# The effectiveness of sustainable strategies on the performance of small to medium enterprises (SMEs). A case of Goromonzi District in Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

*The study was on the effectiveness of sustainable strategies on the performance of SMEs in Zimbabwe with special reference to Goromonzi District in Mashonaland East Province. A sample of 63 employees and owner managers of the SMEs in the Goromonzi district was taken for the study using convenience and purposive sampling. In order to answer the research questions, a questionnaire which had both open ended and closed ended questions was designed and administered. The sample had a response rate of 85.7%. The study found that most of the SMEs in the Goromonzi district are facing a number of challenges which are impairing their ability to achieve their goals. These challenges include among others lake of funds, unqualified personnel, burglaries, shortage of raw materials and suppliers, high rentals and licenses and competition. Furthermore, the study found that most of the SMEs understudy are facing a number of challenges in trying to implement their business strategy. Additionally, the study also concluded that the strategy implementation processes of most of the SMEs understudy are poor. Moreover, it was found in the study that most of the business strategies that are used by SMEs in the Goromonzi district are not sustainable. Moreover, the study concluded that the choice of strategy that SMEs adopt have a strong bearing on their performance. The study recommended SMEs to not to rely on a few sources of funding but rather on a large portfolio of funding sources.*

**Keywords:** *Sustainable Strategy, Performance, Small to Medium Enterprises, Goromonzi District.*

## 1. Introduction

Small to Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) have a key role to play in driving local economic development (Nyamwanza, 2014). This view is also shared by Gombarume and Mavhundutse (2014) who found that Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are vital within the social and economic aspect of the modern society. However, most of the SMEs in Zimbabwe are failing to grow and others are even closing down. The majority of the SMEs in the country have been struggling since their inception and some have since closed operations soon after establishment. Mudavanhu et al., (2011) found that about 85% of SMEs that start up in the country eventually fail within the first three years of establishment. This also applies to SMEs in Goromonzi district.Goromonzi District is a district of Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe. On its flanks, Goromonzi District shares borders with Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe to the west, Seke District to the south and Marondera, to the east. To the north, Goromonzi District shares borders with districts in Mashonaland Central Province, namely,

Bindura, Mazowe and Shamva. Goromonzi District has a land area of 2,459 square kilometres and a population of 223,879 (ZIMSTAT, 2012). Goromonzi District is mainly a rural district and agriculture forms the economic base. Goromonzi District is suitable for intensive farming, beef, dairy, horticulture, tobacco, maize, sugar beans, potatoes, paprika, soya beans and small grains (sorghum, millet and rapoko). The other economic activities in the district include gold mining and tourism (GRDC, 1996) and wildlife rearing (Moyo, 2000).

The Zimbabwean economy has been in free fall with an economic decline of up to 50% over the past seven years. There has been massive scaling down in terms of capacity utilisation and employment creation on the part of large businesses, a situation made worse by the drying up of direct foreign investment. This situation calls for locally-driven solutions to boost both economic activities and employment creation and small to medium enterprises pose as one of these solutions. Hence, there is need for Governments to support SMEs. The Government of Zimbabwe set up ministries to assist small to medium enterprises (SMEs) like the ministry of small to medium enterprises that was established in 2000 and other support institutions in order to provide targeted support to small to medium enterprises (Gombarume and Mavhundutse, 2014). However, to date, social and economic support structures in Zimbabwe have had little impact on the growth and survival of small to medium enterprises. Nevertheless, while a supportive environment and favourable policies have not resulted in small to medium enterprises playing a bigger role in Zimbabwe's economy, there is evidence of their growing contribution (Nyamwanza, 2014). Therefore, the social, economic and political changes that are impacting on the business environment require small to medium enterprises owners to be proactive by developing sustainable strategies for their survival and growth. Sustainable strategies are vital in increasing small to medium enterprises contribution to economic development and employment creation. Small to medium enterprises owners/managers have to change the way they do business and incorporate sustainable strategies in their operations.Sustainable strategies are a variable that small to medium players have direct control of, unlike external elements like government policy. Thus, with the prevailing operating environment, formulating and implementing sustainable strategies plays a significant role in the performance of small to medium enterprises. Hence there is need to investigate the effectiveness of sustainable strategies on the performance of small to medium enterprises in Zimbabwe.

## 2. Research Objectives

2.1 To ascertain the variables which hinder the performance of small to medium enterprises.

2.2 To establish the existing competitive strategies within small to medium enterprises.

2.3 To determine the sustainability of the business competitive strategy.

2.4 Provide recommendations on how small to medium enterprises can use sustainable strategies to improve their performance.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Defining SMEs

An interesting observation in Gombarume and Mavhundutse's (2014) study was that SMEs are easier to describe than to define. According to Muponda (2012) SMEs can be defined using a number of aspects including size, number of employees, country just to mention a few. The Small Enterprises Development Corporation (2010) defines an SME as an enterprise whose workers are not more than 100 and whose sales turnover does not exceed $US1830000. An interesting finding in Agbenyo (2015) was that SMEs refer to those enterprises in which the owner takes part in the administration and production process. Additionally, Jasra et al. (2012) found that an SME does not represent a public company but rather a business. They add that medium sized enterprises are businesses that employ not more than 250 employees while small enterprises employ less than 50 employees and micro enterprises employ less than 10 employees. Nyamwanza (2014) found that small to medium enterprises can be defined using both quantitative approaches and qualitative approaches. Thus, defining small to medium sized enterprises using quantitative approaches involves the use of quantifiable characteristics which include sales volume, number of employees and worth of assets. Nikisi (2014) found that a number of features distinguishes large enterprises from small and medium ones which include:

- Responsive, firefighting attitude
- Exceptional innovative capacity
- Supple structures
- Dependence on very few customers
- Working in imperfect markets
- Individualized management with slight decentralized power
- Strategies that are not formal

The aforementioned features of SMEs help define these firms and also the strategies they use. Thus, the strategy implementation of SMEs is greatly influenced by these features as they determine which strategy is suitable for each particular SME. It must also be noted that larger enterprises have

resources than smaller firms. For instance, they have more access to capital than smaller firms who have challenges in securing capital. Moreover, larger firms have more employees than smaller firms. Given the abovementioned characteristics of SMEs, the definition of an SME is summarised in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Definition of an SME**

| Business characteristic | Typical SME |
| --- | --- |
| Type of management | Personalised |
| Innovative potential | High |
| Number of employees | Not more than 250 |
| Nature of strategies | Dynamic and informal |
| Markets served | Very few |
| Resource endowment | Limited |
| Turnover | Not more than $50 000 000 |
| Size | Small/medium/micro |

**Source: Nyamwanza (2014)**

Table 3.1 shows some of the characteristic features of SMEs that help define these enterprises including the type of management, their innovative potential, number of employees, nature of strategies, markets served, resource endowment, turnover and size. However, it must be noted that these features vary from one SME to the other depending on a number of factors such as their type of industry and the country they operate in.

*3.2 Variables that hinder the performance of SMEs*

It must be noted that SMEs are faced with a variety of challenges that hinder their performance. Some of the challenges as highlighted by Maseko et al., (2012) include:

- Poor infrastructure
- Shortage of capital
- Strict and unfavourable regulations
- Inadequate information
- Limited access to land
- Improper management

Moreover, it must be noted that SMEs do not have enough collateral to use as security when sourcing funds from banks hence there are not able to get loans and if they do manage, they will only get insignificant amounts. Additionally, SME operations are heavily affected by the poor marketing strategies employed by these firms as they are not able to get and keep customers. In addition, SMEs are not able to meet the needs of their customers because they lack the necessary market information to be able to determine beforehand what their customers require in order for the to be satisfied.

Maseko (2012) found that the performance of SMEs in the country is hindered by the poor managerial and entrepreneurial skills found in these firms. Furthermore, the shortage of capital persistent in SMEs makes it difficult for them to be able to afford proper equipment and machinery, land and buildings which are vital if they are to successfully and efficiently carry out their operations.

### 3.3 The SME context

An appreciation of the context of the SMEs understudy is necessary before embarking on a discussion of the sustainable strategies that these firms use. Zimbabwe has faces a number of challenges since independence in 1980 to date. It is estimated that over 85% constitute the unemployment rate for the country. Given such a high statistic, SMEs in the country are playing a very pivotal role by creating employment for the country's unemployed citizens as they are labour intensive. An interesting finding in Gombarume and Mavhundutse's (2014) study was that the SME sector was very important in any economy because it helps in employment creation, alleviating poverty and in generating income. They add that it is necessary that governments and all related stakeholders promote the development of this sector given the significant role SMEs play in the economies of most countries. This view is shared by Reinecke and White (2004) who believe that SMEs all over the world need all the support they can have given the very nature and size of these firms. In an attempt to promote the SME sector, the government of Zimbabwe prepared a policy framework for SMEs. However, government assistance and support has not always resulted in the growth of the SME sector in the country. Thus, most SMEs in Zimbabwe appear to be struggling and worse still others closing down regardless of the government assistance targeted to this sector (Muponda, 2012). Hence, one may argue that the development of small to medium enterprises in Zimbabwe and elsewhere should be determined by internal factors, including the sustainable strategies they adopt.

### 3.4 The business sustainability concept

Business sustainability is about exploiting the opportunities and controlling risks involved in a firm's interactions with the environment in an attempt to create durable value for shareholders (Pojasek, 2007). Thus, business sustainability is supposed to help organisations realise thier objectives today and in the future. Landrum and Edwards (2009) adds that a sustainable business execute their economic activities with both the current and future stakeholders in mind. Therefore, a business that is only concerned about meeting the needs of its current stakeholders at the expense of its future stakeholders is not regarded as a sustainable business. On the contrary, a business that

is concerned about meeting the needs of its future stakeholders at the expense of its current stakeholders is also not regarded as a sustainable business. A sustainable business is supposed to satisfy the needs of both its current and future stakeholders and not favouring either its current or future stakeholders only.An interesting finding in Raderbauer (2011) was that sustainability has three dimensions which are also referred to as the triple bottom line. These dimensions include the social sustainability, environmental sustainability and economic sustainability. Thus, sustainability is a balancing act where business decisions take into account the impact they may have on these three aspects of sustainability including the economic viability of the business.Social sustainability activities focus on maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with employees, customers and the community.These activities often have benefits in terms of positive profile and customer and community support. On another note, environmental sustainability activities focus on the impact of resource usage, hazardous substances, waste and emissions on the physical environment.These activities may have a direct benefit for a business by reducing costs. However, economic sustainability activities focus on business efficiency, productivity and profit.

### 3.5 The concept of strategy

There seem to be no universal agreement as to the definition of strategy as definitions of this concept abound and also seem to vary with the context in which they are used. However, literature suggests that strategy is basically about deciding where you want your business to go, and deciding how to get there. A firm's strategy mirrors how that organisation reacts to challenges and opportunities both in the short and long term (Mhizha, 2015). Pushpakumari and Watanabe (2009) argue that an SME can choose to use a single strategy or many strategies which are found at the business unit level, corporate level and the functional level. Thus, these three levels of strategy can be found in a single firm. Issues to do with human resources management, finance, research and development, marketing and production are part of the elements involved in the functional strategies that SMEs can adopt.Strategies that SMEs can use abound which include but are not limited to the innovation strategy, the network and cluster strategy and the flexibility strategy.

### 3.6 The concept of sustainable strategy

Sultan (2007) postulates that the starting point of having a sustainable strategy is to have compelling goals that will drive one to success. It is clear that a poor or vague strategy can limit implementation efforts dramatically; hence the kind of strategy that is developed will influence the effectiveness of implementation (Li et al, 2008).Hence, effective sustainable strategies are anchored

in the production of a strategic plan. According to Nyamwanza (2014), there is tendency among SMEs to believe that someone, especially government, should support them; this creates a dependence syndrome. SMEs should take the initiative themselves. Urban (2004) adds that instead of hoping for massive capital injections to improve business performance, transitional economies would be well advised to implement formal self-efficacy programmes to foster individual initiatives for entrepreneurial empowerment. Such programmes would enable entrepreneurs to fashion their own destiny, in this case through the formulation of a sustainable strategic plan. How strongly the entrepreneur believes in their vision will determine how high the self-set goals are; and the stronger the desire to achieve these goals will be.

### 3.7 The concept of performance

Performance is the most commonly studied dependent variable in the business literature (Chan and Reich 2007).Since firms pursue differentstrategies, they emphasize distinct output variables including financial performance,productivity, and customer benefit (Hitt and Brynjolfsson 1996; Porter 1980). According to Fatima (2016) entrepreneurial performance is defined in relation to the output of the entrepreneur.It refers to the level of achievement of the entrepreneur in running the businessenterprise. Sometimes, the achievement may be measured by the number of employees,level of profit and sales volume among other things. It may also refer to the outcome ofefforts exerted by an entrepreneur into the business which is influenced by severalfactors (Nneka, 2015).

### 3.8 Business strategy and performance

There is a relationship that exists between the business strategy that a firm uses and the performance of that firm. Thus, the business strategy of a firm determines the performance of that firm (Pearce and Robinson, 1985). According to Covin (1991) there are different types of strategies thus, there are those that results in high performance and those that results in low performance. Strategies that leads to high performance put much importance on the following:

- Customer services management
- Opening new markets
- The quality of products
- Innovation
- Relying on multiple sources of finance
- Advertising

- New technologies

- High initiative taking ability

- Proactive to situations

- Cost effectiveness

   However, strategies that lead to low performance put much importance on the following:

- Avoiding risk

- Reactingto situations

- Little innovation

- Little or no advertising

- Relying on a few sources of finance

Thus, when SMEs pursue strategies that places much importance on advertising, innovation, proactive behaviour and so forth, they are likely to exhibit higher performance. However, those that pursue strategies that emphasises avoiding risk, little innovation, reacting to events and so forth are likely to exhibit lower performance.

### 4.  Theoretical Framework

There are several established models that explain how organizations can successfully formulate and implement sustainable strategies to help organizations improve their performance. This paper utilized Porter's (1985) model on generic strategies. It must be noted that the objective of most corporate strategy is gaining competitive advantage. Hence, a more complete definition of strategy must be based on competitive advantage. Unlike other models, Porter's generic strategies are useful because they characterize strategic positions at the simplest and broadest level.  Porter maintains that achieving competitive advantage requires a firm to make a choice about the type and scope of its competitive advantage.Given the focus of this study on sustainable strategies, Porter's Model on generic strategies is more applicable.

*4.1 Porter's Generic Strategy*

According to porter (1985) a firm's choice of competitive scope and competitive advantage (cost leadership vs. differentiation) determines its relative position within an industry. Porter (1985) proposes what he calls generic strategies which he claims vividly illustrate strategic positions well. In addition, Porter (1985) proposes that differentiation and cost leadership are the two types of competitive advantage that exists. Porter's generic strategies are depicted in Figure 4.1.

**Figure 4.1: Porter's Generic Strategies**

| | | COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Lower Cost | Differentiation |
| COMPETITIVE SCOPE | Broad Target | 1. Cost Leadership | 2. Differentiation |
| | Narrow Target | 3A. Cost Focus | 3B. Differentiation Focus |

**Source: Porter (1985)**

## 5. Methodology

This study took place in the form of a case study. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this research. This approach was used because it enables researchers to have a better understanding of the research problem than when only one of the approaches are used. All the SMEs operating in the Goromonzi district comprised the population for this research.Data in the study was collected from the SME owner managers and employees. In this study, the sample size constituted 63 SME representatives. The response rate was calculated as follows:

Response rate = Absolute frequency x 100

Targeted frequency

Non-probability sampling techniques which include convenience and purposive sampling were used in this study. The samples were selected based on their accessibility to the researcher (convenience sampling) and the researcher used their discretion to select the respondents they thought were in a position provide answers to the research questions (judgmental sampling). Primary data and secondary data was collected in the study. Questionnaires and were used to collect primary data. Internet sources, books and scientific articles were used to collect secondary data. SPSS

was used to analyze data because it has proved to be convenient in terms of accuracy and time.
Findings from the study were depicted in graphs, textual method and tabular method

## 6. Results and Discussions

### 6.1 Response rate

63 questionnaires were administered to the SME representatives in the Goromonzi district.
The response rate of these representatives is depicted in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1: Response rate**

| Description | Study subjects | Responses received | Percentage response |
|---|---|---|---|
| Questionnaires | 63 | 54 | 85.7 |
| Total | 63 | 54 | 85.7 |

Table 6.1 shows that out of the 63 questionnaires administered to the SME representatives
in the Goromonzi district, 54 questionnaires were returned. Hence, the percentage response rate was
85.7%.

The SMEs understudy were involved in different activities. Some were in to clothing, steel
products, food and so forth. The composition of the business types of the enterprises is outlined in
Table 6.2.

### 6.2 Type of enterprise/Business

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Furniture | 16 | 29.6 | 29.6 | 29.6 |
| | Clothing | 15 | 27.8 | 27.8 | 57.4 |
| | Confectionery (Bakery) | 7 | 12.9 | 12.9 | 70.3 |
| | Steel Products | 6 | 11.1 | 11.1 | 81.4 |
| | Curvings | 5 | 9.3 | 9.3 | 90.7 |
| | Food | 3 | 5.6 | 5.6 | 96.3 |
| | Other | 2 | 3.7 | 3.7 | 100 |
| | Total | 54 | 100.0 | 100 | |

**Table 6.2 Type of enterprise**

Table 6.2 shows that 29.6% of the SMEs in the study were involved in furniture. 15% were into clothing and about 12.9% of the SMEs were involved in confectionery (bakery).11.1% were into steel products and 9.3% were involved in carvings. 5.6% of the SMEs were into food while only 3.7% were into the other businesses not listed in the questionnaire.

*6.3 Variables that hinder the performance of small to medium enterprises.*

*6.3.1 Factors that impede the achievement of business goals*

Participants were asked to indicate the factors that impede their businesses from achieving their goals.  Their responses are depicted in Table 6.3.

**Table 6.3: Which of the following factors impede the achievement of your business goals.**

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Lake of funds | 54 | 100 | 100 |
| | Unqualified personnel | 45 | 83.3 | 83.3 |
| | Poor managerial skills | 28 | 51.9 | 51.9 |
| | Burglaries | 41 | 75.2 | 75.2 |
| | Failing to obtain loans | 50 | 92.6 | 92.6 |
| | Electricity & water shortages | 43 | 79.6 | 79.6 |
| | Very few or no customers | 50 | 92.6 | 92.6 |
| | Customers delaying or failing to pay for credit sale | 36 | 66.7 | 66.7 |
| | Shortage of raw materials & suppliers | 34 | 63 | 63 |
| | High rentals & Licenses | 47 | 87 | 87 |
| | Fake money from customers | 6 | 11.1 | 11.1 |
| | Short leasing periods | 13 | 24.1 | 24.1 |
| | Competition | 53 | 98.1 | 98.1 |
| | Total | 54 | 100 | 100 |

Table 6.3 shows that 100% of the respondents claimed that lake of funds impede their businesses from achieving their goals. 83.3% cited unqualified personnel, 51.9% poor managerial skills and 75.2% burglaries. 92.6% cited failing to obtain loans, 79.6% electricity and water shortages. 92.6% cited very few or no customers, 66.7% customers delaying or failing to pay for

credit sales. 63% cited shortage of raw materials and suppliers, 11.1% fake money from customers, 24.1% short leasing periods and 98.1% competition. However, an interesting finding from these results was that all of the participants (100%) claimed that lake of funds was obstructing their businesses from achieving their goals.

*6.4 Existing competitive strategies within small to medium enterprises.*

*6.4.1 Strategy used*

Participants were asked to indicate the strategy they use in their organisations. Their responses are highlighted in Figure 6.1.

**Figure 6.1: Which strategy do you use in your organization?**
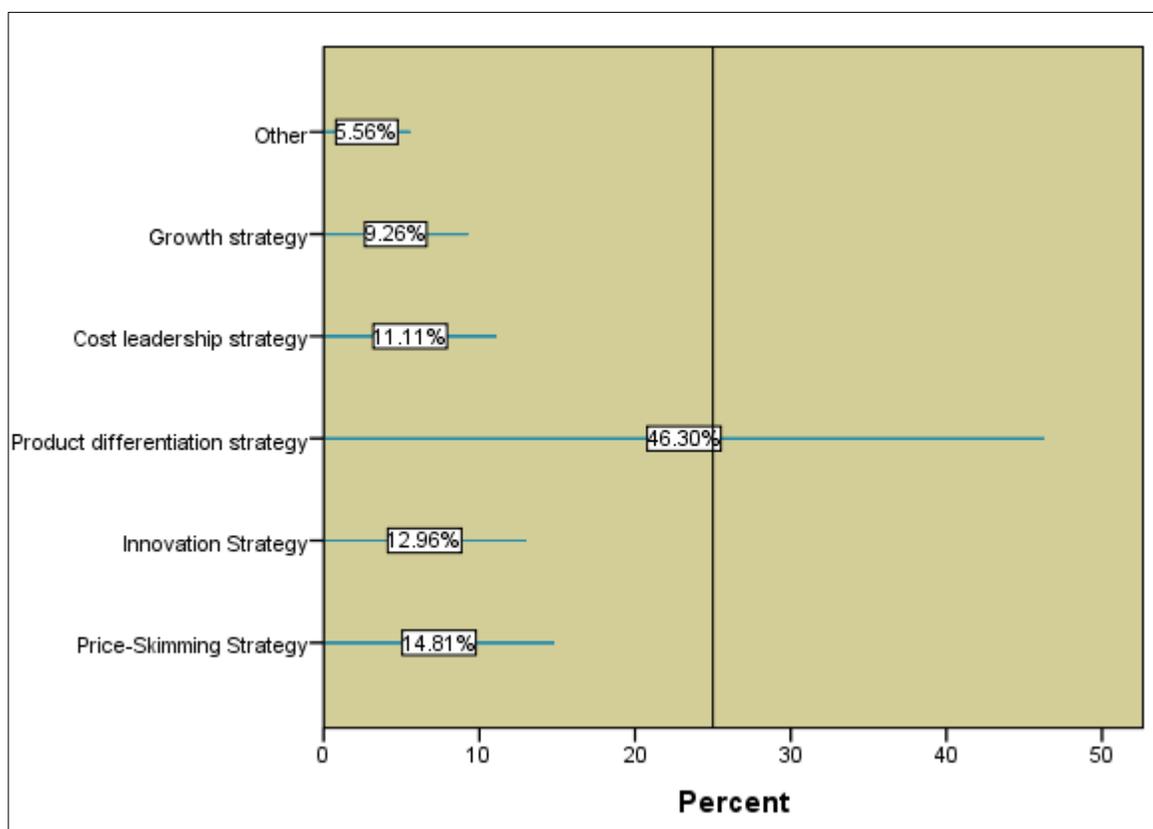


Figure 6.1 shows that 14.8% of the respondents use price-skimming strategy, 13% use innovation strategy while 46.3% use product differentiation strategy. Additionally, 11.1% of the respondents use cost leadership strategy and 9.3% use growth strategy. Only 5.6% used other strategies besides those indicated in the questionnaire.

*6.5 The sustainability of the business competitive strategy.*

*6.5.1 Strategy implementation processes*

Participants were asked to indicate what they thought best described the effectiveness of the strategy implementation processes in their organisation. Their responses are shown in Table 6.4.

**Figure 6.2: What do you think best describes the effectiveness of the strategy implementation processes in your organisation?**
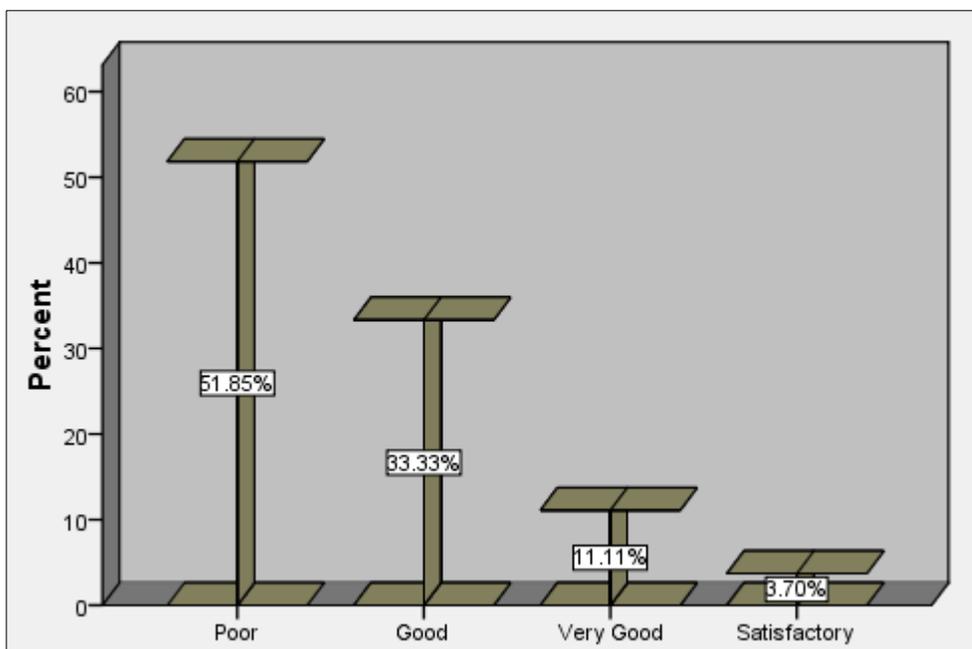


Figure 6.2 shows that most of the respondents (51.9%) describe the effectiveness of the strategy implementation processes in their organisation as poor, 33.3% as good and 11.1% as very good. Only 3.7% of the respondents describe the effectiveness of the strategy implementation process in their organisation as satisfactory. Hence, most of the SMEs understudy believe that their strategy implementation processes are poor.

*6.5.2 Sustainability of business strategy*

The questionnaire asked the participants to indicate the extent to which they thought their business strategy to be sustainable. Their responses are depicted in Figure 6.3.

**Figure 6.3: To what extent do you think your business strategy is sustainable?**
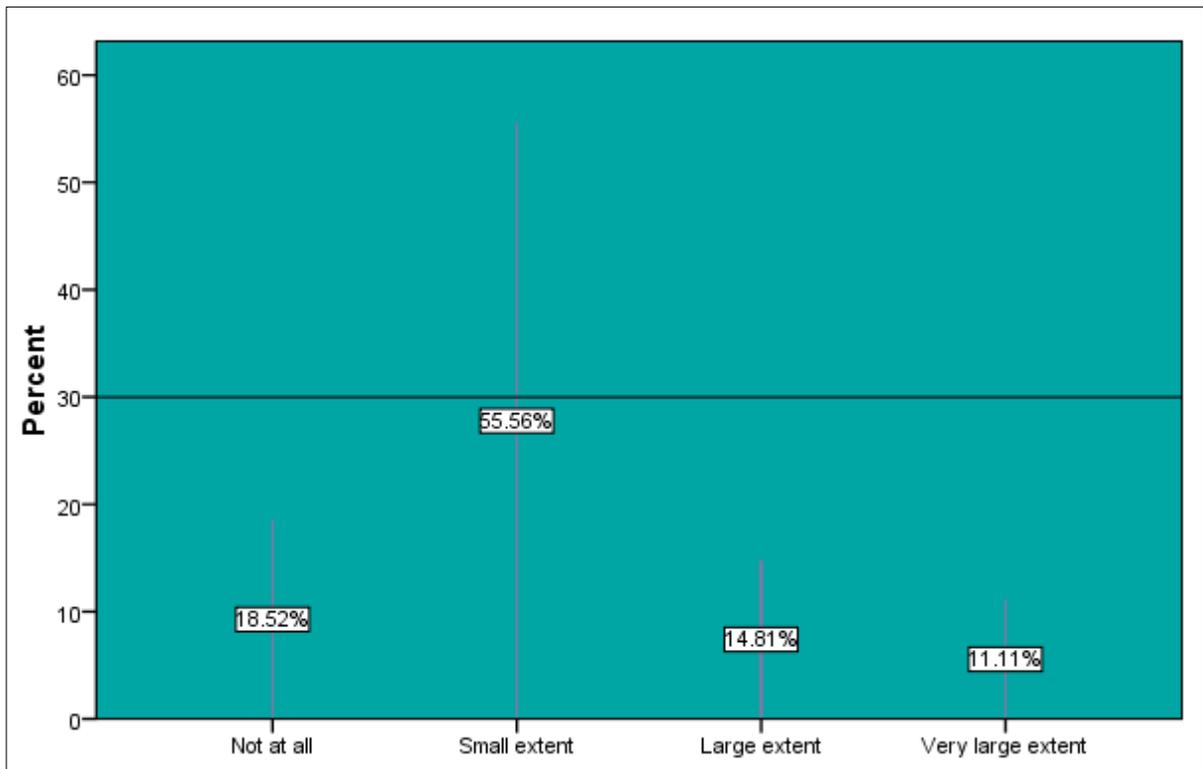


Figure 6.3 shows that 18.5% of the respondents thought that their business strategy was not at all sustainable. 55.6% of the respondents thought that their business strategy was sustainable to a small extent and 14.8% to a large extent. 11.1% of the respondents thought that their business strategy was sustainable to a very large extent. Hence, most of the respondents thought that their business strategy was sustainable.

*6.6 Sustainable strategies and business performance*

Participants were asked whether implementing sustainable strategies could improve the performance of their businesses. Their responses are depicted in Figure 6.4.

**Figure 6.4: To what extent do you think sustainable strategies can improve the performance of your business.**
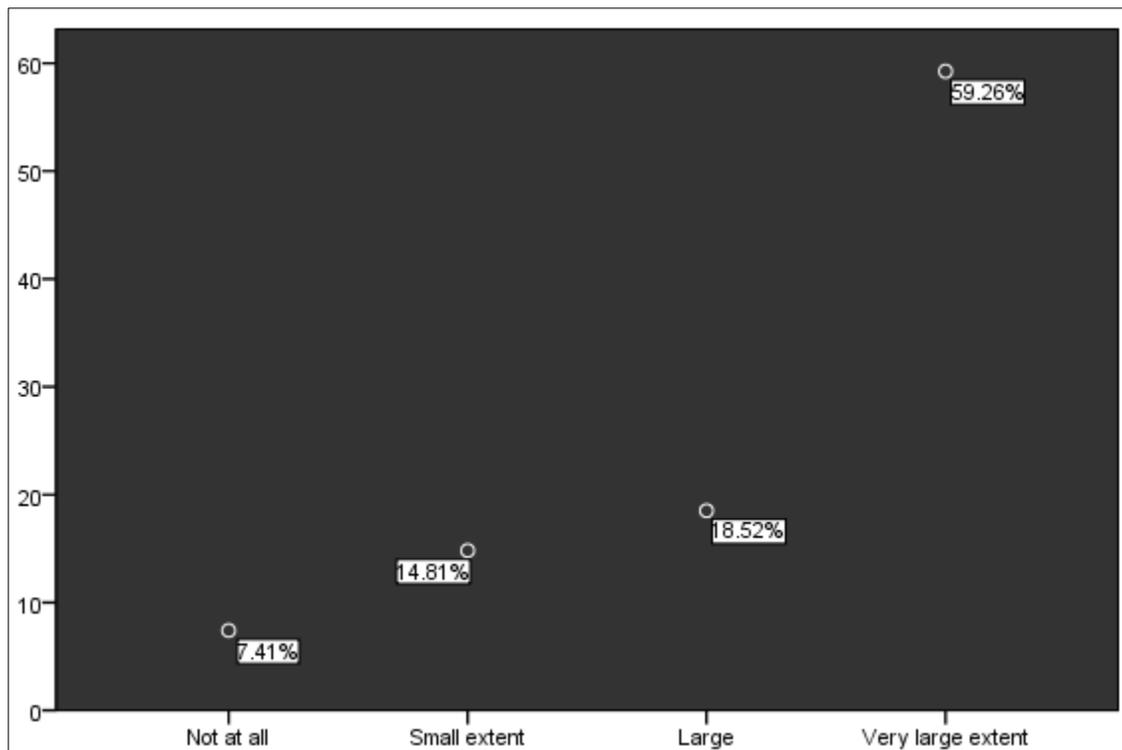


Figure 6.4 shows that only 7.4% of the respondents did not think that sustainable strategies could improve the performance of their business. 14.8% of the respondents thought that sustainable strategies could improve the performance of their business to a small extent. 18.5% of the respondent thought that sustainable strategies could improve the performance of their business to a large extent. 59.3% of the respondents thought that sustainable strategies could improve the performance of their business to a very large extent. Hence, most of the respondents thought that sustainable strategies could improve the performance of their business.

## 7. Conclusions

SMEs in the Goromonzi district are facing a number of challenges which are impairing their ability to achieve their goals. These challenges include:

- Lake of funds
- Unqualified personnel
- Poor managerial skills
- Burglaries

- Failing to obtain loans

- Electricity & water shortages

- Very few or no customers

- Customers delaying or failing to pay for credit sale

- Shortage of raw materials & suppliers

- High rentals & Licenses

- Fake money from customers

- Short leasing periods

- Competition

However, the challenges that are impairing the SMEs in the Goromonzi district from achieving their goals the most are that of shortage of funds followed by competition, and failure to obtain loans. The research also sought to establish the existing competitive strategies within small to medium enterprises. Regarding this objective, the study makes the conclusion that most of the SMEs in the Goromonzi district use the product differentiation strategy followed by the price-skimming strategy, innovation strategy and the cost leadership strategy. Again, the study also concludes that the strategy implementation processes of most of the SMEs understudy are poor. Additionally, the study makes the conclusion that most of the business strategies that are used by SMEs in Goromonzi district are not sustainable. Moreover, the study concludes that the choice of strategy that SMEs adopt have a strong bearing on their performance.

## 8. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in order to improve the performance of Small to Medium Enterprises through sustainable strategies:

- SMEs in the country must not have dependency syndrome especially waiting for support from the government but instead must take the initiative of devising and implementing strategies that will ensure the satisfaction of the needs of both their current and future stakeholders.

- SME should not rely on a few sources of funding but rather should have a large portfolio of funding sources.

- SMEs should open new markets if they are to grow. Kastelle, (2009) argues that creating new markets for businesses has the effect of increasing the market base and the annual revenues of the company.

- SMEs also need to become globalised. This will help them to become internationally competitive.

- SMEs also need to have alliances with institutions such as universities and research centres. This will help them to get more rich market information as well as innovative ideas.

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