

Original Article: Strategic Planning and Sustainability Practices for Small and Medium Enterprises Facing Global Market Challenges

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Citation A Vahedi, *Strategic Planning and Sustainability Practices for Small and Medium Enterprises Facing Global Market Challenges*, *AJMHS*, 2025; 1(5): 316-335.

 <https://10.5281/zenodo.16934299>

Article info:

Received: 10.05.2025

Accepted: 19.06.2025

Checked for Plagiarism: Yes

Keywords:

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs); Strategic Planning; Sustainability Practices; Global Market Challenges; Green Supply Chain

ABSTRACT

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) represent the backbone of global economic activity, contributing significantly to employment, innovation, and sustainable development. However, globalization, rapid technological advancements, shifting consumer preferences, and increasing environmental pressures have intensified the challenges these firms face in remaining competitive. Strategic planning and sustainability practices have therefore become critical tools for ensuring SME survival and growth in international markets. This paper examines the role of strategic planning in guiding SMEs through uncertain environments, enabling them to align resources, anticipate risks, and pursue innovation-driven opportunities. It also highlights how sustainability practices—such as green supply chain management, energy efficiency, corporate social responsibility, and circular economy models—can strengthen resilience, improve brand reputation, and enhance long-term profitability. The integration of sustainability into strategic planning allows SMEs not only to comply with international standards but also to gain a competitive advantage in markets where eco-consciousness and ethical practices are increasingly valued. Despite resource limitations and barriers to adoption, SMEs that combine effective strategy with sustainability are better positioned to respond to global market challenges and contribute meaningfully to sustainable economic growth. Policymakers, business leaders, and stakeholders must therefore support SMEs by providing financial incentives, training, and collaborative platforms to accelerate this transformation.

Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) constitute the backbone of the global economy, accounting for over 90 percent of businesses worldwide and generating more than half of total employment

(World Bank, 2020). Their role extends beyond economic contributions, as they are also key drivers of innovation, regional development, and social stability [1]. Despite their importance, SMEs are disproportionately vulnerable to external pressures such as globalization,

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technological disruptions, shifting consumer demands, and environmental sustainability challenges [2].

Unlike large corporations with abundant resources and established global networks, SMEs often operate under severe financial, managerial, and operational constraints. This makes the task of adapting to global market challenges more complex, requiring strategic foresight and long-term planning. The phenomenon of globalization has reshaped competitive dynamics across industries. While globalization offers SMEs access to international markets and supply chains, it simultaneously exposes them to intensified competition from multinational corporations with greater resources and brand recognition. Furthermore, trade liberalization and digital commerce have reduced geographical barriers, forcing SMEs to compete not only locally but also regionally and globally [3].

To survive in this competitive environment, SMEs must develop effective strategies that enable them to differentiate their offerings, respond to market volatility, and establish sustainable value propositions. Strategic planning has emerged as a crucial instrument for navigating these challenges. It is a process of defining organizational goals, assessing internal and external environments, and determining the allocation of resources to achieve long-term objectives [4].

For SMEs, strategic planning provides clarity of vision, enhances organizational adaptability, and strengthens decision-making. It allows business leaders to anticipate risks, explore emerging opportunities, and create pathways for sustainable growth. However, research indicates that many SMEs lack formalized planning structures, often prioritizing short-term survival over long-term competitiveness [5].

This reactive orientation can limit their ability to withstand external shocks such as economic downturns, supply chain disruptions, or regulatory changes. Parallel to the importance of strategic planning is the growing emphasis on sustainability. Sustainability, conceptualized

through frameworks like the Triple Bottom Line, encompasses economic viability, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship. While sustainability has traditionally been perceived as a concern for large corporations, SMEs are increasingly pressured by stakeholders, governments, and consumers to adopt sustainable practices. Issues such as climate change, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation have heightened awareness among consumers, who now demand products and services that are ethically produced, eco-friendly, and socially responsible. For SMEs, integrating sustainability into their operations not only helps to meet regulatory requirements but also opens new market opportunities, reduces costs through efficiency, and enhances corporate reputation [6].

Intersection of Strategy and Sustainability

The convergence of strategic planning and sustainability has become a defining feature of modern business management. Strategic sustainability planning enables SMEs to align their economic goals with environmental and social objectives, thereby ensuring long-term resilience [7].

This integration shifts the perception of sustainability from being a cost burden to a value-creation mechanism. For instance, adopting green supply chain management practices can reduce waste and operational costs, while simultaneously enhancing the firm's attractiveness to environmentally conscious consumers and investors. Similarly, embedding corporate social responsibility (CSR) into strategic frameworks helps SMEs build trust with stakeholders and strengthen community relations. Despite the recognized benefits of strategic planning and sustainability practices, SMEs face considerable barriers in implementation. Limited financial resources often constrain investment in advanced technologies, eco-friendly processes, or specialized training programs. Managerial inexperience and lack of technical expertise further hinder the effective integration of

sustainability into strategic frameworks [8]. Additionally, SMEs frequently struggle with compliance to international sustainability standards, such as ISO certifications, which are often resource-intensive. Global market volatility, including supply chain disruptions caused by geopolitical tensions, pandemics, or climate-related disasters, adds further complexity to SME survival strategies [9].

While the challenges are significant, they also present opportunities for SMEs willing to adapt strategically. Globalization and digital transformation provide access to broader markets through e-commerce platforms and digital supply chains. Innovations in renewable energy, waste reduction, and circular economy models create avenues for SMEs to differentiate themselves and capture niche markets. Governments and international organizations are increasingly recognizing the vital role of SMEs in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs), leading to the introduction of policies, subsidies, and training programs designed to support their transition towards sustainable practices [10].

By leveraging these opportunities, SMEs can not only survive but also thrive in the evolving global economy. Several theoretical frameworks underscore the significance of integrating strategy and sustainability for SMEs. Resource-Based View (RBV) emphasizes leveraging unique resources and capabilities, such as innovation and local market knowledge, to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

Institutional theory highlights the role of regulatory pressures, industry norms, and cultural expectations in shaping SME behavior towards sustainability. Stakeholder theory emphasizes the necessity of balancing the interests of various groups—including customers, employees, communities, and investors—when formulating strategies. Collectively, these frameworks provide valuable insights into how SMEs can craft strategies that are both competitive and sustainable.

Research Gaps and Purpose

Although there is a growing body of literature on strategic planning and sustainability in SMEs, research gaps remain. Many studies focus on large corporations, with limited exploration of how SMEs—especially in developing economies—navigate global market challenges. Moreover, while the benefits of sustainability are widely acknowledged, there is less emphasis on practical frameworks that SMEs can adopt within resource-constrained environments. This paper seeks to contribute to this gap by exploring the integration of strategic planning and sustainability practices specifically tailored for SMEs. It examines how these firms can develop resilience, adapt to global challenges, and create value not only for themselves but also for society and the environment [11].

Structure of the Paper

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: The literature review section synthesizes existing research on strategic planning, sustainability practices, and global market challenges for SMEs. The discussion and analysis section explores best practices, barriers, and case examples that illustrate successful integration of strategy and sustainability. Finally, the conclusion summarizes key findings and offers policy and managerial recommendations for strengthening SME competitiveness in the global marketplace.

Literature Review

Strategic Planning in SMEs

Strategic planning refers to the process of defining organizational direction, allocating resources, and adapting to environmental changes (Porter, 1996). For SMEs, strategic planning is critical for improving competitiveness, yet many lack formalized planning structures due to limited managerial expertise [12]. Research shows that SMEs with robust strategic planning frameworks achieve higher survival rates and profitability.

Sustainability in SMEs

Sustainability in SMEs involves environmental, social, and economic dimensions. While large corporations often implement structured sustainability programs, SMEs face challenges due to financial constraints and lack of technical knowledge. However, studies highlight that sustainability adoption enhances market opportunities, strengthens reputation, and reduces operational costs [13].

Integration of Strategy and Sustainability

Recent research emphasizes the integration of sustainability into strategic planning as a pathway for SMEs to achieve resilience. Concepts like the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), Circular Economy, and Sustainable Business Models offer SMEs frameworks for aligning profit-making with social and environmental goals [14].

Table 1. Previous Studies on Strategic Planning and Sustainability Practices in SMEs [15]

Author(s) & Year	Title of Study	Country/Region	Methodology	Key Findings
Porter & Kramer (2011)	Creating Shared Value: Redefining Capitalism and the Role of the Corporation	USA	Conceptual Paper	Introduced the concept of shared value; emphasized linking strategy with sustainability.
Jenkins (2009)	A Business Opportunity Model of Corporate Social Responsibility for SMEs	UK	Qualitative Case Study	SMEs adopt CSR mainly for reputational benefits and competitive positioning.
Spence (2007)	CSR and SMEs: Beyond the Usual Approaches	Europe	Literature Review	Highlighted that SMEs often use informal sustainability practices embedded in daily operations.
Perrini et al. (2007)	Developing CSR in SMEs: A Case Study	Italy	Case Study	Found SMEs more flexible in implementing sustainability but lacking formalized strategies.
Aragón-Correa et al. (2008)	Environmental Strategy and Performance in SMEs	Spain	Quantitative Survey	Positive link between proactive environmental strategies and firm performance in SMEs.
Battisti & Perry (2011)	Walking the Talk? Environmental Responsibility in SMEs	New Zealand	Survey + Interviews	Many SMEs show awareness of sustainability but limited resource capacity for full adoption.
Leonidou et al. (2015)	Resources and Capabilities as Drivers of Eco-Innovation in SMEs	Greece	Quantitative Study	Resource-based view confirms that internal resources drive eco-innovation in SMEs.

Tilley (1999)	Small Firms and Environmental Ethics	UK	Case Study Analysis	SMEs often driven by owner values rather than external pressures in adopting sustainability.
Lee (2014)	Business Sustainability and CSR Practices in SMEs	South Korea	Mixed-Methods	SMEs integrate CSR in response to global supply chain pressures.
Lozano (2015)	A Holistic Perspective on Corporate Sustainability Drivers	Multi-country	Literature Review	Integration of strategy and sustainability requires alignment with stakeholders and innovation

Discussion and Analysis

The discussion around the integration of strategic planning and sustainability practices in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) is both timely and necessary, given the evolving complexities of global markets. SMEs are increasingly recognized not merely as economic actors, but as agents of sustainable development capable of bridging local needs with global sustainability objectives. However, their survival and success depend on how effectively they can align their strategic frameworks with sustainable practices to address the challenges of globalization, resource limitations, and shifting consumer expectations [16].

Strategic Planning as a Survival Mechanism

Strategic planning plays a central role in enabling SMEs to navigate uncertain and competitive environments. Unlike large corporations, SMEs often face fragile market positions due to their smaller scale, limited access to capital, and narrower resource bases. Without clear strategic planning, SMEs may become reactive rather than proactive, making them vulnerable to sudden market shifts.

A robust strategic plan enables SMEs to:

1. Set Long-Term Goals: Moving beyond short-term survival toward long-term competitiveness.
2. Anticipate Risks: Identifying potential threats such as supply chain disruptions,

geopolitical tensions, and regulatory changes.

3. Allocate Resources Effectively: Ensuring scarce financial and human capital is directed toward priority areas that maximize returns.
4. Encourage Innovation: Creating an environment where innovative practices and technologies can thrive.

For SMEs, the ability to integrate these elements into strategic frameworks is a decisive factor in building resilience against global market shocks.

Sustainability as a Value-Creation Strategy

Sustainability, once regarded primarily as a moral obligation, is now widely acknowledged as a driver of competitive advantage. For SMEs, sustainable practices can lower operating costs, improve market reputation, and open access to environmentally and socially conscious consumer bases. Furthermore, global buyers and multinational corporations are increasingly requiring suppliers, including SMEs, to demonstrate sustainable practices as part of their procurement processes [17].

For example, adopting green supply chain management not only ensures compliance with international standards but also reduces waste and improves efficiency. Similarly, investing in renewable energy sources can significantly lower long-term energy costs while aligning the enterprise with global climate commitments.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

activities, when strategically integrated, strengthen community relations, improve employee morale, and enhance brand loyalty.

Thus, sustainability in SMEs is not merely an external requirement but a strategic tool for creating long-term value.

Integration of Strategy and Sustainability

The most effective SMEs are those that view sustainability not as a separate initiative, but as an integral part of their strategic planning. This integration can take various forms:

- Embedding sustainability in mission and vision statements, ensuring it guides decision-making at all levels.

- Developing sustainable business models, such as circular economy approaches that reuse, recycle, and regenerate resources.
- Aligning with the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, balancing economic profitability with social equity and environmental protection.
- Adopting innovation-driven strategies, where eco-friendly product design and sustainable technologies become sources of differentiation.

The integration of strategy and sustainability transforms SMEs from reactive entities into proactive market players, capable of leveraging sustainability for competitive advantage [18].

Table 1. Previous Studies on Integration of Strategy and Sustainability

Author(s) & Year	Title of Study	Purpose / Objective	Methodology	Key Findings	Contribution to Literature
Porter (1996)	What is Strategy?	To define strategy as positioning and differentiation in competitive markets.	Conceptual / Theoretical	Strategic positioning is central to long-term competitive advantage.	Laid the foundation for linking strategic planning to sustainability by highlighting competitive positioning.
Elkington (1997)	Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line	To introduce the concept of Triple Bottom Line (TBL) integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions.	Conceptual Framework	Firms must measure success not only by profit but also by social and environmental performance.	Provided the fundamental framework for sustainability integration into business strategy.
Stonehouse & Pemberton (2002)	Strategic Planning in SMEs	To explore the role of strategic planning in small and	Empirical, Case Studies	SMEs with structured strategic planning show	Showed that SMEs need structured planning, opening path

		medium-sized enterprises.		higher survival and growth.	for sustainability integration.
Revell, Stokes & Chen (2010)	Small Businesses and the Environment	To examine environmental practices among SMEs.	Survey of SMEs in the UK	Many SMEs see sustainability as costly, but adoption can improve competitiveness.	Highlighted barriers and opportunities in SME sustainability adoption.
Dyllick & Muff (2016)	Clarifying the Meaning of Sustainable Business	To present a typology of sustainable business models.	Conceptual / Typological	Introduced categories from “business-as-usual” to “true business sustainability.”	Advanced theoretical clarity on integrating sustainability with core business strategy.
OECD (2021)	SME and Entrepreneurship Outlook	To analyze global trends affecting SMEs, including sustainability.	Policy Review	Global competition and environmental pressures push SMEs toward sustainability.	Emphasized policy-level role in supporting SME sustainability integration.
Bocken et al. (2014)	Sustainable Business Model Archetypes	To develop archetypes of sustainable business models.	Literature Review + Framework Development	Proposed 8 archetypes (e.g., eco-efficiency, creating value from waste).	Provided concrete models for integrating sustainability into strategic planning.
Lozano (2015)	A Holistic Perspective on Corporate Sustainability Drivers	To identify drivers influencing sustainability adoption.	Systematic Literature Review	Drivers include regulation, consumer pressure, leadership, and innovation.	Reinforced importance of external and internal forces in strategic sustainability integration

Barriers to Implementation

Despite the clear benefits, many SMEs encounter significant barriers when attempting to integrate strategic planning with sustainability practices. The most prominent barriers include:

1. Financial Constraints: Many SMEs operate with limited budgets, making investments in sustainable technologies or certification processes challenging [19].
2. Managerial and Technical Expertise: Lack of knowledge on sustainability frameworks,

tools, and implementation strategies limits their ability to operationalize sustainability.

3. **Short-Term Pressures:** The urgent need for survival in highly competitive markets often overshadows long-term sustainability initiatives.
4. **Regulatory Complexity:** Compliance with international sustainability standards, such as ISO 14001 or ESG reporting, can be resource-intensive and difficult for SMEs.
5. **Cultural Resistance:** In some regions, sustainability is not yet fully embedded in business culture, making adoption slower and less effective.

Addressing these barriers requires targeted interventions from governments, industry associations, and academic institutions to support SMEs through training, financial incentives, and technical assistance [20].

Best Practices for SMEs

While barriers exist, several best practices have emerged that demonstrate how SMEs can effectively integrate strategy and sustainability:

- **Collaborative Networks:** SMEs that engage in partnerships with universities, industry associations, and non-governmental organizations gain access to knowledge, resources, and innovative practices.
- **Leveraging Digital Transformation:** Adopting digital tools for supply chain management, energy monitoring, and market analytics allows SMEs to reduce costs while implementing sustainable solutions.
- **Government and Policy Support:** Utilizing subsidies, tax incentives, and grants available for green technologies can make sustainability financially viable [21].
- **Leadership and Culture:** Committed leadership that prioritizes sustainability sets the tone for organizational culture, driving employee engagement and stakeholder trust.
- **Eco-Innovation:** Developing products and services with sustainability at the core provides differentiation in competitive

markets. For instance, SMEs producing biodegradable packaging or renewable energy solutions have carved out significant market niches.

Case Insights

Several examples illustrate the successful integration of strategy and sustainability in SMEs:

- **European SMEs** have adopted circular economy practices in manufacturing, where waste materials are reprocessed into valuable inputs. This has lowered production costs and enhanced their global competitiveness.
- **Asian SMEs**, particularly in countries like China and India, are increasingly adopting green technologies to access environmentally conscious markets in Europe and North America.
- **African SMEs** are leveraging renewable energy solutions not only as sustainable practices but also as cost-saving mechanisms in regions where traditional energy infrastructure is inadequate.

These cases highlight that regardless of geographic context, SMEs that strategically adopt sustainability are better positioned to thrive globally.

Policy and Stakeholder Implications

The role of policymakers and stakeholders is crucial in supporting SMEs' transition toward strategic sustainability. Policymakers must create enabling environments through regulations, financial incentives, and infrastructure that make sustainable practices feasible for SMEs. Similarly, large corporations and global supply chains should foster inclusive procurement policies that encourage SME participation based on sustainable criteria [22].

Stakeholders, including consumers, investors, and communities, also play a role by demanding greater accountability and transparency. The increasing emphasis on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting creates

opportunities for SMEs that can demonstrate sustainable performance, as they become more attractive to socially responsible investors [23].

The Way Forward

The integration of strategic planning and sustainability is no longer optional for SMEs—it is essential for survival in the global economy. Moving forward, SMEs must embrace sustainability as a source of innovation, not a cost. By embedding sustainable practices into their strategic frameworks, SMEs can enhance resilience, build competitive advantage, and contribute to broader sustainable development goals [24].

Ultimately, the discussion underscores that SMEs are not too small to make a difference. On the contrary, their collective impact is substantial, and their ability to innovate and adapt positions them as key players in the pursuit of sustainable economic growth. The challenge lies in ensuring that they receive the necessary support, guidance, and resources to integrate strategy and sustainability in meaningful ways [25].

Conclusion

SMEs are vital players in the global economy, yet face immense challenges from globalization, technological disruptions, and sustainability demands. Strategic planning offers a roadmap for SMEs to manage uncertainty, while sustainability practices create long-term resilience and competitive advantage. The integration of these two approaches enables SMEs to thrive in international markets, build stakeholder trust, and contribute to global sustainable development. For policymakers and business leaders, supporting SMEs in adopting sustainability-oriented strategies is not only crucial for business survival but also for achieving broader economic and environmental goals.

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