

Strategies and Factors Influencing SME Sustainability : A Case Study of TSANG Company in Butembo, Democratic Republic of Congo

Adel Kalembe Kambesa

Adventist University of the Philippines

Cavite, Silang, Putting Kahoy, AUP Campus

Author Corresponding e-mail : adelkalembe4@gmail.com

Abstract

Medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of the economy of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Indeed, these businesses are pivotal in sustaining the country's economic growth through job creation and alleviating poverty. Inasmuch as this fact stands, Congolese SMEs face a myriad of economic and political dynamics that intimidate their existence and essentially viability. The paper will highlight how TSANG, one of the prominent SMEs in Butembo, undertook strategies to remain competitive amid such a difficult environment and what would be some determinants of its sustainability. Guided by these following research questions : "What strategies does TSANG implement to ensure its sustainability ? " and "What factors influence the success of these strategies ? A qualitative and descriptive case study methodology was used, involving a literature review and semi-structured interviews with the company's manager. The study identified four main sustainability strategies : diversification, differentiation, long-term planning, and choice of financing method. Also, inside things like manager skills and worker motivation ; outside things such as stakeholder links and how fast you can get money all played big roles in whether these plans worked. The study wraps up by saying a mix of badly done plans and the skill to handle inside and outside factors is key for keeping SMEs in tough times. It suggests that to make their long-term success chances better and be more competitive, SMEs should work on building strong plans that deal with both their internal strengths and external challenges.

Keywords: Strategy, Sustainability, SME, Butembo, TSANG

INTRODUCTION

SME sustainability involves ensuring their long-term survival and prosperity by adapting to challenges and remaining competitive. (Abhaya et al., 2025). Several companies are created, develop, and fewer reach a level of

sustainability. In developed countries like Vietnam for example, the survival rate of SMEs is estimated at 54. 1% in 2019 (Sambou, 2019 ; Nguyet, 2022). According to Clément et al. (2023) fewer than two companies in three continue their activities after three years of existence and only one company in two manages to pass the five-year mark. In Central Africa, SMEs account for 99. 8% of businesses. However, 72% of SMEs created between 2010 and 2016 did not survive beyond six years. The creation of SMEs makes it possible to deal with unemployment and reduce poverty (Nesrine & Abdelaziz, 2023).

Thus the SME is the locomotive of the contemporary economy in both developed and developing countries, for its undeniable role in development and in the reduction of unemployment, hence the interest of public authorities in encouraging the creation of new businesses. Creating a business is a challenge ; ensuring its sustainability is an ongoing battle for managers. Given that businesses constitute the lungs of the economy, they must be sustainable in order to promote the development of the economy. As Sustainability requires a holistic approach that encompasses environmental, social, and economic aspects, and focuses on creating value for all stakeholders, not just shareholders (Masfer, 2023). The business world is constantly subject to upheaval, with companies operating in an increasingly complex and competitive environment in which changes seem difficult to identify and control. Thus, this climate plunges companies and more particularly SMEs into a situation of questioning, adoption of new strategies or the implementation of organizational decisions to compensate for the situations they are going through (Lati et al., 2023).

Most studies focus on developed countries, a minority on countries of the South and very limited on countries with hostile environments. In Democratic Republic of Congo, the economy is largely driven by small and medium-sized businesses and the trend of SMEs creation is growing. Since these companies contribute to the economic development of the country by creating jobs and reducing poverty (Natalia et al., 2020). However, these businesses face significant economic and security challenges, making their sustainability a difficult task. Various factors such as the hyper-competitive and fluctuating economic environment, the security situation and limited access to financing threaten their survival, 30% of SMEs have only 1 to 5 years of existence and more than 50% have less than 10 years of existence. This indicates that SMEs disappear as the time goes by.

The city of Butembo, located in the North Kivu province of the DRC, characterized by its strong commercial activity, nevertheless operating in the

hostile environment of the DRC, also faces challenges. However, some companies are more able to succeed compared to others despite a hostile environment in which they operate. The main question is why and how do they manage to stay on the market in a highly competitive environment ? Starting from the case study of TSANG Company with more than 25 years of existence and still strong on the market, we would affirm that there are secrets that these companies have to ensure sustainability. Businesses develop strategies to deal with challenges presented by the environment. Hence the following questions:

- To ensure its sustainability, what strategies does the “TSANG Company” implement ?
- By what factors is the success of its strategies influenced ?

This study aims to analyze the factors that influence the sustainability of TSANG establishments and determine their secrets for remaining on the market despite the economic environment which is highly competitive in the city of Butembo

LITERATURE REVIEW

The survival and prosperity of SMEs are closely connected to the strategies they implement to make it a flawless sheep in the continuity of its daily activities. These strategies' success depends on the combination of a few factors internal to the company such as the competence of the manager (Claude et al., 2023), employee promotion, innovation, long-term management, harmonious relationships with customers and suppliers without forgetting external factors such as the environmental context (Sisira Kumara et al. , 2020). In a complex and turbulent context, coopetition, a strategy according to which competing companies cooperate with each other in order to create value and fairly large shares of commercial gain, would be implemented in order to achieve the desired performance, and to guarantee a certain lasting sustainability.

Several research studies on the sustainability of SMEs have been carried out and provide different results. Innovation is identified as a main source of long term success for companies (Filali & Torra Mohamed, 2023; Michel et al., 2016). Other studies have shown that human resource capacity, business diversification and the competence of the entrepreneur have a positive effect on SME sustainability (Firman et al., 2022 ; Claude et al. , 2023). Furthermore financial governance play a significant role in business

sustainability, the more effectively it is implemented ; the better equipped businesses are to prosper in the long term (Mehdi & Abdelhakim, 2023). In the specific context of the DRC, few studies have focused on the sustainability strategies of commercial SMEs. However found some strategies like specialization, market conquest or the Offensive Strategy, cost leadership, innovation, differentiation, diversification, collaboration and loyalty to face the challenges faced these businesses, notably insecurity, corruption and difficulties in accessing markets and ensuring sustainability.

Theoretical framework

Contingency theory emphasizes that business success is from the combination of a set of factors, notably human, organizational, financial and environmental. The main suggestion of the theory is that there is no unique best way of organizing a business and that the organizational context influences efficiency. Guided by the general hypothesis that organizations whose internal characteristics best match the demands of their environment achieve the best results. In the context of the study, this is to mean that the sustainability of TSANG society depends on how its strategies align with the specific challenges and opportunities presented by the economic and political environment of the DRC. Strategically managing Porter's Five Forces can significantly enhance SMEs' competitive advantage and sustainability (Prihatin et al., 2019). SMEs leveraging differentiation and innovation are better equipped to address rivalry and buyer power. Managing supplier power is critical for cost control and quality fostering innovation can capitalize on the low threat of substitutes (Zemani et al., 2024).

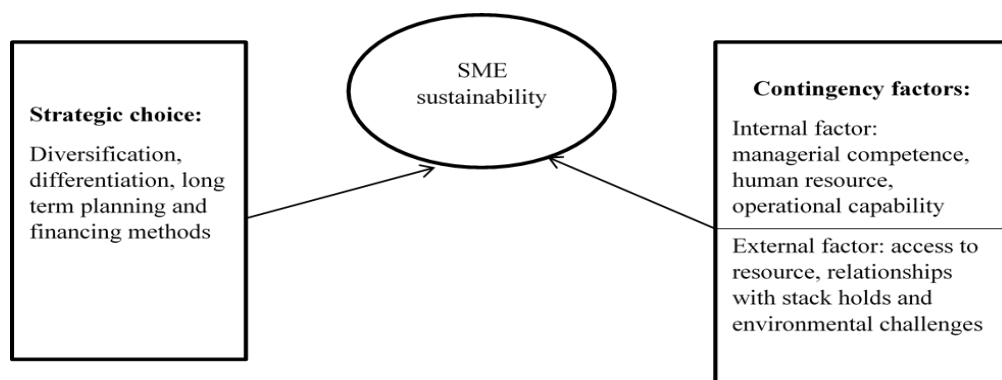


Figure 1: Framework of business sustainability

The framework shows that the sustainability of SMEs in the DRC results from the interaction between strategic choices and contextual factors. The success of strategies is influenced by both internal factors (e.g, management

competence, employee motivation) and external factors (e.g., economic instability, stakeholder relations).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This research used a qualitative and descriptive case study methodology. This methodology was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the sustainable development strategies of TSANG, an SME operating in the challenging context of Butembo, Democratic Republic of Congo, and the factors that influence their success. Semi-structured interviews with TSANG Company's director served as the data collection tool. Through these interviews, qualitative data provided detailed insight into the company's strategic approaches and the internal and external factors affecting their implementation. This data was processed using descriptive methods, including transcription, categorization, and thematic analysis by organizing information, to derive relevant insight, identify key strategies and influencing factors.

Research setting

This study was conducted in Butembo city, North-Kivu in Republic Democratic of Congo; the data were collected in an SME in the region operating in a competitive, economically and politically unstable environment, which has existed for more than 25 years. The researcher met personally with the manager of the SME twice.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with the director of TSANG Company, with the primary objective of collecting qualitative data to understand the company's sustainability strategies and the factors contributing to their success, constituted an important source of our data. We conducted four individual interviews with the director of the SME. We asked various questions through which information on various aspects of the company, including its characteristics, strategic drivers (such as product strategies, market scope, and planning), and the influence of the social, economic, financial, and political environments, was available to us. They explored the internal and external factors that play a role in the success of the company's strategies.

The qualitative data collected during the interviews were then transcribed for descriptive analysis. This analysis aimed to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies implemented by TSANG to ensure its sustainability in a competitive, economically, and politically unstable environment. Finally, it is important to note that the manager's participation

in these interviews was voluntary. To maintain confidentiality, transcribed data were stored on the researcher's personal computer and deleted after analysis was complete.

Data analysis

This study used a descriptive analysis of qualitative data collected during semi-structured interviews with the director of TSANG. The main objective was to explore and understand the strategies implemented by the company to ensure its sustainability. The focus on the systematic organization of this qualitative information in order to derive relevant insights into the company's strategic approaches makes it an analytical method. The data transcription process, which consisted of converting oral statements into a written format for systematic analysis, marked the beginning of the process. This transcription was followed by a categorization of the data to identify key themes and trends related to the company's strategies and the factors influencing their success. This categorization consisted of classifying the identified strategies into four main areas : product-related strategies, market scope, planning, and the social, economic, financial, and political environment. The factors influencing the success of these strategies were then grouped into two main categories : internal and external. Internal factors included elements within the company's control, such as managerial skills and employee motivation, while external factors encompassed elements beyond its control, such as economic instability and stakeholder relations. With this structured approach, we were able to systematically examine qualitative data, providing a clear and structured understanding of the strategies employed by TSANG Company and the variables affecting their effectiveness. The results of this analysis form the basis of the study's conclusions and contribute to a better understanding of the sustainability of SMEs in challenging environments.

Ethical considerations

The manager participation to the interview was voluntary. Data transcribed were store in the researcher personal computer and deleted after analysis.

Researcher reflexivity

Based on my reading experiences on the strategies implemented by SMEs to ensure their sustainability and wanting to verify their applicability in a particular case of an SME having lived more than 25 years was of capital importance for the research. This may have influenced my analysis

RESULT

Description of the company

TSANG Company is an individual private company, located in the town of Butembo, North Kivu, DRC created in 1990, which at the creation specialized in the sale of construction hardware materials. As it evolved, it launched into livestock breeding and real estate, now it is in the hotel industry and transport. Thus the main activities of TSANG Company are: sale of construction hardware, livestock breeding, real estate, hotel industry and transport.

The annual sales volume is approximately \$50, 000 (fifty thousand) and the number of employees estimated at 38. Considering the information above, the company has been in existence for 34 years and is classified among small and medium-sized businesses in light of its turnover and the number of employees.

Presentation of main strategies identified

In light of answers given by the manager during the interviews, we classified strategies identified into 4 categories :

Strategy linked to the activity : diversification

Here is the manager's declaration "given the unstable political environment and the hyper-competitive economic environment we thought not to do in a field of activity that is why we are also in livestock breeding, transport, real estate, hotels and our activities extend to other cities in the region such as Beni, Mambasa"

The company's activities include the sale of construction hardware materials, livestock breeding, transportation, hotel services, and real estate. From these qualitative data, it is seen that the company is expanding its portfolio of activities, by the fact that it is not only in hardware but also in livestock, real estate and transport.

While the company's main market is Butembo, it has expanded to Beni and Mambasa. From that it is seen that the company is diversifying geographically because its activities are spread across several areas of the country. This reduces the risk of bankruptcy if business does not work in one region, it works in another. In addition, this diversification makes it possible to improve its portfolio of activities.

Management-related strategy : long-term planning

“The plan and process of expanding our market in major cities of the country and even abroad pushes us to do our best to be up to the task”

The company plans to expand its hardware sector to other major cities in the country such as Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, etc. Even in foreign countries for an internationalization process. This gives direction to the organization, drives it towards the goal in future proactively, able to allocate resources strategically also forms strategic alliances. Long-term planning is a key to sustainability but it is often not easy to carry out in an unstable context. Long-term plans should be flexible in view of the changing market conditions. The firm will need good market research as well as financial planning to support such a bold expansion

Product and market strategy: Differentiation

“To attract customers we are trying our best to sell the best quality products”
In the construction hardware materials sales market, try our best to sell high quality products. With TECNO TANK, it is renowned as an importer of good quality plastics and hardware, which allows customers to always buy its products and this gives it a leading position in the market. High-quality products can help TSANG Company to build customers loyalty, create strong brand reputation and gain competitive advantage. Financing method “Generally our source of financing is our own funds, however we also have access to credit from banks”

The company is financed by its own funds from its various sales and by credit granted by the banks. Its access to bank credit demonstrates financial credibility and the ability to invest in profitable projects that ensure timely repayment. Access to financing is a major element. Being financed by its own found reduces dependence on external financing, but access to credit also allows for larger investments and faster expansion. However, relying exclusively on internal funds can slow the pace of growth. The need for strategic use of credit for rigorous management to avoid over-indebtedness is an asset.

Analysis of the factors influencing the success of these strategies

We identified these factors into two main factors which are: internal and external factors.

Internal factors

With regard to internal factors of the business we have identified 6 which are: profile of the manager. Who has the ability to adapt to change, his spirit of

listening. To the evolution of the environment to anticipate change and readjust strategies. Listening skills, the ability to adapt, and the ability to anticipate change are important qualities for a leader and contribute significantly to effective strategy implementation in a dynamic environment.

Regular staff training. For greater performance, staff training seminars are organized within the enterprise. Training employees is an investment for the company and helps improve the skills needed to enable the company to undertake new projects and maintain quality.

Committed and motivated employees. Employees are powerful enterprise ambassadors for they are motivated and committed. And they contribute to the effectiveness of achieving strategic objectives. Open collaboration between all levels of the company. For problem solving at all and prompt communication to foster a positive attitude that helps meet challenges and implement strategies effectively. Acquisition of new equipment to increase the productive capacity. The company has acquired the ACTROS type transport vehicle, which allows the company to transport its imported goods for itself instead of renting one. This vehicle is beneficial for the company because it constitutes a source of financing when other companies rent it for the transport of their goods. Investing in the acquisition of assets such as the ACTROS transport vehicle not only improves operational efficiency (internal transport) but also creates new revenue streams (leasing to other companies), thereby directly promoting diversification and financial stability.

External factors

With regard to external factors of the business we have identified : innovation, relation with stakeholders (customers and suppliers) and access to financing.

As the company operates in an unstable and hyper-competitive environment, it focuses on internal strengths to face challenges and seize opportunities and finally ensure its sustainability. Thus new markets, new activities and new products play an important role in the success of strategies.

DISCUSSION

There are numerous and varied researches on the sustainability of SMEs. In light of this existing literature, we guided the questions during our interview with the company's manager in order to identify the main strategies implemented for its sustainability. And the study identified 4 main strategies which are diversification, differentiation, long-term planning and choice of financing method. In addition, the study identified internal and external factors such as manager competence, employee motivation and

communication between all stakeholders in the company that influence the success of these strategies.

The diversification strategy is supported by (Claude et al., 2023) et (Firman et al., 2022) as a strategy that companies implement to ensure their sustainability. It has been shown that diversification in both commercial activities and geographical location is a key strategy for TSANG Company as a response to the instable and hypercompetitive environment. It makes sense in an unstable economic and political environment such as that of the DRC. It can be an approach to SMEs whereby they would not have to put emphasis on a single product or market. According to It reduces risks by giving different market access, enhances the general portfolio, and creates synergies among variegated business units. The flip side is that running a diversified business can be very complicated and requires a different kind of expertise as well as resources which must be allocated properly.

To face the competition, the company is doing its best to offer the best quality products. This refers to the differentiation strategies supported by, maintaining quality, however, would be the biggest challenge for the company since its supplies can be easily disrupted. The desire to expand necessitates large resources and entails a need for stability that often cannot be met. Although the company currently uses its own funds, continued access to credit will be crucial to support its ambitious expansion plans and address potential economic challenges, since (Bianca, et al. , 2025) affirmed that equity can restrain growth, and though access to bank credit is good, it is not easy to come by and not affordable for most SMEs in the DRC.

A combination of internal and external factors can significantly impact the company's survival, either positively or negatively. In a hypercompetitive market, the ability to introduce new products, services, or processes is essential to maintaining a competitive advantage and ensuring the success of diversification efforts (Uwah et al., 2022). Strong relationships with customers (loyalty through quality) and suppliers (guaranteeing reliable resources) are essential to the smooth operation and success of product and market strategies (Obafemi, et al. , 2023).

Nesrine & Abdelaziz (2023) in their empirical study, made the statical analysis and the results denounce eight factors which are : the profil of the manager, enterprise strategy, innovation, entrepreneunial support, the field of activity, enterprise environment, strategic implementation and customer/supplier role. The study concluded that profil characteristic of the manager is the most significant determinant. This meet our founding

according to which the manager profile characteristic is among internal factors that influence the success of sustainability strategies.

Carel & Jean Roger (2022) point out manager priority to the objective of maintaining their good image within the geographic area where they operate and meet all stakeholder needs as the main definition of sustainability. This meets our findings according to which the relation with stakeholder influences success strategies of sustainability. According to Ida & Doddy (2022), better business strategies improve the competitive advantage of SMEs and the evidence of the importance of innovation to improve the competitive advantage. Managerial competence and employee motivation are internal factors that cut across universality. In the DRC, security needs and managing limitations in infrastructure can also pose additional challenges. External factors, especially stakeholder relationships, are critical. In the DRC, these relationships can be adversely affected by political instability, corruption, or logistical difficulties. It can be concluded that though the strategies identified in the study are relevant, their successful implementation would hinge greatly on the ability of SMEs to address the specific challenges of their environment. This research focuses on a Congolese SME from Butembo operating in a competitive and unstable environment. The findings provide valuable insights for startups and other businesses in the region.

CONCLUSION

Strategic management is essential to sustainability of SMEs, regardless of their location, in an unstable economic and political context. The resilience of TSANG in Butembo, DRC, is a testament to this. The company's success relies on a combination of diversification, differentiation, long-term planning, and rigorous financial practices, enabling it to meet the challenges inherent in its environment.

This strategy helps you get by right away and also encourages long-term growth and staying competitive. The success of these strategies, however, takes place due to the relation that strengths and opportunities have. Internal strengths such as managerial skills, employee motivation, and operational capabilities are required for the adaptation and innovation of the company. Just as much, external factors such as stakeholder relationships, resource availability, and ability to show dynamism towards environmental changes also determine what constitutes an opportunity or threat for the company. In challenging environments like TSANG's, as this case study demonstrates, comprehensive strategy, proactive internal management and adaptive responses to external forces are critical for SME sustainability. This case

study provides other SMEs aspiring to achieve sustainability in similar contexts with valuable lessons.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- SME Owners and Managers should create and implement integrated sustainability plans to enhance internal capabilities, establish external relationships, and promote innovation and adaptability.
- Policymakers and Support Organizations should Support a good business climate, offer SMEs focused tools and support, and encourage networking and cooperation among them to thus increase information exchange, entrance to fresh markets, and group solutions to shared problems development.
- Future researcher should:
 - Include large-scale quantitative to give more generalized findings on SME sustainability strategies and contributing factors,
 - Focus on the problems and sustainability strategies of SMEs in various industries in the DRC to provide targeted solutions.
 - Focus on how technology adoption and digital transformation can improve the sustainability and competitiveness of SMEs in DRC

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

Beyond its academic contribution, this study offers a direction for ensuring the resilience and growth of SMEs, which are considered key economic drivers. It sheds important light on the strategies and factors that determine the sustainability of SMEs in a challenging context such as Butembo, DRC. It emphasizes the crucial internal and external factors that enable SMEs to overcome market obstacles and achieve long-term success. By following the proposed strategies and focusing on continuous development, SMEs can increase their competitiveness, create jobs, and support economic growth in the DRC.

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