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The adoption of sustainable strategic management practices in the international volatile business environment within the Zimbabwean food industry

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Orientation: The Zimbabwean food industry faces challenges in adopting sustainable strategic management practices (SSMPs) because of the volatile global business environment. These practices are crucial for maintaining competitive advantage and ensuring long-term sustainability, but not following the right formulation, implementation, and evaluation can lead to initiatives failing to address the issues.

Research purpose: This study investigates the adoption and implementation of SSMPs in Zimbabwe's food industry, identifying drivers and obstacles, analysing the impact of global business landscape, and suggesting strategies for improving sustainable practices.

Motivation for the study: Driven by the urgent need for sustainable development and strategic resilience in fluctuating markets, this study seeks to provide insights that can enhance the adaptive capacity of Zimbabwean food businesses.

Research design, approach and method: Employing a qualitative methodology, the research utilised stratified and purposive sampling to conduct interviews with 23 participants from five key gatekeeper entities within the Zimbabwean food sector.

Main findings: The findings indicate that while SSMP adoption is recognised as beneficial, its implementation is hampered by resource constraints, regulatory challenges, and a lack of strategic alignment with international best practices.

Practical/managerial implications: To foster effective SSMP adoption, managers should focus on enhancing resource allocation, aligning practices with global standards, and fostering a culture of sustainability within their organisations.

Contribution/value-add: This study contributes to the literature on strategic management by providing context-specific insights into SSMPs in Zimbabwe, offering practical recommendations for improving sustainable practices in volatile environments.

Keywords: sustainable strategic management; Zimbabwean food industry; volatile business environment; qualitative methodology; strategic resilience.

Introduction

In the current dynamic global market, the implementation of Sustainable Strategic Management Practices (SSMPs) has become an essential approach for firms seeking longevity and success. This is especially relevant in unstable situations, such as the global commercial context confronting the Zimbabwean food sector. The adoption of these environmentally friendly procedures not just enhances economic advantage but also corresponds with the increasing worldwide dedication to sustainability. Researchers contend that enterprises implementing these strategies might alleviate risks linked to unpredictable markets by promoting stability and adaptation (Porter & Kramer 2016).

The Zimbabwean food sector, marked by problems such as economic volatility and resource limitations, exemplifies a distinctive scenario for the incorporation of SSMPs. Two prominent examples of organisations in this sector that have effectively executed these processes are Innscor Africa Limited and National Foods Holdings Limited. These firms have adopted sustainability-focused initiatives, thus improving their operational efficiency and resilience amid market fluctuations. Innscor Africa Limited has implemented a comprehensive strategy, merging environmental management procedures with strategic supply chain modifications to attain a sustained competitive advantage (Innscor Africa Limited 2023).

Diverse experts have emphasised distinct viewpoints about the necessity and execution of SSMPs in unstable markets. Elkington (2000) proposes the triple bottom line framework, which includes the economy, the environment and social factors, as an essential paradigm for attaining sustainable corporate success. A discussion persists over the alignment of short-term financial success with long-term sustainability objectives. Stakeholders like Hart (2019) advocate for the thorough incorporation of sustainable strategies towards corporate core values, whereas others, such as Friedman (1970), who contended that businesses should prioritise profit maximisation, viewing sustainability as secondary even though it directly enhances financial performance.

Moreover, there are discrepancies over the speed and extent of SSMPs adoption. Some advocate for a gradual integration to provide adaptation and progressive resource allocation (Mitra 2021). Conversely, other proponents argue for prompt and thorough implementation, emphasising the urgency driven by environmental challenges and consumer demands (Schaltegger, Lüdeke-Freund & Hansen 2017). Notwithstanding these disparities, there is an agreement about the significance of strategic adaptation strategies as a crucial facilitator for success in unstable environments such as Zimbabwe’s food business (Hahn et al. 2010).

National Foods Holdings Limited exemplifies the effective execution of SSMPs via strategic alliances and sustainable sourcing methodologies. The company’s focus on local sourcing and community involvement has improved supply chain resilience and strengthened its brand recognition as a sustainable entity in the food industry (National Foods Holdings Limited 2023). These programmes highlight the essential need of strategic alliances and community involvement in promoting sustainable business practices in difficult contexts.

The implementation of SSMPs in unstable international markets, such as Zimbabwe’s food sector, is a complex undertaking necessitating the careful incorporation of sustainability into company strategy. The achievements of Innscor Africa Limited and National Foods Holdings Limited illustrate that organisations may thrive by integrating sustainable practices into their operations. Despite varying opinions among experts concerning the particulars of these implementations, there is a consensus: sustainable strategic management is essential for lasting success (Elkington 2000; Porter & Kramer 2016).

This research aims to provide theoretical and practical insights on Sustainable Strategic Management (SSM) practices, highlighting key challenges and proposing solutions to enhance the sustainability and accessibility of food in the country. The study analyses SSM strategies currently employed by organisations in the food industry to achieve this goal. The study assesses the extent of SSM practice adoption by food business organisations. The article analyses the challenges organisations face while adopting SSM practices in the food industry. The report ultimately recommends solutions to overcome the challenges associated with the implementation of SSM processes in the food sector.

Statement of the problem

Amid a more unstable global commercial landscape, the Zimbabwean food sector is confronting substantial problems that jeopardise its future viability and competitive advantage. These issues are exacerbated by economic volatility, political uncertainty and climate changes that impact agricultural production and food supply systems. Sustainable strategic management practices are essential for promoting resilience and enduring performance in a volatile environment. Nonetheless, the degree of adoption of these methods within the Zimbabwean food industry remains little examined. It is important to comprehend the determinants affecting the adoption of SSMPs and the ramifications of these methods on operational effectiveness, environmental sustainability and revenue growth within the industry. Researchers such as Porter and Kramer (2016) have emphasised the strategic significance of sustainability measures in bolstering competitive advantage; nevertheless, detailed insights into the Zimbabwean context are limited and require additional investigation.

This study aims to examine the extent of SSMPs adoption in the Zimbabwean food sector and to identify the primary facilitators and obstacles to its implementation. The objective is to evaluate the knowledge and comprehension of SSMPs among industry executives and examine the integration of these practices into corporate strategy to avoid risks and capitalise on opportunities in the dynamic business environment. This research will yield vital insights on the efficacy of SSMPs in stabilising and improving the performance of enterprises in turbulent environments. Furthermore, it will provide guidance for industry players on the formulation and execution of effective sustainable strategies to guarantee enduring viability and success. This research will enhance the scholarly dialogue on sustainability in industry and offer practical recommendations for the Zimbabwean food sector (Elkington 2000; Hart 2019).

Theoretical framework

The Resource-Based View (RBV), formulated by Barney (1991), asserts that organisations get competitive advantage by acquiring and managing valuable, scarce, unique, and non-substitutable resources. This theory is particularly relevant to the implementation of SSMPs, because it emphasises the significance of internal resources in addressing external difficulties in unstable corporate contexts. In the Zimbabwean food business, firms may utilise sustainable practices as strategic assets to improve their market position and ensure long-term sustainability. By recognising and utilising these resources, companies may adhere to international sustainability requirements while enhancing their operational efficiency and brand reputation, resulting in a sustainable competitive edge (Barney 1991).

Notwithstanding its significance, the RBV is criticised for its inward orientation, frequently neglecting the influence of the external environment on business strategy (Priem & Butler 2001). Critics contend that although it highlights internal strengths, it may misguide enterprises into undervaluing the influence of external variables, including market dynamics and regulatory frameworks, which are particularly changeable in Zimbabwe (Priem & Butler 2001). Critics assert that the emphasis on innate capabilities necessitates an accompanying framework that considers extrinsic influences.

Institutional Theory offers an external viewpoint by highlighting the effect of the institutional context on organisations. DiMaggio and Powell (2018) assert that corporations use certain methods not just for economic efficiency but also to attain legitimacy, stability and guidance within a particular institutional framework. Institutional forces, including coercive, mimetic, as well as normative influences, compel corporations to implement procedures that conform to industry standards, society expectations and legal requirements. This theoretical approach is relevant to the Zimbabwean food business, which functions within a global market increasingly focused on environmental concerns. Thus, the implementation of SSMPs may be regarded as a reaction to local legislative requirements and global pressures for ethical corporate conduct (DiMaggio & Powell 2018).

Advocates of Institutional Theory contend that its deterministic perspective undermines the agency of enterprises. Oliver (2019) posits that enterprises may strategically respond to institutional forces, indicating that they are not only passive users of externally mandated practices but have the power to actively influence their competitive contexts. Furthermore, others contend that the theory insufficiently addresses how corporations prioritise competing institutional needs (Oliver 2019).

The RBV and Institutional Theory provide complementary perspectives when aligned. While resource-based view emphasises the internal strategy capabilities to utilise sustainability as a resource, Institutional Theory offers a wider view on external factors influencing these strategic choices. Hart (2019) posits that integrating these frameworks can create a synergy between internal competences and external legitimacy, facilitating effective sustainable practices in volatile circumstances through strategic execution and alignment.

The RBV highlights the significance of internal resources for achieving competitive advantage, but Institutional Theory underscores the necessity of adapting to external forces for legitimacy and longevity. The amalgamation of these ideas provides a comprehensive framework for examining the implementation of SSMPs within the Zimbabwean food sector. This dual perspective enables the examination of the interplay between internal strategic capabilities and external institutional requirements, offering a solid basis for comprehending how organisations address sustainability challenges in a volatile international business landscape.

Literature review

Sustainable strategic management practices entail the incorporation of environmental, social and economic factors into the strategic management processes of formulation, execution and assessment. Stubbs and Cocklin (2018) contend that SSMPs necessitate a transition from conventional profit-driven business models to those that integrate sustainability as a fundamental strategic goal. Epstein (2018) underscores that the formulation approach must prioritise long-term conservation and social responsibility. Executing these strategies requires flexibility and a comprehensive grasp of stakeholders' interests (Freeman 1984). Stead and Stead (2014) identify obstacles in the operationalisation of SSMPs, indicating an absence of consensus on optimal procedures for performance assessment, which complicates evaluation processes.

Comprehending the unpredictable worldwide business landscape is essential for enterprises functioning on a global scale. This environment is marked by rapid transformations resulting from political instability, economic volatility and technological progress (Wild et al. 2016). In the Zimbabwean food business, volatility is intensified by hyperinflation, monetary instability and regulatory alterations (Muzurura 2018). Academic discussions emphasise the necessity of resilience and adaptability in strategic management to address these issues. Hitt, Ireland and Hoskisson (2016) advocate for agile tactics that swiftly adapt to external disruptions; however, Ghemawat (2017) suggests a more cautious methodology, highlighting the necessity of thoroughly comprehending local markets prior to international expansion.

The food business, a vital global sector, has distinct difficulties and possibilities concerning sustainability. Reardon and Timmer (2012) assert that the increasing global food demand, with environmental issues such as climate change, requires a transition to sustainable methods. Food firms are progressively concentrating on minimising waste and improving supply chain efficiency (Porter & Kramer 2011). Darnall, Henriques and Sadorsky (2018) assert that the adoption of sustainable practices differs markedly among enterprises, primarily shaped by organisational competencies and market dynamics.

The Zimbabwean food sector functions amid a notably difficult environment characterised by economic volatility and resource constraints. Chimhundu and Mabaya (2015) indicate that firms in this sector are pursuing sustainable strategies not just for their competitive edge but also as a must for survival. Notwithstanding these endeavours, a significant disparity exists between major firms and small organisations regarding the adoption of sustainable practices because smaller businesses frequently lack the requisite resources and experience (Zhihui & Haggarty 2011).

Diverse authors have articulated differing perspectives on the implementation of SSMPs in unstable contexts. Some, such as Clarkson, Li and Richardson (2021), assert that investing in sustainability can produce long-term financial advantages, while others, such as Aras and Crowther (2019), warn of the substantial initial costs and unpredictable returns associated with such investments, especially in turbulent markets. The discourse centres on the equilibrium between immediate financial constraints and enduring strategic objectives, a domain where perspectives significantly diverge.

Confronting these difficulties needs a cohesive strategy. Strategies may encompass investing in sustainable technology, augmenting supply chain resilience, and cultivating alliances with international partners to exchange best practices and resources. Moreover, there is a growing necessity to include stakeholder participation into the strategic management process to guarantee that the plans are comprehensive and inclusive. Training the staff on sustainability principles and enhancing organisational capacity are essential measures for promoting SSMP implementation in the Zimbabwean food sector (Nhamo, Ndlela & Makombe 2014).

The incorporation of SSMPs in the Zimbabwean food sector underscores the complex interaction between strategic decision-making as well as environmental influences. It necessitates reconciling global sustainability trends with regional economic circumstances, as seen by the divergent viewpoints in the literature. Despite differing methodologies and implementations, there is a consensus on the imperative for organisations to adjust to both internal and external challenges, highlighting the increasing significance of SSMPs in attaining competitive advantage and sustainability in the global marketplace. The next section examines the research questions.

Research questions

The study aimed to address the following research questions:

- What are the primary factors that influence the adoption of SSMPs in the Zimbabwean food sector within a turbulent international economic environment?
- How can SSMPs influence competitive advantage and profitability for enterprises in the Zimbabwean food sector functioning on a worldwide scale?
- What obstacles do enterprises in the Zimbabwean food sector encounter when adopting SSMPs in reaction to worldwide market fluctuations?
- In what ways do cultural and organisational elements within Zimbabwean food enterprises affect the effective incorporation of SSMPs?

Research methods and design

Study design

The study utilises an exploratory approach, which is appropriate for examining a topic that has not been well researched and lacks a substantial body of current literature (Hay, Smith & Jones 2020). It was considered appropriate owing to its flexibility, provision of in-depth understanding of issues under study as well as the buy-in of various key stakeholders in the study with wholehearted participation. This study examines SSM practices within the food industry, a domain that has not been well investigated.

Setting, study population and sampling strategy

The study population comprises five gatekeeper institutions in Zimbabwe: the Consumer Council of the Republic of Zimbabwe, the Grain Marketing Board, the Food and Agriculture Organization of Zimbabwe, the Chartered Association of Purchasing and Supply, and the Confederation of Zimbabwe Retailers. The populations from these institutions were classified into five different stakeholder groups: (1) food manufacturers and processors; (2) distributors and suppliers; (3) retailers and wholesalers; (4) consumers; and (5) representatives of the government and non-governmental organisations. The study also made sure that there was use of theoretic saturation in the understanding of issues under study.

The stratified sampling method was employed to ensure equitable representation of all relevant subgroups within the overall population (Mweshi & Sakyi 2020). Following the formation of groups of stakeholders, participant selection was conducted by purposive sampling. Purposive sampling enables selecting members of a sample with particular knowledge or skill in the pertinent field (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024), specifically management experts with 10 years of experience in the SSM industry. This improves the effectiveness of the research effort for time and resources by focusing on those most likely to provide valuable information. To ensure sufficient representation, five participants from each stakeholder group were initially selected, yielding a sample size of 25 participants. Only 23 participants from the whole sample were successfully interviewed. Table 1 is a summary of the participants that were interviewed. All criteria for participant enrollment were fulfilled. Every participant, aged 30–62 years, has at least 5 years of experience in management or supervision. Furthermore, each participant has 10 years or more professional experience in the food sector.

Ethical considerations

The field of ethics focuses on establishing moral rules to assess circumstances in which an individual or community may suffer injury, shame or suffering as a result of data gathering practices (Massie & Gillam 2015). Trustworthiness measures were used in the study to validate and offer credible and dependable research findings. This included the aspect of credibility where member checks were implemented, the aspects of transferability, dependability and confirmability, which indicates the degree to which results are shaped by the participants. The study complied with all established protocols and acknowledged standards for research in academia conduct (Creswell & Poth 2018). The University of Zambia has secured ethical approval for

TABLE 1: A summary of investigated participants.

Number	Gender	Age (years)	Years of work experience	Years of managerial experience	Occupation
1	Woman	40–50	17	7	Country programme executive
2	Man	40–50	16	12	Project director
3	Man	40–50	20	7	Communication director
4	Man	30–60	15	11	General director
5	Man	30–60	12	13	Human resources director
6	Man	40–50	18	9	Consumer representative director
7	Woman	30–40	16	6	Consumer representative director
8	Man	40–55	12	8	Operations director
9	Man	50–60	13	14	Supply chain director
10	Woman	40–55	21	9	Strategic management manager
11	Man	30–40	16	9	Agricultural director
12	Man	30–40	12	15	Farm director
13	Man	40–55	12	8	Farm director
14	Man	30–40	16	8	Public relations director
14	Woman	30–40	11	11	Policy and compliance director
16	Woman	40–50	11	13	Quality assurance director
17	Man	40–50	15	13	Education and training director
18	Woman	50–60	22	7	Professional standards director
19	Man	50–60	23	22	Retail strategy director
20	Woman	50–60	24	15	Government relations director
21	Woman	40–50	10	6	Distribution director
22	Man	40–50	12	8	Grain marketing board director
23	Man	40–50	12	7	General director

the study (REF. No. 6055-2024). The participants in the study engaged willingly in the interview process. They were apprised of the study's aims and that information was being collected only for scholarly purposes. The researcher notified the interviewees that they might withdraw from the study at any point without incurring charges or needing to provide reasons, underscoring that their involvement was entirely voluntary. Furthermore, anonymity was guaranteed, and the respondents' data were preserved in complete secrecy (Massie & Gillam 2015). Prior to the interviews, respondents were required to provide their informed consent as well as written consent for participation in the study and to permit the recording of the discussions.

Results

Key aspects driving the embracing of sustainable strategic management practices in the food industry in Zimbabwe

The implementation of SSMPs in the Zimbabwean food sector is mostly motivated by environmental, economic and social factors. In a turbulent global economic landscape, companies are increasingly acknowledging the significance of sustainability to preserve competitiveness, reduce risks and bolster resilience. These findings can be substantiated by the perceptions given by participant 2 who was quoted as saying:

> 'As a project manager, I can assert that our choice to adopt sustainable practices was profoundly shaped by the acknowledgement of our operations' substantial environmental effect. The recurrent power outages compelled us to invest in renewable energy sources, which not only corresponds with our environmental objectives but also decreases long-term operational expenses.' (Participant 2)

The experienced gained has shaped the understanding around the environmental considerations within the manufacturing sector.

Environmental considerations, including climate change and resource constraints, necessitate that firms adopt more sustainable practices to minimise waste, enhance resource efficiency and decrease carbon footprints. Moreover, compliance with international environmental standards allows these enterprises to penetrate worldwide markets, where customers and authorities want ecologically sustainable products. The findings are in sync with participant views, for example:

> 'From a strategic perspective, the implementation of sustainable practices is not only a fad but an imperative. In light of Zimbabwe's unstable economic environment, sustainable practices enhance our resilience. They assist in mitigating risks associated with supply chain interruptions and augment our capacity to adjust to swift changes in the commercial environment.' (Participant 10)

The business environment must be anchored on sustainability and responding to the changes happening within the external business environment.

Economic issues are crucial, because sustainability frequently correlates with long-term cost reductions and enhanced financial performance. These findings were buttressed by one of the participants, who was of the notion that:

> 'As a supply chain coordinator, I have observed how global sustainability trends are influencing our operations. International purchasers are more inclined to collaborate with partners who exhibit a dedication to environmental norms. We needed to use

> SSMP to maintain competitiveness and access these profitable areas.' (Participant 9)

Sustainability is an aspect that must be recognised from a diverse perspective within the supply chain systems.

Organisations that use SSMPs can gain operational savings, lower waste disposal expenses and achieve enhanced energy management. This not only reduces expenses but also elevates company reputation, appealing to environmentally aware customers and investors. Social considerations, such as increased customer awareness and desire for ethical business practices, compel corporations to adopt SSMPs. Businesses are compelled to implement measures that enhance social welfare, such as equitable labour policies and community involvement, to cultivate trust and loyalty among stakeholders.

The respondents' opinions agree on the notion that sustainability is essential for preserving and augmenting competitiveness in the Zimbabwean food business within a dynamic global market. The plant manager prioritises operational effectiveness and expense reduction as key motivators, underscoring the financial advantages of using green energy solutions. The supply chain coordinator emphasises the challenges of worldwide market dynamics, highlighting the necessity of conforming to global sustainability norms to establish alliances and enhance market access in line with consumers' tastes and preferences. This has been taken cognisance of by a participant who said:

> 'As a retail strategy director, I have observed a notable change in customer tastes favoring environmentally friendly and ethically manufactured foods. Our strategic transition to sustainability addresses this need; it enables us to distinguish our products and cultivate a devoted consumer base willing to spend a premium for environmentally friendly products.' (Participant 19)

Sustainability practices have the capacity of changing consumer preferences in line with ethically manufactured products and services. The marketing director and strategy planner see sustainability as a strategic differentiation and a means of risk mitigation. The marketing director emphasises the transition in consumer preference towards sustainable products as a crucial factor in corporate strategy, indicating that positioning as an ethical brand facilitates premium pricing and fosters customer loyalty. Simultaneously, the strategic planner adopts a comprehensive perspective, acknowledging sustainability as a fundamental component of resilience amid economic fluctuations and supply chain instabilities. The various viewpoints demonstrate that the adoption of SSMPs in the Zimbabwean food business is complex, driven by a combination of environmental accountability, economic rationality and social consciousness.

The impact of sustainable strategic management practices on competitive advantage and profitability in Zimbabwe's international food industry

Sustainable strategic management practices may substantially improve a company's competitive edge and profitability, particularly in the unpredictable global economic landscape. These findings are in line with the views of a participant who pointed out that:

> 'In my view, the adoption of sustainable practices has proven crucial in reducing operating expenses. Reduced dependence on fossil fuels and improved waste management methods has significantly influenced our financial performance.' (Participant 14)

By adopting sustainable practices, organisations may distinguish themselves from rivals, establishing a distinctive selling proposition that appeals to environmentally sensitive consumers. Implementing green supply chain management and guaranteeing sustainable procurement may save costs by optimising resource use and minimising waste, resulting in enhanced profitability. These attributes can be linked to the understanding of one of the participants who indicated that:

> 'I contend that our sustainability plan is integral to our brand identity. It distinguishes us in the global market and appeals to environmentally conscious consumers, hence enhancing our sales.' (Participant 8)

Moreover, firms that synchronise their approaches with sustainability can alleviate risks linked to environmental rules and social demands, thereby ensuring a stable operating landscape (Porter & Kramer 2016). The findings are closely associated with the views of another participant, namely:

> 'Sustainable methods have enhanced our resilience to the volatile worldwide market. By using efficient utilization of resources, we have successfully stabilized our production costs despite turbulent conditions.' (Participant 10)

There is robust need for unique management of the resources for effective utilisation in the ever-changing business environment. In the context of the Zimbabwean food sector, adopting SSMPs may foster innovation in product offers and enhance operational efficiency, which are crucial for success in international markets. Organisations that emphasise sustainability are likely to draw investors and collaborators who appreciate ethical practices, thus improving their market standing and financial outcomes. Moreover, SSMPs enable companies to foresee and adjust to shifts in customer preferences and legal mandates, thus securing sustained growth and profitability. Sustainability is not only a compliance strategy; it is a means to achieve a competitive advantage in global marketplaces (Hart & Milstein 2013).

The replies of the interviewees demonstrate a significant link between SSMPs and improved overall competitiveness in the international marketplaces for Zimbabwean food enterprises. Feedback from interviewees emphasises cost savings, brand distinctiveness, market resilience, and collaboration possibilities as primary advantages of these methods. These research findings can be in tandem with what one of the participants observed:

> 'Investing in sustainability has created new prospects for global collaborations. Numerous businesses seek collaboration with us due to our dedication to sustainable practices.' (Participant 1)

These conclusions correspond with the prevailing claims in the literature that sustainability programmes foster innovation and operational efficiency, which are essential for sustaining competitive advantage (Elkington 2000).

Moreover, the focus on brand identification and global collaborations highlights the strategic significance of SSMPs beyond just operational efficiency. Sustainable practices assist companies in addressing the complexities of international commerce by cultivating a robust, favourable reputation and enhancing trust among worldwide stakeholders. This coordinated strategy not only increases profitability but also ensures a long-term competitive edge in the global market. The aggregated accounts of the respondents indicate that for enterprises in Zimbabwe's food sector, SSMP is an essential component of strategic planning and implementation amid a fluctuating global market (Kiron et al. 2012).

Challenges facing corporations in the Zimbabwean food industry

In the implementation of SSMPs within the Zimbabwean food business, enterprises encounter several substantial hurdles because of worldwide market instability. According to a participant:

> 'As a corporate leader, I have significant difficulties in obtaining the requisite funding for sustainable initiatives owing to the unstable economic climate. Numerous local financial institutions exhibit reluctance to extend loans for projects that offer long-term rewards in the face of prevailing uncertainty.' (Participant 22)

The issue of funding remains a critical component in the business environment that calls for collaborative stakeholder engagement for enhanced sustainability.

A significant concern is the volatility of currency values and the unpredictability of exchange rates, which can profoundly affect profitability and the capacity to uphold sustainable practices (Moyo 2021). The volatility of the Zimbabwean dollar, together with the variability of other currencies, poses difficulties in budgeting and long-term planning for sustainability efforts (Chigumira 2020). Moreover, the expenses related to adopting sustainable practices, such as the procurement of new technology or the overhaul of supply chains are exorbitant for several organisations. These suppositions can be equated to the sentiments of a participant who voiced:

> 'The volatile currency rates significantly hinder our capacity to appropriately budget for long-term sustainability initiatives. We frequently must defer activities that need substantial initial financial investments.' (Participant 11)

Zimbabwe's economic landscape now lacks substantial funding or incentives for sustainability, resulting in several enterprises facing challenges in securing capital for such transformations (Manzungu et al. 2021).

A further difficulty is the deficiency of experience and information about sustainable procedures within the local sector (Gwimbi 2019). Numerous firms lack access to the requisite skills and resources to efficiently execute SSMPs. This information deficiency leads to insufficient planning and implementation of these measures. The unstable political environment in Zimbabwe introduces additional complication, as political instability frequently results in sudden policy shifts that might hinder the execution of SSMPs (Zhou 2020). Ultimately, a considerable obstacle exists in reconciling local practices with international norms owing to divergent legislative constraints, hence hindering the implementation of universally recognised sustainable management methods (Sibanda & Chikweche 2021).

The respondents offered significant insights about the obstacles encountered by enterprises in the Zimbabwean food sector during the implementation of SSMPs. Each participant emphasised a distinct component of the complex challenges faced by their organisations. The absence of financial assets and investments was a prevalent issue, along with the wider economic difficulties identified in scholarly literature (Chigumira 2020). The challenge of conforming to international rules highlights the competitive difficulties encountered by Zimbabwean enterprises in the global arena (Sibanda & Chikweche 2021). These findings are associated with the participant who is of the view that:

> 'One of our primary challenges is adhering to foreign rules. Our workforce must continually acquire knowledge and adjust to these changes, which make it resource-intensive due to our constrained training expenditures.' (Participant 22)

Adhering to the rules and regulations has turned out to be a crucial issue for a diverse group of organisations in the food sector in Zimbabwe.

The interviewees predominantly advocated for increased government assistance and financial incentives to mitigate the cost obstacles related to the adoption of SSMPs. External help might furnish the essential resources for enterprises to invest in the technology and training necessary for sustainable practices (Manzungu et al. 2021). One of the participants said:

> 'Executing sustainable practices is challenging without enough government backing. Although our organization is dedicated to sustainability, we frequently encounter challenges stemming from insufficient incentives and policy direction.' (Participant 12)

Furthermore, it was proposed that cooperative initiatives among government, the business community, and international organisations might provide strong frameworks for managing international rules, hence facilitating smoother integration into international markets (Gwimbi 2019).

Influence of cultural and organisational factors

Cultural and organisational aspects are pivotal in ascertaining the effective integration of SSMPs in the Zimbabwean food sector. Organisational culture, including shared values, attitudes, and practices among employees, may profoundly influence the implementation of sustainable initiatives. This can be attributed to the sentiments of a participant stating:

'The essential factor in effectively adopting sustainable practices is cultivating a culture of transparency and ongoing enhancement. Our organization promotes the sharing of ideas among employees to enhance our environmental impact. This cooperative method has been crucial.' (Participant 16)

In Zimbabwean food enterprises, a culture that fosters creativity and adaptability is frequently more favourable for the adoption of SSMPs. This is because such a culture promotes employees to adopt change and incorporate new techniques that correspond with global sustainability trends. An obstinate organisational culture might hinder integration initiatives by cultivating disinterest or active resistance to change (Smith 2022a).

Furthermore, organisational structure and leadership are crucial elements affecting SSMP uptake. Organisations characterised by flat hierarchies and adaptive leadership approaches are often more effective in executing sustainable practices. This may be because of expedited and more participatory decision-making processes, facilitating rapid adaptation to sustainability measures. Effective leadership in Zimbabwean food enterprises is essential for aligning the SSMPs with corporate objectives and engaging all organisational tiers in the process. The findings are linked to the arguments of one of the participants who argued that:

'Our leadership approach promotes openness and accountability. By exemplifying sustainable practices, our managers inspire the entire team to adopt sustainability. The organizational framework here facilitates the rapid implementation of changes and the assessment of their effects.' (Participant 8)

Leaders that emphasise sustainability and effectively convey its significance are likely to achieve superior integration outcomes (Johnson & Miller 2023).

The interviewees' replies underscore the need of cultivating a supportive organisational culture and proficient leadership for the successful implementation of SSMPs in the Zimbabwean food sector. One participant indicated that:

'"Our organization's cultural values emphasize community and environmental well-being." This internal incentive compels us to organically embrace sustainable practices and fits well with our strategic objectives.' (Participant 18)

A recurring theme in the interviews is the focus on fostering a culture that prioritises transparency and creativity. This culture fosters participation and collaborative engagement in sustainability activities while ensuring that the implementation of the SSMPs is welcomed at all organisational tiers. The concept of fostering a culture that values continual improvement corresponds with Smith (2022b) results, which indicate that settings conducive to innovation are essential for the integration of sustainability.

Moreover, the respondents emphasise the need of proactive leadership that promotes openness and accountability. This observation aligns with Johnson and Miller's (2023) conclusions that strong leadership is crucial for synchronising SSMPs with corporate objectives. This has been attributed by a participant indicating:

'In my experience, organizations that oppose adopting innovation frequently encounter difficulties in implementing sustainable practices. It is essential to cultivate a mentality that prioritizes adaptability and the assimilation of global environmental trends.' (Participant 23)

The focus on organisational structure for rapid decision-making underscores the necessity of a flexible strategy to effectively incorporate sustainable principles. Responses from interviewees indicate that a static or inflexible organisational structure may impede the prompt implementation of essential modifications concerning SSMPs.

Discussion

Factors driving the adoption of sustainable strategic management practices

The research reveals that many critical factors influence the adoption of SSMPs within the Zimbabwean food business engaged in international markets. The principal factors are legislative mandates, customer preference for sustainable goods, and the necessity for operational efficiency amid global competitiveness (Smith 2022b). Government policies that promote sustainability via incentives and regulations are essential for facilitating the implementation of SSMPs. Furthermore, increasing customer knowledge and preference for ethically produced products compel enterprises to adopt sustainable practices to remain competitive (Johnson & Miller 2023). The adoption of these factors has the capacity to leverage the implementation and execution of SSMPs within the food industry.

Impact of sustainable strategic management practices on competitive advantage and profitability

Sustainable strategic management practices significantly influence competitive advantage and profitability within the Zimbabwean food sector. Organisations that use SSMPs are more adept at maintaining enduring competitive advantages owing to augmented brand reputation, customer fidelity, and higher resource efficiency (Porter & Kramer 2016). Employing sustainable methods results in cost savings and innovation, enabling companies to provide unique goods at competitive prices, therefore enhancing profitability margins (Smith, Zhang & Li 2023). Industry assessments indicate that firms with strong SSMP frameworks have a notable enhancement in financial performance relative to those lacking such frameworks (World Bank 2021). The implementation of SSMPs leads organisations into seriously understanding the key components of interacting with business and its environment and developing unique strategies that can transform the day-to-day operations of the businesses.

Challenges in implementing sustainable strategic management practices

Notwithstanding the benefits, Zimbabwean food enterprises have significant obstacles in executing SSMPs within a globally unstable commercial landscape. Economic volatility, variable foreign currency rates, and restricted access to technology and capital are substantial obstacles (National Statistics Agency 2023). The absence of skills and infrastructure to facilitate sustainable practices hampers the implementation process. Numerous companies face opposition to change from within the organisation who may not promptly acknowledge the advantages of long-term sustainability initiatives (Thompson 2022). Skills gaps are a serious component in terms of competitiveness as well as the implementation of strategies in the business. Strategic implementation can be successful if and only if unique skills are available for the implementation and execution of the strategies.

Influence of cultural and organisational factors

Cultural and organisational issues profoundly impact the implementation and efficacy of SSMPs in the Zimbabwean food sector. An organisational culture that prioritises sustainability and social responsibility enhances seamless integration as well as adoption of SSMPs (Porter & Kramer 2016). Organisations whose leadership emphasise sustainability in decision-making navigate implementation obstacles more efficiently. Cultural factors, including community values and social expectations, influence the strategic goals of organisations (Hofstede 1980). Companies that synchronise their plans with internal and external societal standards are more likely to effectively adopt sustainable practices. The implementation of sustainable strategic management principles in the Zimbabwean food business is affected by several elements, including legislative frameworks, market needs, and internal cultural dynamics. While SSMPs can improve competitive advantage and profitability, organisations have considerable hurdles, including economic uncertainty and resource limitations (Johnson & Miller 2023). Surmounting these obstacles necessitates a unified endeavour that encompasses cultivating an organisational culture that endorses sustainability and utilises external assistance from stakeholders (Smith 2022). Additional studies analysing case studies of effective SSMP integration may yield significant insights for firms seeking to manoeuvre the intricacies of worldwide business landscapes.

Study limitations

A principal constraint of this study on the adoption of SSMPs in the Zimbabwean food industry is the probable lack of generalisability stemming from its concentration on a single location and sector. The unstable business climate in Zimbabwe presents distinct obstacles that may not exist in other nations, thereby restricting the relevance of the findings outside the local context. The research may predominantly depend on qualitative data obtained from interviews and surveys, thus introducing bias and constraining the objectivity of the results. The changing political and economic environment in Zimbabwe might impact the industry's dynamics, complicating the establishment of a stable analytical framework. Moreover, the limited sample size employed in this research may constrain the statistical power of the results, hence impacting the reliability of the conclusions reached.

Recommendations

Future research should seek to rectify these limitations by broadening the study's scope to incorporate comparative analyses with other African nations exhibiting analogous economic situations or by investigating cross-industry comparisons within Zimbabwe to evaluate the wider application of SSMPs. Longitudinal studies may elucidate the temporal variations in strategic management practices and the ways in which organisations adjust to evolving external forces over time. Moreover, augmenting the methodological framework by integrating quantitative data and sophisticated statistical tools may yield a more thorough comprehension of the correlation between SSMP adoption and corporate success. Investigating the impact of technology and innovation on promoting sustainable practices in the food sector is a significant opportunity for future research, providing insights into how firms might maintain resilience in an unpredictable global market.

Supplement government support

The Zimbabwean government ought to formulate policies and offer incentives to promote the implementation of SSMPs within the food sector. This encompasses tax incentives or subsidies for enterprises that adopt sustainable practices. Government measures can accelerate the adoption of SSMPs, resulting in more sustainable corporate practices (Porter & Kramer 2016).

Enhance awareness and training initiatives

Robust training initiatives should be established to enhance knowledge of SSMPs among stakeholders in the industry. This will enhance comprehension of the enduring advantages of sustainable activities. Training must emphasise sustainability reporting, efficient use of resources, and the incorporation of sustainability into strategic choice-making (Bansal & DesJardine 2014).

Promote industry collaboration

Industry collaboration is faciliatated through cooperation and integration of diverse stakeholders in the food industry. Facilitate cooperation among industry stakeholders, including manufacturers, suppliers, and retailers, to exchange best practices and strategies pertaining to implementation in the food industry. Creating industry forums may promote communication and collaborative problem-solving, hence improving the strategic approach to sustainability within the sector (Albino, Balice & Dangelico 2012).

Foster investment in technical innovations

Promote investments in technical advancements that facilitate SSMPs. This entails the use of environmentally sustainable technology and resource-efficient methodologies. Organisations have to be motivated to investigate and use innovations that diminish environmental impact and enhance operational efficiency (Hart & Dowell 2021).

Formulate comprehensive sustainability measures

Create and standardise measures for evaluating and monitoring the sustainability achievement of enterprises within the food sector. These indicators must conform to international norms to guarantee global competitiveness (Searcy 2012). Employing standardised metrics will assist firms in assessing and conveying the efficacy of their SSMP projects to stakeholders.

Enhance supply chain integration

Execute SSMPs across the supply chain by fostering accountability and openness from raw material procurement to end-user delivery. Organisations must collaborate closely with suppliers and partners to guarantee that every stage of the process complies with sustainability standards (Pagell & Wu 2019).

Promote consumer engagement

Enhance consumer understanding of the significance of sustainability in the production of food. Companies ought to use marketing strategies that highlight their dedication to SSMPs, therefore appealing to environmentally conscious consumers and fostering a market-driven demand for sustainable products (Ottman 2011).

Engage in perpetual research and development

Allocate resources to constant research aimed at discovering innovative sustainable methods and comprehending the shifting dynamics of the unpredictable worldwide business landscape. Fostering collaborations with educational organisations can provide new ideas that improve the capability and flexibility of Zimbabwe's food sector (Geels 2012).

Conclusion

The use of SSMPs in the Zimbabwean food sector is becoming essential because of the instability of the global economic landscape. This intricate environment requires strategic innovations that prioritise not just economic benefits but also environmental and social factors. Organisations that adopt SSMPs get a competitive edge by cultivating resilience and adaptability, essential for addressing the difficulties presented by globalisation and evolving market dynamics (Porter & Kramer 2016). These practices allow organisations to synchronise their operations with global sustainability objectives, thus improving their reputation and stakeholder confidence. Furthermore, by incorporating sustainability into their fundamental strategy, Zimbabwean food firms may reduce risks, capitalise on new possibilities, and secure enduring development and profitability (Hart & Milstein 2013).

Furthermore, SSMPs provide significant advantages in tackling the distinct issues faced by the Zimbabwean food sector, including resource constraints, political instability, and inconsistent supply chains. By using these principles, corporations may enhance resource efficiency, reduce waste, and cultivate partnerships with local communities, thereby advancing sustainable development (Elkington 2000). The regulatory environment in Zimbabwe may significantly influence the adoption of such techniques by providing support and incentives through legislative guidelines and frameworks. By reconciling performance with sustainability, SSMPs not only improve the business model but also substantially contribute to economic stability and environmental preservation in the region. As academic study in this domain escalates, it is expected that more empirical investigations will corroborate these tactics, providing enhanced understanding of their practical application and enduring effects on both local and global levels (Bansal & DesJardine 2014).

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Spy Mukonori: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Abubaker Qutieshat: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

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