas adotadas por restaurantes comerciais para promover a sustentabilidade social

Abstract

Introduction: Commercial restaurants have the potential to promote the social dimension of sustainability. establishments, knowledge about social practices is incipient in these cases. *Objective:* To identify actions carried out by commercial restaurants to promote social sustainability. *Methods:* A questionnaire composed of fifty-two questions distributed in 9 themes was answered by those responsible for fifteen commercial restaurants in the municipality of Governador Valadares, Brazil. *Results:* All establishments were small size and most of them did not have nutritionists (80%) or technical nutrition (93.3%). These restaurants promoted 87.8% of the evaluated actions related to the theme "health and safety of employees"; 80% of those related to employee compensation and benefits; and 89.1% of those aimed at consumer relations. The topics with the lowest percentage of taken actions were those related to the relationship with employees (66.7%), working conditions, quality of life and working hours for employees (61.8%), support for supplier development (60,5%), commitment to professional development (50.6%), commitment to community development and management of social actions (44.0%). *Conclusion:* The commercial restaurants analyzed promoted mandatory and voluntary actions that contribute to the promotion of social sustainability. However, actions related to employees, suppliers, and community still needs to be further explored.

Keywords: Sustainability. Social Responsibility. Social Sustainability. Restaurant. Food Services.

Resumo

Introdução: Os restaurantes comerciais possuem elevado potencial para a promoção da dimensão social da sustentabilidade. Apesar da relevância, o conhecimento sobre as práticas socialmente sustentáveis nesses estabelecimentos é incipiente. *Objetivo:* identificar ações realizadas por restaurantes comerciais para promover a sustentabilidade social. *Métodos:* questionário composto por 52 questões distribuídas em nove temas, respondido por responsáveis de 15 restaurantes comerciais do município de Governador Valadares, Brasil. *Resultados:* Todos os estabelecimentos eram de pequeno porte e a maioria não contava com nutricionista (80%) ou técnico em nutrição (93,3%). Esses restaurantes promoveram 87,8% das ações avaliadas relacionadas ao tema "saúde e segurança dos colaboradores"; 80%

das relacionadas à remuneração e benefícios de empregados; e 89,1% das voltadas para as relações de consumo. Os temas com menor percentual de ações realizadas se referiam ao relacionamento com os colaboradores (66,7%), condições de trabalho, qualidade de vida e jornada de trabalho dos colaboradores (61,8%), apoio ao desenvolvimento de fornecedores (60,5%), comprometimento ao desenvolvimento profissional (50,6%), compromisso com o desenvolvimento comunitário e gestão das ações sociais (44,0%). *Conclusão:* Os restaurantes comerciais analisados promoveram ações obrigatórias e voluntárias que contribuem para a promoção da sustentabilidade social. No entanto, as ações relacionadas aos colaboradores, fornecedores e comunidade ainda precisam ser mais exploradas.

Palavras-chave: Sustentabilidade. Responsabilidade Social. Sustentabilidade Social. Restaurante. Serviços de Alimentação

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability, defined as the capacity of society must meet the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, is supported by the intersection of three primary dimensions: environmental, economic, and social.[1] Although the concept of sustainability included the social dimension, this dimension has been neglected amid abbreviated references to sustainability that focus primarily on environmental issues. [2]

Social sustainability can be defined as specifying and managing both positive and negative impacts of systems, processes, organizations, and activities on local communities, workers, and consumers as the main groups of the stakeholders.[3,4] The topics that integrate the social sustainability concept include, but are not limited to; health, food security, social equity, gender issues, safety, human rights, labor rights, practices and decent working conditions, social responsibility and justice, community development, and well-being, product responsibility, among other factors.[4,5]

Currently, there has been an increase in the number of emerging food services, contributing to the economic sector, increasing employment opportunities and income generation[6] and it can play important roles as facilitators of transitions to more sustainable futures, as articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals[7]. Among these establishments, we highlighted the commercial restaurants, which are exclusively used for the production and sale of meals to the non-captive consumer. During all stages of meal production, ranging from field production, transportation, receiving, storage, production, and distribution of the meal, these establishments may cause environmental and economic impacts.[7] Furthermore, the generation of sustainable practices in commercial restaurants will contribute to the sustainability of the global food system.

Although the environmental sustainability aspects in restaurants are researched extensively in Brazil and worldwide,[7,8] the social sustainability dimension is generally absent in restaurants.[9] A systematic review covering 25 years on sustainable restaurants suggested that previous research has predominantly focused on the environmental aspects of sustainability and that social sustainability through restaurants is the neglected pillar.[7]

In the social sphere, commercial restaurants have a high potential for promoting health and improving the quality of life of their employees and consumers by ensuring the human right to adequate food, and food and nutritional security. Scientific studies in establishments in different segments have shown that socially sustainable practices range from the sustainable management of agricultural systems, better distribution of income, ensuring employee satisfaction, retaining the company's top talent, increasing employee productivity, reduced risk of accidents, respect for human rights and labor standards.[7,10,11]

Given the need for studies to pay attention to social sustainability, which could enhance the overall corporate-level sustainability of restaurants,[12] this study aimed to identify actions carried out by commercial restaurants to promote social sustainability. The contribution of this article is certainly applicable to other foodservice operations that can achieve a good degree of sustainability in business and it may assist in formulating strategies to support commercial restaurants in promoting social sustainability.

METHODS

This is a cross-sectional study conducted in commercial restaurants located in the municipality of Governador Valadares (Minas Gerais state, Brazil). The restaurants were selected by simple random sampling, from the list of establishments registered in the Google Maps platform. Among the registered establishments

(n = 112), 45 were excluded because they were not commercial restaurants or did not have a complete address and telephone number. Among the eligible establishments, 25 commercial restaurants were randomly drawn and contacted by telephone, of which 15 accepted to participate in the study.

The owners or managers of the establishments were interviewed by the researcher on previously scheduled visits. For the interview, a questionnaire was elaborated based on the social dimension of the Ethos Indicators for Sustainable and Responsible Businesses. This management tool aims to support companies in incorporating sustainability and corporate social responsibility into their business strategies.[13] Considering the incipience of sustainable social practices in commercial restaurants, due to the extension of the original questionnaire and the inadequacy of some questions to the reality of small commercial restaurants, only the questions related to indicators classified in the original questionnaire as essential or basic were included in the questionnaire used in this study. The basic indicators comprised issues that relate to a more panoramic approach on the themes dealt with in the social dimension and the indicators classified as essential represent what traditionally is recognized as the "minimum agenda" of sustainability.[13] In addition to these indicators, the Ethos Indicators for Sustainable and Responsible Businesses encompassed questions classified as broad or comprehensive, which were not included in this study.

The adapted questionnaire was composed of 52 basic or essential questions distributed in nine themes: health and safety of employees; working conditions, quality of life and working hours; relations with employees; commitment to professional development; remuneration and benefits; promotion of diversity and equity; consumer relations; support for supplier development; commitment to community development and management of social actions. The questions had the following response options: "yes", "no" and "not applicable". In addition, a section with questions to identify and characterize commercial restaurants was included in the questionnaire. The establishments were classified by size, considering the number of meals produced per day: small size (up to 500 meals/day); medium size (from 501 to 2,000 meals/day); Large size: (from 2,001 to 10,000 meals/day); Extraport (greater than 10,000 meals/day).[14]

The data were automatically tabulated in Google Forms spreadsheets. The results were presented in absolute frequency and the percentage was calculated using the Microsoft Office Excel software, version 2016. The research was approved by the Committee of Ethics in Research with Human Beings of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (CAAE in the 77985117.1.0000.5147) and fulfilled the guidelines governing research involving human beings (Resolution n. 466/2012).

RESULTS

All commercial restaurants were small and most existed less than ten years ago (Table 1). Few commercial restaurants had nutritionists (20%) or nutrition technicians (6,7%) and only 20% of these professionals considered themselves qualified to promote social sustainability. In 13% of the establishments, the employees received training related to social sustainability

Table 1. Characterization of commercial restaurants from Governador Valadares, Minas Gerais, Brazil, 2018.(n = 15)

Characteristics of restaurants	Frequency	
	Relative (%)	Absoluta (n)
Time of existence		
1 - 10 years	46.7	7
10 - 20 years	26.7	4
20 - 35 years	20.0	3
35 years or older	6.7	1
Number of employees		
1 - 5 employees	13.3	2
5 - 10 employees	60.0	9
10 - 20 employees	20.0	3
20 employees or more	6.7	1
Employees' working hours		
6.5 hours	6.7	1
7 hours	20.0	3
8 hours	66.7	10
12 hours	6.7	1
Presence of nutrition professional		
Technical nutrition	6.7	1
Nutritionist	20.0	3
Working hours of nutrition professional		
2 hours / day	6.7	1
5 hours / day	6.7	1
8 hours / day	13.3	2
Nutrition professionals qualified for social sustainability		
Responsible for food handling activities / technical responsible	20.0	3
Promotion of training on social sustainability		
For employees	13.3	2
For suppliers	0	0

The maintenance of up-to-date and complete documents referring to the health and well-being of employees and compliance with regulatory standards was carried out in most establishments (Table 2). Furthermore, more than 80.0% of the restaurants had a professional responsible for the health and safety of employees and had regular training or awareness campaigns on this theme.

Table 2. Working conditions and relations in commercial restaurants from Governador Valadares, Minas Gerais, Brazil, 2018

Actions developed by restaurants	Frequency(%)		n
	Yes	Not	
Employee health and safety.			
It has and maintains updated and complete legal documents relating to Occupational Health and Safety	100	0	15
It meets the requirements of Regulatory Standards or has an action plan to ensure compliance	93.03	6.7	15
It has a customer responsible for the health and safety of employees	80.0	20.0	15
It has a health and safety commitment or policy	80.0	20.0	15
It regularly conducts health and safety training with employees	86.7	13.7	15
It conducts regular health and safety awareness campaigns, aimed at the well-being of employees	86.7	13.7	15
Weighted average.	87.8	12.2	

Table 2. Working conditions and relations in commercial restaurants from Governador Valadares, Minas Gerais, Brazil, 2018. (Continues.)

Actions developed by restaurants	Frequency (%)		n
	Yes	Not	
Working conditions, quality of life and working hours			
It respects employees' working hours	100	0.	15
It compensates overtime for all employees on a regular and recorded basis	100	0.	8
It performs planning, avoiding frequent overtime	100	0.	15
It has initiatives to combat employee stress	20,0	80,0	15
It promotes physical exercises during working hours	6.7	93.3	15
Weighted average	61.8	38.2	-
Relationship with employees (permanent, temporary or partial)			
It takes necessary measures to fix any pending issues related to the labor legislation	100	0	15
There is an easily accessible channel for suggestions, opinions and complaints regarding working conditions	100	0	15
Weighted average	100	0	-

Regarding working conditions, quality of life, and working hours, more than 80.0% of commercial restaurants did not take action to combat employees' stress and did not perform actions for the practice of physical exercises during working hours. On the other hand, all reported keeping some informal, easily accessible communication channels for employees' opinions about working conditions.

All establishments surveyed reported adopting necessary measures to resolve labor legal issues. They also reported respecting collective agreements and complying with obligations related to the payment of salaries and benefits (Table 2). Furthermore, in approximately 50% of restaurants, employees were benefited from life insurance and health insurance; and their relatives were benefited from dental plans or scholarships.

The actions related to professional development were followed by a little more than 50.0% of the establishments (Table 3). Approximately 87.0% of the commercial restaurants offered basic training to their employees to carry out their operations, and 53.3% enabled them to perform the designated function. However, few commercial restaurants had any program to eradicate illiteracy among their employees

Table 3. Financial management and benefits in commercial restaurants from Governador Valadares, Minas Gerais, Brazil, 2018

Remuneration and benefits	Frequency(%)		n
	Yes	Not	
It complies with all legal labor obligations related to the payment of wages and benefits	100	0	15
It respects and complies with the collective agreements in which its employees are included	100	0	15
The lowest salary of the company increased in relation to the current minimum wage	100	0	15
It offers life insurance, health insurance or other insurance benefits to its employees	53.3	46.7	15
It offers benefits that cover family members, such as participation in a dental plan, scholarships, leisure options, etc.	46.7	53.3	15
Weighted average	80.0	20.0	-
Commitment to professional development.			
It offers employees basic training to carry out their operations	86.7	13.3	15
It empowers its employees to exercise the designated function	53.3.	46.7	15
It has regular training aimed at improving employees in current functions	73.3	26.7.	15
It provides incentives for external courses by awarding scholarships or working time	26.7	73.3.	15
It offers programs that contribute to the eradication of illiteracy	13.3.	86.7.	15
Weighted average . . .	50.6	49.4.	-

Most commercial restaurants prioritized the acquisition of inputs from local suppliers and respected their suppliers as to their production capacity and the seasonality of the marketed products (Table 4). However, the restaurants did not promote actions for the technical and managerial development of the suppliers or still they didn't consider social aspects (e.g., history, positioning, vision, mission, values, served customers) during negotiation.

Table 4. Relationship of the commercial restaurants in Governador Valadares, Minas Gerais, Brazil, with consumers and the community, 2018

Actions developed by restaurants	Frequency (%)		n
	Yes	Not	
Support for supplier development.			
When negotiating with local suppliers, the company is based only on commercial criteria	57.1	42.9	14
It prioritizes the purchase relationship with local suppliers	64.3	35.7	14
It promotes joint actions with suppliers aiming at their technical and managerial development	15.4	84.6	13
It respects seasonality and production capacity	100	0	15
Weighted average	60.5	39.5	
Consumer relations			
It has a relationship channel for resolving customer / consumer demands	93.3	6.7	15
It monitors if responses to consumer demands are given in a timely manner and resolved	100	0	14
It provides its clients with guidance on rights and duties	80.0	20.0	15
It trains its service professionals to ensure prompt service and an ethical relationship and respect for consumer / customer rights	100	0	15
Weighted average	89.1	10.9	-
Commitment to community development and management of social actions			
It performs social actions in a timely manner	87.3	12.7	15
It uses resources from tax incentives in social or cultural projects	0	100	15
It defined an area or a responsible for Social Actions	67.3	32.7	15
It performs diagnostics to identify possible areas of activity in the community.	47.3	52.7	15
It internally disseminates the projects it supports and develops, encouraging the participation of employees	60.0	40.0	15
It maintains an annual social investment plan	40.0	60.0	15
It discloses its projects in the media, reporting the achieved results	6.7	93.3	15
Weighted average	44.0	56.0	-

Most restaurants were concerned about listening to the customer through channels for receiving feedback on the service provided and it has professionals were trained to ensure prompt service and ethical relationship concerning consumer / client rights. Despite that, a small portion of the commercial restaurants did not provide their clients with guidance on their rights and duties, i.e. they did not provide the Consumer's Protection Code.

Among the companies, 86.7% carried out social actions or acted in response to external requests, but none of them used tax incentive resources in social projects. In addition, 60.0% stimulated the participation of their employees in the actions carried out and 40.0% maintained an annual social investment plan. However, none of the commercial restaurants reported in the media the results achieved in their projects and social actions.

DISCUSSION

In this study, it was observed that the commercial restaurants analyzed performed actions that contributed to the promotion of social sustainability, especially those related to employee health and safety; relationship with employees; remuneration and benefits; and consumer relations. Although sustainable development is an innovation in commercial restaurants that can be useful, among others, to attract consumers, its implementation can still be a great challenge for these establishments due to its small size and because some actions require investment and operational costs.

In the commercial restaurants analyzed, another important factor that can hinder the implementation of socially sustainable practices is the low presence of nutrition professionals. Little is known on the level of knowledge of nutrition professionals and employees' commercial restaurants about social sustainability. However, nutritionists can contribute to promoting sustainability by using their expertise to develop actions during all stages of the management of commercial restaurants, especially during the process of meal production aimed at guaranteeing Food and Nutrition Security and the Human Right to Adequate Feeding.[15,16]

The characteristics and working conditions of places destined for the production of meals, such as commercial restaurants, involve occupational hazards related to the physical aspects such as noise, heat, lighting; to the chemicals and to the ergonomics that can cause health and safety problems to their employees, in the short, medium and long term.[17] Furthermore, they can still increase employee stress, causing emotional imbalance, social embarrassment, and even the need of hospital intervention.[18,19]

Employment practices that support work-life balance and well-being in workplace experiences lead to long-term workforce effectiveness or the cultivation of a "sustainable workforce".[20] Given the risks to which employees are exposed, the regular performance of training or awareness campaigns as observed in the evaluated establishments are essential to promote the health and well-being of employees. However, complementary actions are still needed to reduce stress, such as encouraging the practice of physical activity and health care. Studies have shown that postural exercises, walking, Hatha Yoga, work gymnastics, and weight reduction programs improve health, self-esteem, well-being, and worker's productivity.[21] In noncommercial food services, the practice of activities like these for up to 15 minutes twice a day has improved working conditions and the quality of life of employees by reducing stress, muscle injuries, and pain, and increasing relaxation, energy, and motivation to accomplish their daily tasks.[22,23]

Given the risks to restaurant employees, the existence of channels of communication for employees on working conditions is also essential to mitigate them. Furthermore, throughout the organizational process, interpersonal and intersectoral communication is essential for the development of human resources and, consequently, for the growth of the company.[24] The presence of effective channels of communication enables the aspirations of the employees, facilitating the creation of mechanisms capable of evaluating their satisfaction and fostering their motivation. Thus, these channels provide an alignment between the company's guidelines and strategies with the employees' thinking. For many restaurant employees, miscommunication with service coworkers can result in negative emotions on the staff. On the other hand, the opposite can increase employee satisfaction and commitment, contributing to reducing employee turnover and increasing customer satisfaction.[22,25]

Another important aspect related to the promotion of social sustainability refers to monetary compensation. When, in addition to hiring personnel, the employer complies with labor rights, such as the payment of wages by collective agreements, and grants benefits to employees, promoting their personal development, they contribute to a better quality of life for employees.[22,26,27] Investment in human resources

management, especially in the development of remuneration and insurance benefits policies, increases the motivation of the company's employees, promoting mutual benefits to those involved. [26,27]

As aspects related to remuneration, promoting personal and professional development is an act of great relevance to social sustainability. In the commercial restaurants evaluated, their training programs has to be consolidated, especially to provide their employees with knowledge about the function for which they were designed. Thereby, behavioral changes through an educational process that ensures better personal development and skills in the work environment can be achieved by improving the performance and safety of employees in the designated tasks.[28,29]

An important aspect that can affect the effectiveness of training in commercial restaurants is the level of instruction of handlers. In general, foodservice handlers, which include commercial restaurants, have, to some extent, low schooling level , due to the need for labor for services that require more physical than intellectual effort.[29] So, promoting personal development is an act of great relevance to social sustainability, since it stimulates the intellectual development of employees, making them more able to understand the training and skills. The failure to eradicate illiteracy among their employees' actions may indicate that these establishments did not have illiterate employees, a variable that was not evaluated in this study.

The promotion of social sustainability by commercial restaurants must comprise actions aimed at actors outside the establishment, including suppliers, customers, and the community. About suppliers, the integration between commercial restaurants and the local food production chain is an important driving practice for social sustainability, preserving the local culture, and economic sustainability, fostering local economic growth.[30] However, for this to happen, it is important to consider other criteria in the selection of suppliers, including social, environmental, and financial sustainability actions which, in general, were not performed by the commercial restaurants evaluated.

Furthermore, the more widespread adoption of local food in the foodservice requires still overcoming a series of practical challenges such as inconsistent quality of products, on-time delivery of orders, product shortage information, and price fluctuations.[30] The respect for these characteristics and the seasonality of products as observed in commercial restaurants is indispensable to allow the prioritization of local suppliers, especially those in family agriculture, which often do not have the same production capacity and service as large suppliers.

Consumers are one of the pillars of a company and are increasingly concerned about sustainability in general and sustainable operations in particular.[31] Therefore, it is essential to establish a two-way communicative relationship using technological resources to facilitate the consumer's access to the establishment, such as applications, social networks, sites, whether for positive or negative feedback.[32,33] Thus, the presence of communication channels in commercial restaurants to meet customer demands showed the establishment's alignment with the promotion of social sustainability.

However, it is also essential that consumer rights are respected by all establishments. In Brazil, the step first to show this respect, is to keep a copy of the Consumer's Protection Code, in a visible place and accessible to the public. The fulfillment of this simple legal requirement[34] contributes to the educational process of consumers by informing them about laws governing rights and duties.

Lastly, commitment to community development and management of social actions demonstrated the involvement of restaurants in solving social problems. The biggest contribution of restaurants to social sustainability refers to the community. When settling in a region, an establishment positively impacts the environment in different ways, including through employment generation for society. The commercial

restaurants participating in the research, in addition to providing these positive impacts, were concerned with carrying out social actions, such as the donation of non-perishable food to associations and charities. In addition to these actions, they can contribute to the promotion of social sustainability, using food and nutrition education to promote knowledge of customers and employees about healthy food choices, adequate hygienic and sanitary practices, and other approaches that guarantee the Human Right to Adequate Food and Food and Nutrition Security.

Despite the diversity of social sustainability actions carried out by the surveyed establishments, it is observed that many of them were part of the legal labor requirements, provided for in Brazilian regulations. Respect for the law is a minimum requirement to remain competitive in a business's management environment. On the other hand, just complying with regulations is not enough to promote social sustainability comprehensively. To this end, food services must carry out voluntary actions aimed at promoting social responsibility in an integrated way with the company's business strategy. Thus, both their social and economic goals become easier to achieve and result in better financial performance. Therefore, managers of companies that do not practice social responsibility should place it as one of the central goals to be achieved in the long term.[35,36]

CONCLUSION

In general, commercial restaurants adopt a high percentage of actions that contribute to social sustainability, especially those related to employees' health and safety; relationship with employees; remuneration and benefits; and consumer relations. Nevertheless, efforts should be directed toward promoting actions related to employee relations, working conditions, quality of life and working hours, support for supplier development, commitment to professional development, and commitment to community development and management of social rights actions.

The results of this study can help commercial restaurant owners to better understand the requirements for promoting social sustainability in their establishments. Although the findings have developed valuable implications, the limitations of this study must be considered to advance the discussion on sustainability in commercial restaurants. The instrument used in this study did not allow assessing the degree of commitment of the establishments to each of the proposed actions, nor addressed incipient aspects related to practices directly related to food and nutrition that could be adopted to promote social benefits to customers. Thus, in the absence of instruments with such characteristic, studies are needed to develop and validate a specific instrument for evaluating social sustainability in commercial restaurants, as well as to evaluate the practices adopted in foodservices in general.

Another aspect refers to the unrepresentative sampling of the population and the limited inferences on how the characteristics of the restaurants can affect the establishment's adherence to sustainable practices. Finally, this research was limited to the analysis of small establishments that belong to a single segment of commercial food services. Therefore, the extrapolation of the results of this study to establishments of other segments and sizes must be carried out with caveats.

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Contributors

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