



THE IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT, MARKETING STRATEGIES AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION ON SMES SUSTAINABLE GROWTH IN SUDAN: A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Small and Medium-scale Enterprises (SMEs) are generally regarded as the backbone of any economy and they contribute to the growth and development of a country. Despite the astronomical increase in the establishment of SMEs in many countries, evidences have shown that the failure of SMEs is becoming very high. The objective of this study, therefore, is to examine the impact of government support, marketing strategy, and customer satisfaction on the SMEs sustainable growth in Sudan. The study is conceptual and, reviews the previous literature on the relationships the independent variables (government support, marketing strategy, and customer satisfaction) and the dependent variable (SMEs sustainable growth). The outcome of the review reveals that government support, marketing strategy, and customer satisfaction have a strong relationship with SMEs sustainable growth. The study formulates three hypotheses regarding the relationships between the variables and calls for their empirical examination. The study, recommends that government should provide necessary support to SMEs to achieve a sustainable growth. It also recommends that SME owners should deploy necessary marketing strategies and ensure customers' satisfaction. The study has implications on the government and SMEs owners as it can be used in policy formulation and decision making.

Keywords: SMEs sustainable growth, Government support, Marketing strategy, Customer satisfaction, Sudan



INTRODUCTION

In every country, government alone cannot drive the economy, thus, the participation and involvement of other business stakeholders can go a long way in promoting a sustainable economic growth and development. Small and Medium-scale Enterprises (SMEs) have been recognized as one of the relevant stakeholders in the promotion of the economy of a country (De Sousa Jabbour, Ndubisi & Seles, 2020; Ayandibu & Houghton, 2017; Ismail et al., 2018; Ismail, Abdul-Majid, & Joarder, 2017). Thus, the sustainable growth of SMEs is a strong mechanism for the actualization of economic growth and development.

SMEs are crucial in the provision and creation of employment opportunities and distribution of income (Sousa Jabbour, Ndubisi & Seles, 2020; Ismail et al., 2018; Ismail, Abdul-Majid, & Joarder, 2017) and they are catalysts for economic growth (Razumovskaia et al., 2020; Diabate, Sibiri, Wang & Yu, 2019). The contribution of SMEs in the development of global economy has been significant, both in terms of contribution to GDP and creation of employment opportunities (Koe, Omar & Sa'ari, 2015; Pandya, 2012). According to Singh, Garg and Deshmukh (2010), SMEs contribute about 80 percent of the global economic growth, thus, they are backbone of economic growth in many countries. The sector is a key contributor to new product developments and technical innovation, in terms of employment, and economic development (Diabate, Sibiri, Wang & Yu, 2019; Ayandibu & Houghton, 2017; Yoon, Shin & Lee, 2016). According to Monday, Agorzie, Bello and James-Unam (2015), a dynamic SME sector is generally recognized as the key driver of sustainable economic growth and development. SMEs perform a significant role in the development of several countries as they constitute a major part of the industrial activity both in developed or developing economies (Pandya, 2012). As argued by Arabi and Abdalla (2020) and Edoho (2015), entrepreneurship and economic growth are directly proportional, thus, a country with high level of entrepreneurship will similarly have a high level of economic growth.

SME has different definitions that vary from one country to the other (Chege & Wang, 2020). Generally, the definitions are based upon either headcount or sales or assets (Klewitz & Hansen, 2014). As general guidelines, the World Bank defines SMEs as those enterprises with a maximum of 300 employees, \$15 million in annual revenue, and \$15 million in assets (Pandya, 2012). The European Union, in a similar manner, defines an SME as an enterprise that has minimum revenue of e50 M and maximum of 250 employees (Moeuf et al., 2020). In the context of Sudan, SME refers to any enterprise with a maximum number of 249 employees and the minimum total cost of five million Sudanese pound (SDG) and maximum total cost of five hundred million SDG excluding including working capital but cost of land (Abdelrahman, Abdullah & Abas, 2017).

It is generally believed that SMEs contribute to the development of countries (Thorgren & Williams, 2020; Moeuf et al., 2018; Esther, David & Scholastica, 2018; Singh, Garg & Deshmukh, 2010); however, the impact of SMEs has not been seriously felt in Sudan and their growth is very low (Eltahir, 2018). According to Arabi and Abdalla (2020), the Sudanese entrepreneurship is generally confronted with many problems militating against its progress and development. The report of Doing Business issued by the World Bank Group (2020) also indicates that Sudan is ranked 171 out of 190 in the aspect of ease of doing business. Similarly, the report of Global Entrepreneur Monitor (2018) reveals that the Sudanese government is confronted with the problems of unemployment and serious economic slowdown. In order to solve these problems, the government thought of entrepreneurship as a crucial economic development accelerator that can bring about job creation, value creation, resources utilization, improved production, and wealth accumulation. Unfortunately, entrepreneurship in Sudan has a lot limiting factors (Khattab & Al-Magli, 2017). This line of thought, notwithstanding, the entrepreneurship is confronted with many problems and adverse business environments (Yoo, Choo & Lee, 2018), thus, the need to specifically look at SMEs as a means of improving the economy.

Different studies (Wong et al., 2020; Müller & Voigt, 2018; Paul, Parthasarathy & Gupta, 2017; Kraus, Rigtering, Hughes & Hosman, 2012; Rhee, Park & Lee, 2010; Okpara, 2011) have been conducted on the issue of SMEs in different countries and contexts, however, there appears to be dearth of studies on this subject matter in the context of Sudan. Arising from this, the objective of this is to examine the factors influencing the sustainable growth of SMEs in Sudan. The study is conceptual and it examines three factors comprising government support, marketing strategy, and customer satisfaction as the determinants of SMEs sustainable growth in Sudan. Specifically, this study assesses the relationships between government support, marketing strategy and customer satisfaction and the SMEs sustainable growth in the context of Sudan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SMEs Sustainable Growth

SME Sustainable business practice around the world is an aspiration for higher and increasing proportion of SMEs that promise high level of profitability, resilience and positive impacts (Caldera, Desha & Dawes, 2019). SMEs are considered as the growth engine behind most successful economies in the world (Gherghina, Botezatu, Hosszu & Simionescu, 2020; Karadağ, 2016). The term 'sustainable growth' refers to a growth that is repeatable, ethical and responsible to, and for, current and future societies (Miller, 2018). According to Diabate, Sibiri,

Wang and Yu (2019), sustainable growth ordinarily refers to sustained success, which is the capacity of an organization to accomplish its growth objective within a given period and in a specific context. Economists recommend that an organization is regarded as being capable of sustained growth if such an organization grows at the average growth rate of the country's economy (Diabate et al., 2019). Other scholars look at sustainable growth from long term perspective and consider it as affordable growth or achieving long term growth with low downside (Stefanikova, Rypakova, & Moravcikova, 2015).

The survival of an organization is a function of its business performance, which is vital for economic growth (Yoo, Choo & Lee, 2018). Likewise, management support and decisions do influence all the aspects of organization (Ismail, Abdul Majid, Jibrin-Bida, & Joarder, 2019). However, the sustainable growth of an organization is not a function of a single factor but rather a combination of organizational strategy, processes, and structures that key together. In the context of SMEs, sustainable growth is achieved when the enterprises attain growth without endangering current business (Uddenberg Rönnbäck & Almesåker, 2011). For a business to be seen as having growth element, it has to possess some quantitative and qualitative qualities. As argued by Diabate et al. (2019), growth is a process of positive transformations and in-depth development that is generally evaluated via organizational profit and quality improvement. Thus, Terziovski and Samson (2000) consider business growth as the combination of improvement in the organizational profitability and improvement in quality and ability.

Despite the importance of SMEs, their vast establishment, and government support here and there, evidences have shown that SMEs sector is experiencing high rate of failure (Yusoff et al., 2018; Peter et al., 2018; Rahman, Yaacob & Radzi, 2016; Yildirim, Akci & Eksi, 2013) particularly in developing countries. Globally, about 50% of SMEs failed within the first five years of their establishments, while about 67% failed within the first ten years of establishments (Yusoff et al., 2018).

Previous studies have identified some of the factors affecting the growth of SMEs. Okpara (2011) investigates the factors limiting the survival and growth of SMEs in Nigeria and classifies the problems militating against the growth of SMEs in Africa to four broad categories comprising administrative, strategic, operating, and exogenous problems. The finding of his empirical study reveals that inadequate financial support, insufficient profits, poor management, and low demand for goods and services are some of the most factors constraining the growth and development of SMEs in Nigeria. In a related study conducted in Malaysia, Rahman, Yaacob and Radzi (2016) examine the challenges of SMEs in Malaysia. The study found that management skills, access to credit, and marketing are major problems confronting SMEs in the

country. This finding aligns with the conclusion of Muhammad et al (2015) that inadequate financial, marketing, production, operation, and human resources management are all instrumental to the failure and deterred growth of SMEs. The recent study of Arabi and Abdalla (2020) also found government policy, finance, and human capital as essential for the success of SMEs.

Government Support and SMEs Sustainable Growth

The impact of government support on the growth and development of business organizations, especially SMEs, cannot be underestimated (Marri et al., 2011). For SMEs to succeed, government support in terms of funds, policies, and legislation is indispensable (Yusoff et al., 2018; Okpara, 2011; Singh, Garg & Deshmukh, 2010). The creation of a conducive business environment and provision of finance opportunities by the government to SMEs tend to improve the growth and development of SMEs. Government supports refer to programmes developed by the government to enhance and stimulate the success of business activities of SMEs (Peter et al., 2018). Government support programmes and initiatives by the governments of different countries are responsible for different degree of success in different countries around globally. According to Peter et al. (2018), government development programmes in terms of support are the major mechanism needed to stimulate SMEs growth aggressively. The main intention of government for the support of SMEs is to ultimately establish competitive, viable, and innovative SMEs (Doh & Kim, 2014).

Altayyar and Beaumont-Kerridgea (2016) posit that government support in form of infrastructure improvement, good laws and regulations, protection of intellectual property, financial support, and education programme on business survival can go a long way in enhancing the sustainable growth of SMEs in many countries. According to Marri et al. (2011), the government can help SMEs in their internal systems such as logistics, which invariably assists the growth of the enterprises.

Business organizations can get a variety of support from their government such as tax allowances, financial capital, loans, grants, social support, productivity assistance and information technology (Songling, Ishtiaq, Anwar & Ahmed, 2018). As argued by Anwar and Li (2020), building a strong relationship with external groups such as government, financial intuitions, and other business contemporaries can acquire valuable resources that are essential for the effective performance of business organizations. Also, having a robust relationship with the government can offer a variety of benefits such as financial and succour, tax allowances, granting of loans and advances, and other similar quantitative and qualitative assistance. Many entrepreneurial ventures in contemporary industrial growth often concentrate on government

support, subsidiaries, and tariffs (Anwar & Li, 2020). They argue further that the financial incentive provided by the government enhances SMEs business expansion and smooth running of their operational activities which can have a positive impact on their performance and consequently promotes sustainable economic growth. Therefore, an enterprise that has the strong support of a government can perform better than other enterprises that lack access to government support and resources. Caldera, Desha and Dawes (2019) posit that provision of financial support for SMEs in form of incentives, low-interest loans, and seed-funds can enhance their capacity building.

To yield the intended objective of enhancing economic growth through SMEs, the governments should not be dictatorial but rather facilitative (Doh & Kim, 2014). The aim of government support for SMEs is to ensure the establishment of SMEs that are viable, innovative, and competitive. Thus, a variety of support services for SME innovation are provided by governments (Doh & Kim, 2014). These include provisions for targeted and quality business support services; immediate, managerial, and technical training programs; legal framework reinforcement; provisions for financial incentives and assistance; reducing the burden and administrative costs of SMEs; and building network cross sectors and cross borders. In terms of support service, SMEs need to know where and how to access basic information regarding their growth, thus providing easily accessible information with regard to growth and development. Also, public institutions can play a crucial role in influencing attitudes of SMEs by providing information and incentives to create a culture which can positively contribute to building and sustaining an entrepreneurial environment (Doh & Kim, 2014).

Empirical findings from the previous studies have indicated that there is a relationship between government support and SMEs sustainable growth. For example, the study of Anwar and Li (2020) examines the impact of government support in the SME financial and environmental performance. With the aid of the survey method, the study obtained data from the owners/managers of SMEs in Pakistan. The finding of the study reveals that government supports in terms of financial and non-financial incentives have a positive significant influence on the performance of SMEs in Pakistan. In a similar study by Chen, Zhu and Zhang (2017), government support is found as one of the factors affecting disruptive innovation Chinese SMEs. These findings are consistent with the earlier finding of Idris and Saad (2019) which also shows a significant influence of government support on SMEs Internationalisation. It also aligns with the findings of Gupta and Mirchandani (2018); Songling, Ishtiaq, Anwar and Ahmed (2018); and Eltahir (2018) which also indicate that government support has a significant influence on the success of women-owned SMEs in United Arab Emirate (UAE) and firm performance in Pakistan respectively. Other empirical studies such as Alkahtani, Nordin and Khan (2020),

Razumovskaia et al. (2020), Doh and Kim (2014) have also established the existence of a relationship between government support and SMEs sustainable growth.

Arising from the fore discussion, this study makes the following proposition:

H₁: There is a relationship between government support and SMEs sustainable growth in Sudan.

Marketing Strategies and SMEs Sustainable Growth

Every organization has its objectives because organizational entities, particularly the SMEs, are operating in a highly competitive environment (Cheng & Liu, 2017). However, these objectives cannot be meaningfully achieved without an organization deploying necessary strategies to achieve the objectives. Strategy refers to the mechanism deployed by an organization to reach its objective that is driven by its vision and mission statement (Randazzo, 2014), and it is key for obtaining competitive advantages in the contemporary business environment (García-Villaverde, Parra-Requena & Ruiz-Ortega, 2017). Marketing strategy is, therefore, a broad principle and marketing logic by which an organization achieves its marketing objectives (Sathana, Velnampy & Rajumesh, 2018). It influences the activities of an organization and its response to market forces, such as competition and the economy (López-Jáuregui, Martos-Partal & Labeaga, 2019). In order to formulate effective marketing strategies, organizations need to have a clear understanding of the relationships between three things comprising the variables that describe the organizational environment (external), the variables under the control of the management (internal), and the performance variables (Bang, Joshi & Singh, 2016).

Scholars (Gao & Hafsi, 2019; Sathana, Velnampy & Rajumesh, 2018; Costanigro, Deselnicu & McFadden, 2016; van Scheers & Makhitha, 2016) have suggested many marketing strategies (such as product leadership, customer intimacy/relationship, cost leadership, retail strategy, differentiation strategy) depending on the organizational size and posit that marketing strategies have an impact on the performance and sustainable growth of an organization. From the perspective of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), Jin (2018) claims that SMEs have common problems in the formulation and implementation of marketing strategy. According to Astuti, Afiff and Balqiah (2017), marketing strategy for SMEs has specific styles, informal, short-term oriented and developed based commonsense marketing approach. Thus, they argue that the higher the marketing strategy of the SMEs, the higher their performance. In other words, the highest performing SMEs are the ones that deploy aggressive marketing strategies, while the lowest-performing ones make use of minimal marketing strategies (Astuti, Afiff & Balqiah, 2017).

Rant and Cerne (2017) discuss two marketing strategies (product leadership and customer intimacy) that can be adopted by organizations in the competitive environment in order to achieve sustainable growth and become a hidden champion. They argue that the combination of product leadership and customer intimacy strategies can go a long way in achieving sustainable growth. According to them, product leadership is an effective strategic response in complex and unstable business environments because in such environments, experimentations learning from failure and local search are the most effective mechanism to strategy, competitive advantage and market development. On the other hand, customer intimacy is focused on customers, thus, it is outwardly-oriented. SMEs are generally regarded as flexible enterprises that can quickly respond to customers' needs and to the changing environment (Li, Liu, Tang & Belitski, 2017). The main pillar of customer intimacy is close, trustful, and durable relationships with customers. It is normally established and sustained through concentration on specific problems of customers, and the search for the best solutions within the jurisdiction of an organization for the identified problems. Rant and Cerne (2017) emphasize that customer intimacy strategy is essential because it improves the rate of customer retention; optimizes the revenues from existing customers and reduces the costs of acquiring customers; improves profitability, customer and employees' satisfaction and loyalty; enhances cash flows and lowers the vulnerability and volatility of cash flows.

From another dimension, Masroor and Asim (2019) posit that SMEs can realize sustainable growth and performance through cost leadership strategy. According to them, cost leadership is one of the most common global marketing strategies in a competitive environment. The strategy assists an organization to get the market share if it is a first entrant in the market. Some extant empirical studies have established that there is a relationship between marketing strategy and SMEs sustainable growth and performance. For example, Osano (2019) examined the impact of market strategy on the global expansion of Kenyan SMEs. The study obtained data from 205 managers of SMEs in Kenya and employed descriptive and inferential research design in establishing the relationship between market strategy and SMEs growth. The finding of the study revealed that there is a functional relationship between market strategy and global expansion of SMEs in Kenya.

Furthermore, Finoti, Didonet, Toaldo and Martins (2017) investigated the effect of the marketing strategy process on the innovativeness-performance of SMEs in Brazil. The study made use survey method and questionnaire technique in obtaining data from 105 marketing managers of SMEs in the software sector. The finding of the study showed that the formulation and implementation of marketing strategies have a relationship with SMEs performance and

growth. The study also revealed that the formulation of marketing strategies mediates the relationship between innovativeness and organizational performance.

Other empirical studies have established the existence of a relationship between marketing strategy or its components and the sustainable growth of an organization. Gao and Hafsi (2019) showed that differentiation strategy has a positive significant relationship with charitable giving in China SMEs. Similarly, Zahay and Griffin (2010) found that there is a relationship between marketing strategy and the performance of an organization. Based on these previous findings, this study, therefore, hypothesizes that:

H₂: There is a relationship between marketing strategies and SMEs sustainable growth in Sudan

Customer Satisfaction and SME Sustainable Growth

Customer patronage determines the level of revenue of an organization. On the other hand, the level of the customers' patronage depends on their extent of satisfaction with such products and services. Customers are the utmost value of an organization (Berislav, Hrvoje & Vjekoslav, 2013) and their satisfaction is essential for the achievement of an appreciable profit and performance, thus, the essence of customer has been by scholars globally (Mohsan et al., 2011).

The concept of satisfaction is described as the overall customer behavior or attitude towards particular producers or service providers, or the customers' emotional reaction towards the difference between what they expect and what they receive in relation to the attainment of some needs, objectives or desires (Mohsan et al., 2011). According to Suchánek and Králová (2018), customer satisfaction is a subjective construct that arises from perceptions, feelings, and a comparison of what customers expect to get and what they get. In the psychological view of Deng, Lu, Wei and Zhang (2010), customer satisfaction is the psychological state occurring when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations agree with the prior feelings of consumers about the consumption experience. Also, Hanif, Hafeez and Riaz (2010) opined that customer satisfaction is evaluation of the perceived difference between the prior expectations of a product and the actual product's performance. Arising from all these definitions and descriptions, it can be deduced that satisfaction arises from the customers when their predetermined assumptions regarding the utility to be derived from a product or services are consistent with the actual utility of such product or services.

In an economically challenging business environment where it becomes difficult for organizations to survive, customer satisfaction is an essential factor in determining the competitiveness of an organization and a dependable indicator of the organizational future profit (Kafetzopoulos & Psomas, 2016). According to Suriyankietkaew (2016), customer satisfaction is

one of the most important non-financial indicators of overall business success and sustainability. If customers are satisfied, their loyalty and the subsequent patronage for the product increase (Suchánek & Králová, 2018). Thus, customer satisfaction leads to customer retention and orientation, which invariably leads to organizational profitability (Baporikar, Nambira & Gomxos, 2016).

Empirical studies regarding the relationship between customer satisfaction and SMEs sustainable growth are very rare. However, the consensus in many studies is that there is a relationship between customer satisfaction and the performance of an organization. A great number of literature (Belás & Gabčová, 2016; Williams & Naumann, 2011; Chi & Gursoy, 2009) have indicated the existence of nexus between customer satisfaction and business performance. For instance, Williams and Naumann (2011) empirically investigate the relationship between customer satisfaction and business performance. The finding from the study shows that customer satisfaction breeds customer retention which invariably leads to revenue and profit. In other words, customer satisfaction has a positive significant relationship with business performance. This finding is consistent with the earlier finding of Morgan and Rego (2006) which also reveals a nexus between the two variables. A recent study by Otto, Szymanski and Varadarajan (2020) similarly indicate a positive significant relationship between customer satisfaction and the performance of firms. Arising from these earlier findings, it is hypothesized that:

H₃: There is a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and SMEs sustainable growth in Sudan.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the objectives of every government is to ensure economic growth, development and stability. SMEs assist the government in the achievement of economic growth through the provision of job and general enhancement of GDP. This objective is attainable when SMEs experience desirable and sustainable growth. However, the sustainable growth of SMEs is influenced by government support, marketing strategies, and customer satisfaction.

Government support in all ramifications can make or mar the sustainable growth of SMEs. Literature has indicated that adequate and positive intervention of government on SMEs tends to enhance the growth of SMEs. In other words, formulation of good business policies, provision of access to finance, provision of a conducive environment, among other, can promote the growth of SMEs which will invariably influence the ability of the enterprises to increase the economic development of a country. Furthermore, the extent to which SMEs will grow depends on the level of their products' acceptability by customers. In other words, a marketing strategy is

a catalyst for SMEs growth. Therefore, the deployment of the necessary strategy to influence the customers is essential for the achievement of desired growth. Lastly, customer satisfaction can bring about the loyalty of customers and their ultimate retention. Providing goods and services that meet the need and aspiration of customers can go a long way in improving the revenue and profitability of the enterprises.

In the context of Sudan, it is recommended that the government should lay more emphasis on SMEs growth in its policies, regulation, and intervention, and similarly provide an enabling business environment for SMEs. It is also recommended that SMEs owners should deploy not only relevant strategies for their business growth but also ensure customer satisfaction through quality products and service delivery. Lastly, this study calls for an empirical examination of the three hypotheses formulated in the context of Sudan.

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