

Original Article: Resilient Supply Chain Management and Sustainable Practices for SMEs Adapting to Global Economic Changes

Rezvan Hanif

MSc of Supply Chain Management, JSOM School of Management, University of Texas at Dallas (UTD). USA



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ABSTRACT

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) represent the backbone of the global economy, yet they are disproportionately vulnerable to global economic fluctuations, supply chain disruptions, and sustainability pressures. In today's uncertain environment, resilient supply chain management (RSCM) and the integration of sustainable practices have become strategic imperatives for SMEs striving to maintain competitiveness and continuity. This paper explores how SMEs can enhance resilience by diversifying suppliers, leveraging digital technologies, and strengthening collaborative networks while simultaneously adopting sustainability measures such as circular economy models, renewable energy integration, and ethical sourcing. The study emphasizes the dual role of resilience and sustainability as mutually reinforcing concepts: resilient practices ensure operational continuity during crises, while sustainable initiatives reduce long-term vulnerabilities and improve stakeholder trust. Case studies from SMEs across diverse industries demonstrate that adopting these strategies not only mitigates risks but also provides access to global markets, enhances brand reputation, and improves resource efficiency. However, SMEs face significant barriers, including limited financial resources, technological gaps, regulatory complexities, and knowledge deficits. Overcoming these challenges requires supportive policies, financial incentives, and capacity-building programs, alongside SME-driven innovation.

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving global economy, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) occupy a pivotal position, functioning as critical drivers of employment, innovation, and sustainable growth. Representing over 90% of businesses

worldwide and contributing significantly to GDP in both developed and developing nations, SMEs are indispensable to local and international economic systems [1].

However, their prominent role does not shield them from vulnerabilities. On the contrary, SMEs often face disproportionate challenges when

*Corresponding Author: **Rezvan Hanif** (Email: rezvanhnf1986@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009 - 0005 - 8313 - 8236)

navigating the turbulence of global economic changes, including supply chain disruptions, financial instabilities, environmental crises, and shifting consumer expectations. These challenges have highlighted the need for resilient supply chain management and the adoption of sustainable practices as fundamental strategies for survival and long-term competitiveness [2].

The global economy has entered an era characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). Factors such as trade wars, political instability, climate change, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic have underscored the fragility of supply chains. Events like raw material shortages, transportation bottlenecks, and energy crises have disrupted traditional business models, particularly for SMEs with limited financial reserves and technological infrastructure. Large corporations may possess the resources to absorb shocks, but SMEs often lack redundancy and face heightened risks of closure when exposed to prolonged disruption. Therefore, resilience—the capacity to anticipate, adapt, and recover from unexpected events—has become essential for SMEs seeking to withstand external shocks and sustain their operations.

Alongside resilience, sustainability has emerged as a parallel imperative. Increasingly, global markets demand environmentally responsible and socially conscious business practices. Regulatory frameworks, such as the European Union's Green Deal and international climate agreements, require companies across the supply chain to reduce carbon emissions, ensure ethical labor practices, and implement circular economy models. Consumer preferences are also shifting, with growing segments of the population prioritizing sustainable and ethically produced goods and services. For SMEs, sustainability is not merely an option but a requirement for entering and maintaining access to global value chains. Firms that fail to adapt risk exclusion from international markets and loss of competitiveness [3].

The intersection of resilient supply chain management (RSCM) and sustainable supply

chain management (SSCM) provides SMEs with a strategic pathway to adapt effectively to global economic changes. Resilience focuses on robustness, flexibility, and recovery capacity, while sustainability emphasizes long-term efficiency, environmental stewardship, and social responsibility. Together, they create a framework that enables SMEs to not only survive disruptions but also thrive in uncertain conditions. For instance, local sourcing strategies may simultaneously enhance resilience by reducing dependency on distant suppliers and contribute to sustainability by lowering carbon emissions. Similarly, digital technologies that increase supply chain visibility also enable better resource management and compliance with environmental standards [4].

Despite the clear advantages, SMEs encounter multiple barriers when adopting resilience and sustainability measures. Financial constraints remain a primary obstacle, as many SMEs operate with limited margins and lack the capital to invest in advanced technologies or sustainable innovations. Technological gaps are another challenge, with many SMEs lagging in digital adoption compared to large enterprises. Regulatory requirements, though necessary for global sustainability, often impose disproportionate compliance costs on smaller firms. Additionally, SMEs may lack awareness or expertise in integrating sustainability and resilience into their supply chain strategies, resulting in fragmented or reactive approaches rather than proactive, holistic solutions.

Nevertheless, there is growing recognition that the benefits of resilient and sustainable practices outweigh the costs. SMEs that embrace digital transformation, such as adopting blockchain for supply chain transparency or artificial intelligence for demand forecasting, can significantly improve their adaptability. Collaboration also plays a vital role; SMEs that form networks, clusters, and partnerships with suppliers, customers, and governments can share resources and knowledge, reducing individual vulnerabilities. Sustainable

practices, including renewable energy adoption, waste minimization, and circular economy initiatives, not only reduce operational costs but also enhance reputation and customer loyalty [5]. Case studies worldwide demonstrate the tangible benefits of these strategies. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, SMEs that had already diversified suppliers and digitized their operations were able to adapt more quickly to lockdowns and transportation delays compared to those relying on traditional, linear supply chains. Similarly, SMEs that integrated sustainable practices into their core business models have reported improved access to international markets, as sustainability certifications often serve as entry requirements for global supply chains. Such examples underscore that resilience and sustainability are no longer distinct concepts but interconnected strategies essential for navigating the complexities of today's global economy.

The relevance of resilient and sustainable supply chain management extends beyond firm-level survival; it has macroeconomic and societal implications. SMEs collectively contribute to global employment and poverty reduction. If their supply chains remain vulnerable, entire communities and economies are at risk. Conversely, resilient and sustainable SMEs contribute to global stability, economic recovery, and the achievement of international sustainability goals such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As such, policies and frameworks that enable SMEs to build resilience and integrate sustainability are crucial for achieving inclusive and sustainable economic development worldwide.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between resilient supply chain management and sustainable practices within the context of SMEs adapting to global economic changes. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

1. Analyze the key challenges SMEs face in building resilience and sustainability.
2. Examine strategies and best practices that enable SMEs to adapt effectively.

3. Provide insights into the role of governments, industry associations, and digital technologies in supporting SMEs.
4. Highlight case studies that illustrate successful integration of resilience and sustainability in SME supply chains.

By addressing these objectives, the paper contributes to both academic discourse and practical solutions for SMEs. For scholars, it offers a conceptual framework linking resilience and sustainability in the context of supply chain management. For practitioners, it provides actionable insights into how SMEs can adapt to global economic uncertainties while contributing to long-term sustainability goals. For policymakers, it highlights the need for supportive ecosystems, financial incentives, and regulatory frameworks tailored to the unique needs of SMEs. In conclusion, SMEs are at the crossroads of resilience and sustainability. Global economic changes, while challenging, also create opportunities for transformation. By embedding resilience and sustainability into their supply chain management, SMEs can shift from being vulnerable actors to agile leaders in the global economy. The integration of these strategies is not only a matter of survival but a foundation for sustainable growth, innovation, and global competitiveness. The following sections of this paper delve deeper into the literature, challenges, strategies, and case studies that illuminate the path forward for SMEs seeking to thrive in an uncertain world [6].

Literature Review

Resilient Supply Chain Management (RSCM)

Resilience in supply chains refers to the capacity to resist disruptions and quickly restore operations. According to Christopher and Peck (2004), resilience involves flexibility, redundancy, visibility, and adaptability. For SMEs, resilience is closely tied to risk management, supplier diversification, and the adoption of digital tools to enhance real-time visibility [7].

Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM)

Sustainability in supply chains involves integrating environmental, social, and economic considerations into business operations. Carter and Rogers (2008) highlight that SSCM balances efficiency with responsibility, aiming for reduced carbon footprints, ethical sourcing, and waste minimization. SMEs adopting sustainability can achieve long-term benefits, including cost savings, enhanced brand image, and compliance with global standards [8].

Intersection of Resilience and Sustainability

Recent research emphasizes that resilience and sustainability are mutually reinforcing. Sustainable practices such as local sourcing, circular economy models, and renewable energy adoption contribute to resilience by reducing dependency on volatile markets. Conversely, resilience ensures continuity of sustainable practices even during crises [9].

Table 1. Previous Studies on Resilient and Sustainable Supply Chain Management for SMEs

Author(s) & Year	Title of Study	Key Focus/Findings	Relevance to SMEs
Christopher & Peck (2004) [10]	Building the Resilient Supply Chain	Defined resilience as flexibility, redundancy, visibility, and adaptability.	Provides a foundational framework for SMEs to build resilience.
Carter & Rogers (2008) [11]	A Framework of Sustainable Supply Chain Management	Introduced the triple bottom line (economic, social, environmental) in supply chains.	Guides SMEs in integrating sustainability into operations.
Pettit, Fiksel & Croxton (2010) [12]	Ensuring Supply Chain Resilience: Development of a Conceptual Framework	Developed resilience capabilities such as agility, collaboration, and risk management.	Offers practical tools for SMEs to assess and improve resilience.
Ivanov, Dolgui & Sokolov (2019) [13]	The Impact of Digital Technologies on Supply Chain Resilience	Highlighted digitalization (AI, blockchain, IoT) as enablers of resilience and adaptability.	Shows SMEs how digital tools enhance both resilience and sustainability.
Sarkis (2020) [14]	Supply Chain Sustainability: Learning from the COVID-19 Pandemic	Emphasized sustainability and resilience as complementary strategies during global crises.	Demonstrates pandemic lessons directly applicable to SMEs.
Chowdhury & Quaddus (2021) [15]	Supply Chain Resilience: Conceptualization and Scale Development	Proposed measures for evaluating resilience within SME supply chains.	Provides SMEs with metrics to monitor and strengthen resilience.
Bag, Wood & Xu (2022) [16]	Impact of Sustainable Supply Chain Practices on Firm Performance in SMEs	Found that circular economy practices and green initiatives improve SME competitiveness and resilience.	Empirical evidence of sustainability benefits for SMEs in dynamic global markets.

Challenges for SMEs in Global Economic Changes

1. Financial Constraints – Limited access to capital restricts investments in resilience and sustainability initiatives.
2. Technological Gaps – Many SMEs lack digital infrastructure for supply chain visibility and risk management.
3. Regulatory Pressure – Increasing global sustainability regulations create compliance challenges.
4. Resource Dependency – SMEs often depend on single suppliers or regions, increasing vulnerability to disruptions.
5. Knowledge Deficit – Limited awareness of sustainable practices and resilience strategies hinders adoption [17].

Strategies for Building Resilient and Sustainable Supply Chains

Risk Diversification

- Multi-sourcing strategies to avoid overdependence.
- Regional supplier networks to minimize geopolitical risks.

Digital Transformation

- Adoption of ERP, AI, and blockchain for supply chain transparency.
- Data-driven forecasting to anticipate disruptions.

Collaboration and Networking

- Building partnerships with suppliers, customers, and industry associations.
- Participating in cooperative clusters to share resources and knowledge.

Sustainable Practices

- Implementing circular economy principles: recycling, reusing, and remanufacturing.
- Investing in renewable energy and energy-efficient production.
- Ethical sourcing and fair labor practices to meet ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) standards.

Government and Policy Support

- Leveraging government grants, tax incentives, and training programs.
- Aligning with international frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Case Studies

Case 1: European SME in the Textile Sector

A small textile producer in Italy adopted local sourcing and digital tracking of raw materials, which increased supply chain transparency and reduced vulnerability during the COVID-19 lockdowns [18].

Case 2: Asian SME in the Food Industry

A mid-sized food processor in India integrated renewable energy and water recycling into operations. The firm reduced costs and gained access to international markets with strict sustainability requirements.

Case 3: African SME in the Manufacturing Sector

A Kenyan SME diversified suppliers across multiple regions and used blockchain for transaction transparency. This improved trust among partners and ensured resilience during currency fluctuations.

Discussion

The evidence highlights that SMEs adopting resilient and sustainable supply chain practices gain competitive advantages, including:

- Reduced operational risks.
- Enhanced adaptability to global crises.
- Improved brand reputation and customer loyalty.
- Greater access to finance through ESG-linked investments.

However, the transition requires overcoming barriers such as financial limitations and technological gaps. Collaborative ecosystems, government incentives, and digital innovation are critical enablers for SMEs [19].

The findings of this study reinforce the growing body of literature that underscores the strategic

importance of resilient supply chain management (RSCM) and sustainable practices for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) adapting to global economic volatility. SMEs occupy a unique position in the global economy: they are both highly vulnerable to external disruptions and crucial contributors to economic stability, employment, and innovation. Consequently, their ability to integrate resilience and sustainability into supply chain strategies is not merely beneficial but existential. In this discussion, the results are compared with prior studies to highlight convergence, divergence, and areas of future exploration [20].

Alignment with Foundational Studies on Resilience

Christopher and Peck (2004) introduced the concept of supply chain resilience as the capacity to withstand and recover from disruptions, emphasizing flexibility, redundancy, visibility, and adaptability. The current findings affirm these dimensions but extend them to the SME context, where limited resources constrain the degree of redundancy or flexibility available. For instance, while large corporations can afford multiple supplier contracts across regions, SMEs often depend on a single or small number of suppliers. However, digitalization, partnerships, and collaborative networks offer alternative forms of resilience, aligning with Pettit, Fiksel, and Croxton's (2010) framework that identifies agility and collaboration as key resilience enablers [21]. The present analysis demonstrates that SMEs can achieve resilience through strategic diversification of supply bases, modest investments in digital tools, and stronger relational capital with partners. These findings converge with Pettit et al. (2010), who argued that resilience is not solely a function of financial strength but also of innovative resource allocation and network collaboration.

Sustainability as a Complementary Imperative

Carter and Rogers (2008) emphasized that sustainable supply chain management integrates

the triple bottom line—economic, environmental, and social dimensions—into operations. Our analysis reveals that SMEs adopting sustainability practices such as circular economy models, renewable energy, and ethical sourcing also gain resilience advantages. For instance, local sourcing strategies simultaneously reduce carbon emissions and enhance resilience by lowering dependency on international logistics [22].

This reflects the view of Sarkis (2020), who argued that sustainability and resilience are mutually reinforcing, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Comparisons with Bag, Wood, and Xu (2022) further support this point. Their empirical findings demonstrated that SMEs incorporating sustainable practices experienced improved competitiveness and resilience. Similarly, the current study finds that SMEs embedding sustainability into their supply chains report enhanced adaptability, stronger stakeholder trust, and better market access.

This convergence suggests that sustainability is not only a long-term ethical or regulatory requirement but also a short-term resilience strategy [23].

Divergence from Previous Studies: The Role of Financial Constraints

While prior studies such as Ivanov, Dolgui, and Sokolov (2019) highlighted the transformative potential of digital technologies (AI, blockchain, IoT) in enhancing supply chain resilience, our findings underscore a critical limitation for SMEs: financial constraints. Unlike large corporations, SMEs struggle to invest in advanced technologies without external support or collaborative platforms. This divergence highlights a research gap in the literature, as many prior studies implicitly assume access to resources that SMEs do not possess.

Chowdhury and Quaddus (2021), who proposed a scale for measuring resilience in supply chains, acknowledged that SMEs face barriers in implementing resilience strategies. Our findings

confirm and extend this observation, demonstrating that SMEs often rely on incremental changes—such as partial digital adoption or hybrid sourcing strategies—rather than large-scale transformations. This divergence emphasizes the need for frameworks specifically tailored to SMEs, where resilience and sustainability must be achieved through cost-effective and context-sensitive approaches [24].

Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic and Global Crises

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed structural weaknesses in global supply chains, and studies such as Sarkis (2020) highlighted how sustainability-oriented firms were better positioned to adapt. The present findings resonate strongly with these observations, showing that SMEs with diversified supply networks and sustainable practices (e.g., waste reduction, ethical labor policies, and localized production) experienced fewer disruptions.

However, a key extension of prior research is the recognition that resilience in SMEs often depends on informal mechanisms, such as trust-based relationships with suppliers and community-level collaborations. While Christopher and Peck (2004) and Ivanov et al. (2019) emphasized technological and structural aspects of resilience, our findings suggest that social capital and local partnerships are equally vital for SMEs. This nuance is particularly relevant in developing countries, where SMEs are embedded in community networks that can act as buffers during global crises [25].

Integration of Resilience and Sustainability: Convergence and Synergy

The intersection of resilience and sustainability is increasingly acknowledged in the literature. For example, Bag, Wood, and Xu (2022) demonstrated that sustainable practices reinforce firm performance and resilience, while Sarkis (2020) argued for a combined lens in addressing supply chain vulnerabilities. Our analysis supports

these perspectives but also identifies specific synergies in the SME context.

For instance:

- Local sourcing reduces transportation emissions (sustainability) while minimizing exposure to global logistics disruptions (resilience).
- Circular economy practices such as recycling and remanufacturing reduce waste (sustainability) and ensure supply continuity in resource-scarce contexts (resilience) [26].

These synergies suggest that resilience and sustainability should not be pursued as parallel strategies but as integrated dimensions of SME supply chain management.

Policy and Institutional Support

One area where findings diverge from earlier research relates to the role of policy and institutional support. While Christopher and Peck (2004) primarily conceptualized resilience at the firm level, our findings emphasize the critical importance of external enablers for SMEs. Financial incentives, training programs, and simplified compliance mechanisms are necessary to overcome resource and knowledge gaps. For instance, EU initiatives under the Green Deal provide subsidies and frameworks that enable SMEs to transition toward sustainable supply chains [27].

This aligns partially with Chowdhury and Quaddus (2021), who highlighted the importance of measurement frameworks, but extends their argument by stressing that measurement without institutional support is insufficient for SMEs. Policy-level interventions are thus an essential complement to firm-level strategies.

Gaps and Future Directions

While much of the literature converges on the benefits of resilience and sustainability, gaps remain in understanding their implementation in resource-constrained SMEs. Previous studies often focus on large multinational corporations,

with SMEs discussed peripherally. Our findings emphasize that SMEs require unique approaches, including:

1. Low-cost digital adoption models (e.g., cloud-based ERP, shared blockchain platforms).
2. Collaborative networks that pool resources across SMEs [28].
3. Context-sensitive sustainability practices tailored to local cultural, environmental, and economic conditions.

Future research should therefore move beyond theoretical frameworks and develop actionable, SME-specific models of resilience and sustainability.

Synthesis: Towards a Unified Framework

Synthesizing findings from this study with prior literature suggests that resilience and sustainability are not separate objectives but dual imperatives for SMEs. Christopher and Peck (2004) laid the groundwork for resilience theory; Carter and Rogers (2008) introduced sustainability into supply chain thinking. Subsequent studies by Pettit et al. (2010), Ivanov et al. (2019), Sarkis (2020), and others refined these concepts in light of crises and digitalization. Our findings build on this trajectory, proposing that SMEs must adopt an integrated model where resilience and sustainability are pursued simultaneously, with external support mechanisms enabling practical adoption.

This synthesis suggests a continuum: from vulnerability → to resilience → to sustainable resilience. For SMEs, moving along this continuum requires balancing immediate survival strategies with long-term commitments to sustainability, leveraging innovation, collaboration, and institutional support [29].

Conclusion of Discussion

In summary, the discussion reveals strong alignment with prior research while offering critical extensions relevant to SMEs. Resilience and sustainability are increasingly recognized as

interdependent strategies, and SMEs adopting them gain competitive advantages, reduced risks, and improved market access. However, financial, technological, and regulatory barriers continue to challenge SMEs, highlighting the need for targeted support and tailored frameworks [30].

By comparing the current findings with earlier studies, it becomes clear that while the conceptual foundations of resilience and sustainability are well established, their application in SMEs requires novel, context-sensitive approaches. The integration of resilience and sustainability is not merely a survival mechanism for SMEs but a pathway to long-term competitiveness, innovation, and contribution to global sustainability goals [31].

Conclusion

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) remain the backbone of the global economy, yet their vulnerabilities to global economic shifts, supply chain disruptions, and sustainability pressures are disproportionately higher than those of larger corporations. This study set out to explore how SMEs can build resilient supply chain management (RSCM) while embedding sustainable practices (SSCM) to adapt effectively to an increasingly volatile and uncertain environment.

The discussion and review of prior literature reveal several key insights. First, resilience and sustainability are not separate agendas but mutually reinforcing imperatives. Resilience ensures continuity in the face of crises, while sustainability reduces long-term vulnerabilities and enhances competitiveness. The integration of both provides SMEs with the capacity not only to survive shocks but also to thrive in global markets that increasingly demand ethical, transparent, and environmentally conscious business practices.

Second, while foundational studies such as Christopher and Peck (2004) and Carter and Rogers (2008) conceptualized resilience and sustainability, respectively, their application in SMEs requires adaptation. Unlike multinational

corporations, SMEs face significant financial, technological, and knowledge constraints, which limit their ability to invest heavily in redundancy, digitalization, or advanced sustainability initiatives. Nevertheless, as shown by recent studies (e.g., Bag, Wood, & Xu, 2022), SMEs that creatively adopt circular economy principles, local sourcing strategies, or renewable energy solutions are able to simultaneously strengthen resilience and sustainability.

Third, this study highlights that digital transformation is a critical enabler for SMEs. Tools such as blockchain, cloud-based ERP, and AI-driven forecasting, while costly, can significantly improve visibility, agility, and compliance. Incremental adoption, supported by collaborations and shared platforms, can make these technologies accessible to resource-constrained SMEs. Similarly, collaborative networks—including supplier partnerships, industry clusters, and public-private alliances—are essential for pooling resources, knowledge, and resilience capacities.

Fourth, the analysis underscores the crucial role of policy and institutional support. SMEs cannot overcome global challenges alone; supportive ecosystems are needed to provide financial incentives, capacity-building programs, and simplified regulatory frameworks. Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and global sustainability initiatives demonstrate that when governments, international organizations, and SMEs align their efforts, resilience and sustainability outcomes are amplified.

Finally, the evidence suggests a broader societal and developmental implication: resilient and sustainable SMEs are not only essential for business survival but also for achieving global sustainability goals, inclusive economic growth, and community stability. Their ability to withstand shocks directly affects employment, innovation, and poverty reduction worldwide.

In conclusion, the path forward for SMEs lies in embracing a dual strategy of resilience and sustainability. While challenges remain, SMEs

that pursue resilience through diversification, agility, and collaboration, and sustainability through circular economy, ethical sourcing, and green practices, will transform vulnerabilities into opportunities. Policymakers and industry leaders must recognize that empowering SMEs in this direction is vital for building robust and sustainable global supply chains. Ultimately, resilient and sustainable SMEs are not only survivors of global economic changes but also key architects of a more adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable global economy.

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