Sustainable Business Practises: A Case of Pietermaritzburg-based Small and Medium Enterprises

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Abstract

South Africa is a country committed to accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the year 2030. These goals are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. For this to be achieved, it is the responsibility of all stakeholders to take an active role in ensuring that they act in sustainable ways towards the environment and the society. However, the role of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in sustainable development in developing countries has always been neglected, as it is deemed that they are not big enough to affect any climatic and social changes. This study investigated environmental and workplace sustainability practices by SMEs in South Africa. Primary data was collected from SME owners and managers in the Pietermaritzburg area of Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa by means of self-administered questionnaires (*n=182).* It was established that SMEs are taking actions to reduce their carbon footprint and providing safe environments for their employees. The study also established that environmental reporting and HIV/AIDS management was not being prioritized by the SMEs. SMEs are urged to prepare environmental reports that articulate the actions they are taking in order to attract funding from impact investors. Building a healthy workforce through investment in HIV/AIDS management programs could help strengthen the performance of the SMEs.

Keywords: employees, environment, SMEs, South Africa, sustainability

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Introduction

Sustainability as a concept has gained significant momentum over the past several years. Chapter five of the National Development Plan (NDP) of South Africa outlines the vision of the country to transition to an environmentally sustainable and just economy by the year 2030. For this vision to be achieved, businesses should take a leading role in ensuring that their operations are done in a sustainable manner, for the sake of future generations (ASA 2013). It is widely acknowledged that businesses including SMEs are the major culprits of unsustainable behaviour through natural resource consumption and exploitation of their employees (Wasner & Majchrzak 2015). The role of SMEs in addressing sustainability is critical because the SME sector constitutes about ninety-seven percent of the absolute number of enterprises in South Africa and that it has been estimated that the contribution of SMEs to pollution is approximately seventy percent (Kongolo 2010). Unfortunately, due to their individual small sizes they may not see the need to be environmentally and socially conscious in their economic activities (Spence 2012). Though the impact of SMEs on environment and society is insignificant when considered individually, the collective impact cannot be underestimated and hence justifies research attention (Johnson & Schaltegger 2016). In addition, ACCA (2012) argues that the time has passed of debating whether SMEs should be implementing sustainable business practices or not and their key objective today is to ask how they can incorporate these initiatives optimally in their organization.

Data from several studies around the world suggest that there have been an increase in studies on the role of SMEs in practising sustainability. For instance, a survey of sustainability practices in Canadian SMEs showed that environment and social sustainability aspects are not considered important to SMEs (Burch 2018). Similarly, Lalangui *et al.* (2018) conducted a study in Equador and found that sustainability practices of SMEs showed a medium to high implementation level of all three aspects of sustainability, people, planet and profit. In another study, Shakri and Nabhani (2014) investigated levels of concern and practice of SMEs in the UK and discovered that although SMEs are concerned about the environment and society, they are not implementing any sustainability initiatives. According to Gibbons (2010:16), there is also a lack of SME implementation of sustainability practices in South Africa. Despite this, some South African companies are making inroads into finding

the balance between caring for employees, communities, environment and being profitable as well. For companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, the effort is encouraged by new rules introduced in 2010 that require companies to integrate reports that combine financial and sustainability reporting among others (Gibbons 2010). There is, however a lack of research into the sustainability practices and programmes of SMEs. This research study seeks to investigate the actions taken by SMEs towards ensuring that they are including environmental and social sustainability in their operations. This is important in order to determine the need if any, for greater intervention by the government and other stakeholders in the operations of the SMEs in order to encourage sustainable production practices.

Theoretical Perspectives

The Role of Human Capital Theory in Enhancing Sustainability of SMEs

Human capital theory was coined by Schultz in 1993 and depicts employees as a form of capital to be invested (Sharma 2014). The theory advocates for the enhancement of employees' knowledge, skills, abilities and health (Molloy & Barney 2015). According to McCracken *et al.* (2017:23), the outcomes of investing in human capital include increased job performance, productivity and the use of employees as human input for sustainability practices, provided that they are properly motivated (Thomas *et al.* 2013). In order to remain competitive, organizations are therefore encouraged to develop their employees and workforce. Mason and Bishop (2015) argue that an organization that cannot develop its workforce cannot develop its competitiveness. In addition, studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between individual performance and firm level performance, when employees are valued and developed by their organizations (Jones *et al.* 2012; Bapna *et al.* 2013; Georgiadis & Pitelis 2016).

According to Michaels and Henshaw (2017:1), sustainability is about people, and therefore organizations cannot be sustainable without first protecting the health, safety and welfare of their most important resource, its employees. This is evidenced by a study carried out in Germany on motivation at work that found that employees cited favourable working conditions as the main consideration for their choice of an employer (Casey & Sieber 2016). Craig (2018) argues that most workers do not feel engaged in their work

because the organizations lack a sustainable work culture. He further adds that if sustainability at work is nurtured, employees will be motivated to work with passion and innovation, and will promote the sustainability of the organization. Although studies have found out that employee retention, overall engagement and productivity increase when they are valued by their employers, many SMEs do not know how to make the link between their employees' value and support for sustainability, the employees' daily work and the organization's operations (Polman & Bhattacharya 2016:2). These links can be made by developing employees and enhancing their education, workplace safety and health as well as implementing employment equity requirements as illustrated in figure 1.

Enhancing Education and Training for Sustainability

SMEs are key players in the world's economy through the creation of employment. Due to their small sizes, their main asset is their human capital. In order to enhance performance and productivity, employees require constant development through education and training (Robertson 2014:58). Continuous education and training help to stimulate innovation within SMEs and consequently leading to improved products and processes and enhancement of sustainability (Georgidas & Pitellis 2016; Hosie *et al.* 2013; OECD 2013). According to Sachs (2015:252), as individuals accumulate more education, more on-the-job training and more work experience, their productivity in the labour force also rises. However, for SMEs it is very difficult to engage staff in education and training due to the cost to the company in the short term.

Employee Health and Wellbeing for Sustainability

Ensuring employee health and wellbeing is important for an organization. One of the key areas affecting developing countries, and South Africa in particular, is the disease burden of HIV and AIDS. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest disease burden of HIV and AIDS as the epicentre of the global AIDS pandemic (Sachs 2015:276). This high disease burden has a direct effect on the economy and can have harmful consequences for poverty and hunger. The cost of treatment places additional burdens on individuals, their families, as well as businesses. Businesses, whether big or small are urged to help their employees by creating awareness of HIV and AIDS (Hellriegel *et al.* 2012). While SMEs

might be deterred by the cost of investing in HIV/AIDS programmes, they will accumulate a significant cost in the long run to failing to act in the short-term. Louw and Venter (2013) contends that HIV and AIDS prevention activities can be justified both on financial grounds, as well as on moral and social grounds. SMEs, however, may not be able to afford investment in these activities due to their size and lack of resources. However, a lack of investment will have a negative impact on the social fabric of the workforce and on the community, as an unhealthy workforce cannot work to their full potential and contribute to the economy (Sachs 2015).

Occupation Health and Safety (OHS)

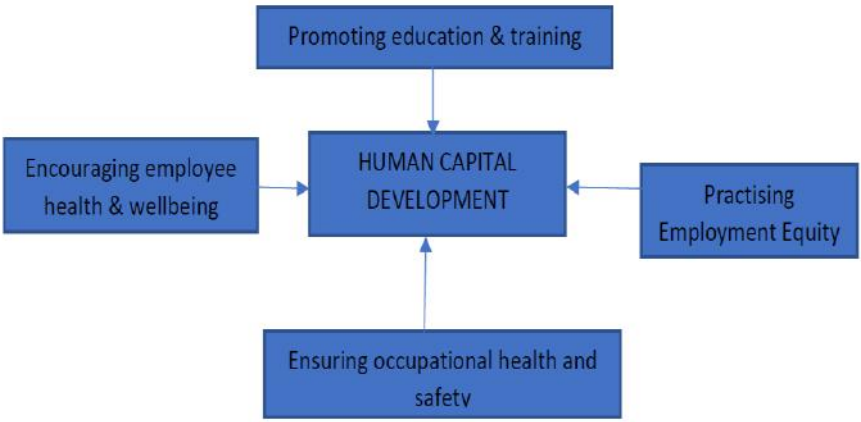
Employers are obligated to provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risk to the health of the employees. According to Jogenson *et al.* (2014:420), it is the responsibility of organizations to provide an environment that reduces injury occurrence and increase employee wellbeing. Improved employee wellbeing translates into higher productivity. The reduction in workplace accidents reduce the costs of business in terms of loss of production, and compensation for the injured employees (Granly & Welo 2014). Several researchers Fabiano *et al.* (2004), Fallon and Rice (2015), Labangui *et al.* (2018), Walters (2001) argue that SMEs carry a higher risk of occupational injuries as they have a more hazardous work environment, and this negatively affects the sustainability of the organization.

Use of Employment Equity (EE) to Enhance Social Sustainability

South Africa has a legacy of discrimination in relation to race, gender and disability that has denied access to opportunities for education, employment, promotion and wealth creation for the majority of South Africans (Howitz *et al.* 2011). To reduce this inequality, the South African government has promulgated legislation that compels organizations with more than 50 employees to report on the demographic representation of their workforce. Failure to do so may lead to penalties or fines (Truter 2014). The efforts by the government to consider groups in the society that were historically excluded from the workplace aim to create an inclusive economy and address poverty.

Lack of inclusion of black people, women, and people with disabilities in various levels of the workplace implies that the societal aspects of sustainability are overlooked. According to Harish *et al.* (2012:17), implementation of employment equity eliminates unfair discrimination at the workplace, making organizations to be friendlier workplaces, motivating employees, and thus enhancing the productivity of employees. Enhancing productivity would lead to economic sustainability and committed communities, contributing to laying the foundation for sustainable development in South Africa.

Figure 1: Aspects of sustainable practices that promote human capital development



Business Case for Sustainability (BCS)

The business case for sustainability is defined as a 'situation where economic success is increased while performing well in social and environmental issues' (Schaltegger & Ludeke-Freund 2012:2). Businesses therefore engage in voluntary social and environmental practices in the hope that they will create a benefit to the company, and this benefit can be measured in a convincing way. The involvement of the business in social and environmental practices is aimed at addressing societal or environmental issues. Grieg-Gran (2002) however argues that companies will not voluntarily invest in sustainability practices unless forced by regulation as such investment will increase costs

while decreasing competitiveness unless all their competitors are forced to do so as well.

Several researchers suggest that reducing the environmental impact of the private sector is likely to have significant social returns (Cordano *et al.* 2010; Jorgenson *et al.* 2014). However, Henderson (2015) argues that it is not immediately clear that these kinds of actions are likely to yield significant private returns. Arguments in favour of the business case for SMEs in practising sustainability have been made by several researchers (Casey & Siebar 2016; Cordano *et al.* 2010; Crosby 2010; Maletic *et al.* 2015; Miller 2010; Wagner 2010) and is depicted in Figure 2 below. ASA (2013) postulates that SMEs implementing sustainable business practices will have competitive advantage over those that do not implement such practices, as larger companies will increasingly opt for suppliers that observe sustainability practices. In addition, ACCA (2012), points out that SMEs that engage in environmental initiatives could further benefit by obtaining grants and financial assistance in addition to waste minimization and cost savings. According to Smith (2018:72), implementing sustainability measures in SMEs is a long-term plan, as the company will grow with the sustainability measures embedded in their strategy. This creates longevity in terms of competitiveness.

Figure 2: The importance of SMEs involvement in sustainable practices (Business Case for sustainability)

Problem Statement

The concept of sustainability has been adopted globally resulting in pressure from various stakeholders to comply. However, literature indicates that SMEs, specifically in developing countries are not taking sufficient action towards ensuring that their economic activities do not harm the environment and/or the society in which they operate. This study investigates environmental and workplace practices undertaken by SMEs in South Africa. The study further aims to provide information that might help policymakers and relevant sectoral bodies to advice SMEs on how to implement sustainability practices in their organizations.

Aim of the Study

The main of the study was to determine sustainable business practices that are undertaken by SMEs.

The study was guided by the following questions.

1. What actions do SMEs take to reduce environmental impacts?
2. What workplace initiatives do SMEs policies and practice in order to enhance social and economic sustainability?

Research Methodology

The study used primary and secondary research methods. A literature review was conducted with the objective of ivestigating theories on business sustainability. A quantitative study was undertaken in order to further determine the sustainability practices of SMEs in Pietermaritzburg.

Study Site

Pietermaritzburg is situated in the uMgungundlovu district in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province (KZN) in the eastern part of South Africa and is the provincial capital city of KZN, the second largest city in the province and the fifth largest in South Africa. The main economic sectors are community services (25-30%), finance (15-20%), manufacturing (10-15%), agriculture,

forestry and fishing (10-15%), wholesale and retail trade (10-15%), and transport and storage. Pietermaritzburg is dominated by the retail and services sectors but also has a robust manufacturing sector that excels in aluminium products and other fabricated metal products, footwear, carpets and textiles, furniture, wood and plastic products, electronics, automotive components and accessories and processing of food.

Research Population and Sampling

The sample frame included all 678 SMEs in Pietermaritzburg. Probability sampling was used as the researcher was interested in getting information from any of the SMEs from each industry and sector. A sample of 250 SMEs were selected and responses were received from 182 SMEs.

Data Collection Method

The study used questionnaires to collect data from SME owners and managers on facts and perceptions of sustainability practices in their organizations. The questionnaires were distributed to SMEs in Pietermaritzburg area of South Africa.

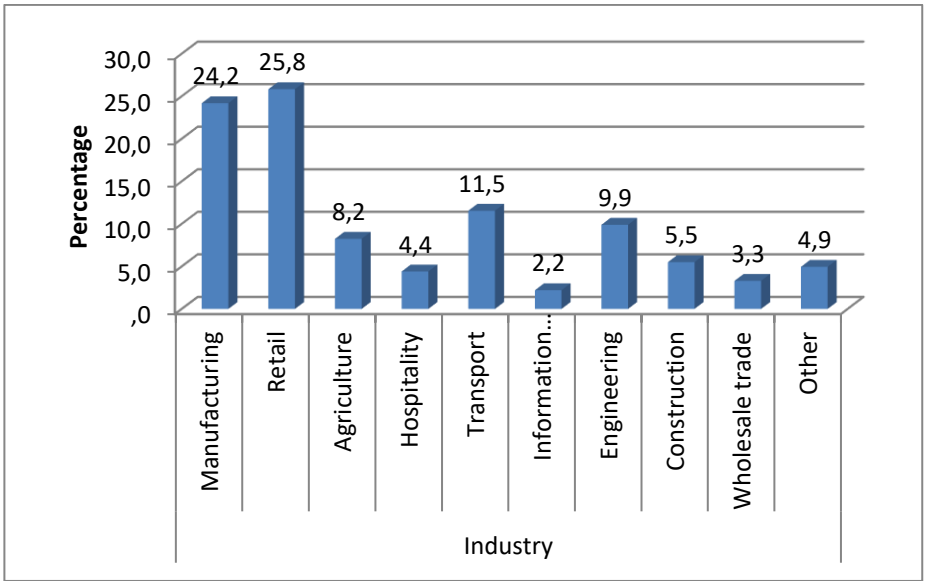
Data Analysis

Data was analysed using descriptive as well as inferential statistics. Histograms and means were used in order to identify the most characteristic value. Binomial tests were used for all the questions that had a yes or no response in order to see if the observed test results differ from what was expected. To find out if there were differences between the sample mean and the hypothesized mean, one sample t-test was used. The Chi-square test was used to test the independence of categorical data.

Findings

The analysis of the actions taken by SMEs to reduce environmental impact as well as workplace initiatives undertaken by SMEs to enhance social and economic sustainability are presented below. The data collected from the SMEs are reported in tables and histograms.

Figure 3: Industry of SME



According to figure 3, the retail industry represented the highest percentage of SMEs in the study (25.8%), followed by manufacturing (24.2%), transport (11.5%), engineering (9.9%), agriculture (8.2%), construction (5.5%), hospitality (4.4%), wholesalers (3.3%), information technology (2.2%), and others (4.9%). The demographics concur with the report that retail and services industries comprise the largest businesses in the Pietermaritzburg area.

According to Figure 4, the largest proportion of SMEs (75,3%) had between 20-50 employees. A proportion of 23.1% of SMEs employed between 51-100 workers, 1,1% had 101-150 employees and only 0.5%. had 151-200 employees. Generally, small enterprises have fewer than 50 employees while medium enterprises have between 51 and 200 employees. In this study, small enterprises comprised 75.3% of the respondents while medium enterprises comprised 24.7%.

Figure 4: Size of SME

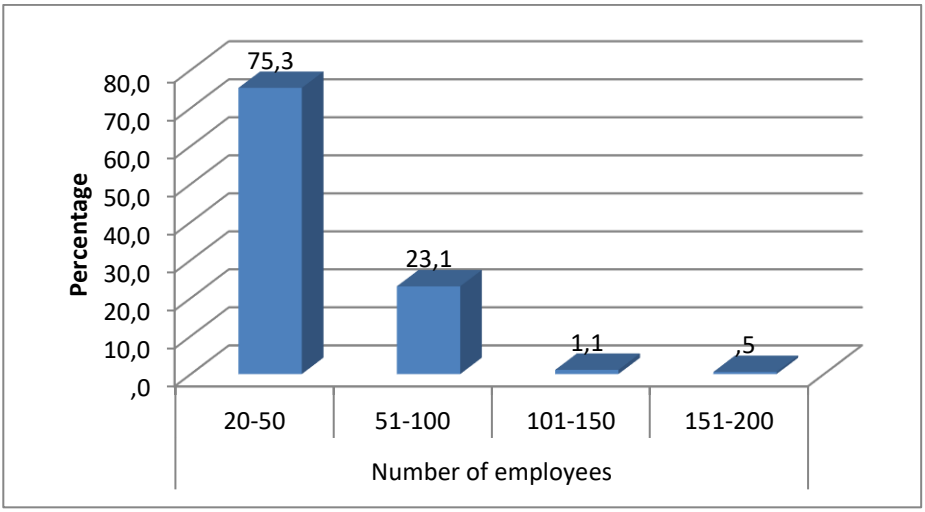


Table 1: Action to reduce environmental impact

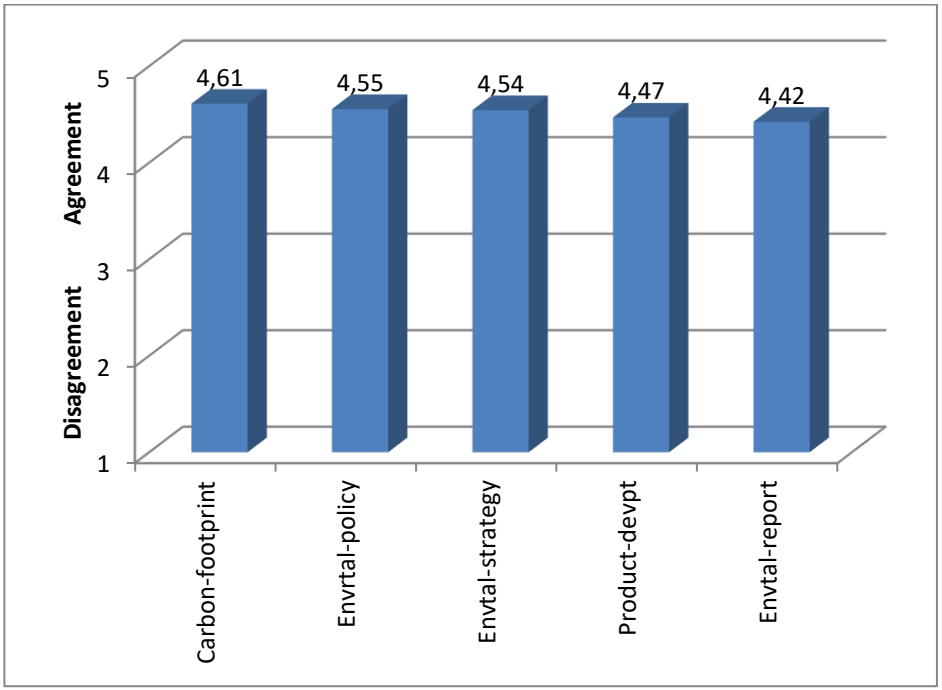
N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
182	4.77	.524	.039

The results were analysed using a one sample t-test (Table 1) and indicated that SMEs are acting to reduce their impact on the environment (M=4.77, SD=0.524), t (181) = 45.661, p<0.0005.

The results presented in Figure 5 indicate that the highest level of agreement on practices to be undertaken to reduce the impact on the environment was to reduce the carbon footprint (4,61), followed by the implementation of an envi-ronmental policy (4,55), including environmental concerns in business strategy (4,54), integrating environmental concerns

and/or opportunities into product development(4,47) and, reporting on environmental performance (4,42).

Figure 5: Practices undertaken by SMEs to reduce impact on the environment



Further analysis of the results using the ANOVA test revealed that there was a significant difference in agreement that reduction in carbon footprint is used to reduce environmental impact, F (9, 172) =2.232, p=.022. In particular, SMEs in manufacturing industries agreed significantly more than SMEs in retail, while SMEs in the IT industry agreed more than SMEs in retail and hospitality industries that more action should be taken to reduce their carbon footprint and its impact on the environment.

Table 2: Availability of environmental policy in SMEs

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	154	84.6	84.6
No	28	15.4	100.0
Total	182	100.0	

A binomial test was used to analyse this question and results (Table 2) showed that a significant proportion (85%) indicated that their SMEs have an environmental policy ($p<0.0005$).

Figure 6: Workplace practices carried out by SMEs to address workplace issues

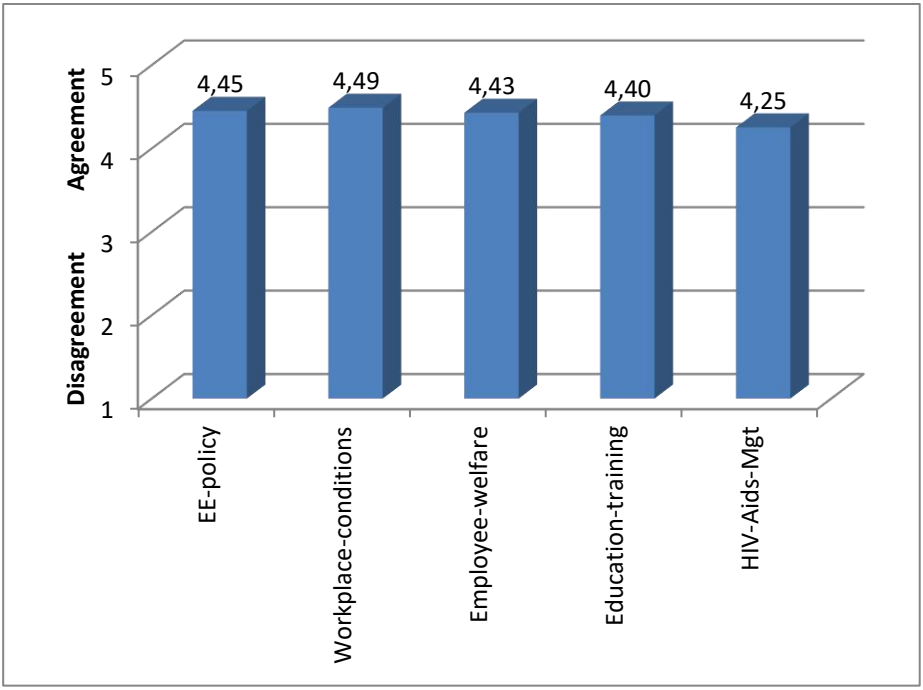
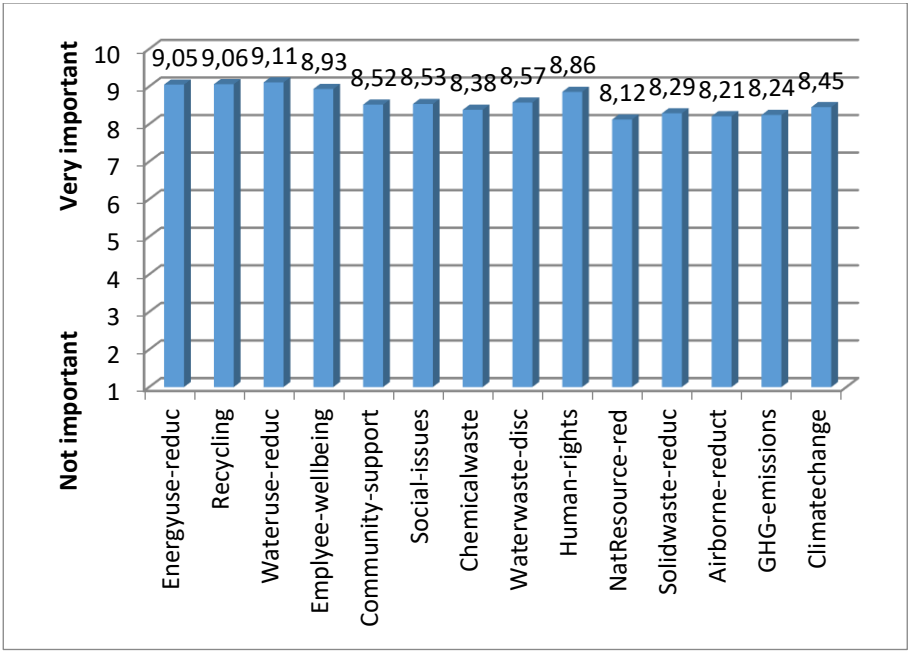


Figure 6 shows that improving working conditions to ensure employees' health and safety was given preference in prioritising workplace issues with a mean of 4.49, while HIV and AIDS management was given the least preference with a mean of 4.25. The results were analysed using a one sample t-test and indicated that there was significant agreement that SMEs used all workplace practices to address workplace issues.

Figure 7: Importance of sustainability aspects



According to figure 7, all the aspects were rated as important with reduction in water use being the most important aspect while the use of natural resources was the least important aspect of concern. Further analysis was done using a Kruskal-Wallis test to determine whether the mean ranks were the same in all the groups. The test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in practises of human rights in SMEs in different industries ($\chi 2$ (9) = 24.915, $p<.003$). In particular, SMEs in the IT industry rated human rights practices

higher than the construction industry, while the wholesale industry employed more human rights pactices compared to SMEs in the manufacturing and construction industries.

Spearman's correlation test results revealed that there was a statistically significant weak negative correlation between the number of employees and the importance assigned by SMEs in terms of all their sustainability aspects as follows: Recycling (rho = -172, p= .020), water use reduction (rho = -188, p= .011), employee wellbeing (rho = -188, p= .011), community support (rho = -153, p= .040), social issues (rho = -209, p= .005), chemical waste reduction (rho = -158, p= .033), water waste discharge (rho = -206, p= .005), human rights (rho = -274, p= .000), natural resource reduction (rho = -194, p= .009), solid waste reduction (rho = -207, p= .005), airborne reduction (rho = -213, p= 0.04), GHG emissions (rho = -194, p= .009), and climate change concerns (rho = -238, p= .001). This finding implies that in the case of all the separate aspects of sustainability, the higher importance SMEs assigned to these aspects, the fewer the numbers of employees in the SMEs.

Discussion

The findings of the study in relation to policies and practices implemented by SMEs to reduce environmental impact, and actions taken by SMEs to address workplace issues are further discussed below.

Practices by SMEs to Reduce Environmental Impact

The results indicated that SMEs are taking action to reduce their impact on the environment. This is an encouraging trend when considering that the sustainability of the planet is dependent on the collective action of all stakeholders. The findings of this study contradict the discovery by by Burch (2018), and Shakri and Nabhan (2014) which showed that SMEs are not implementing sustainability practices. In addition, the results show that the interest of SMEs in environmental sustainability has improved thereby refuting the statement of Gibbons (2010) that there is a lack of SME involvement in sustainability in South Africa. The benefits of sustainability practices in business have been discussed by Stem (2008) and Jorgenson *et al.* (2014) who found that reducing the impact of private sector businesses on the environment

is likely to have social returns which benefits the society at large. However, it is not clear whether these kinds of actions will yield financial returns for the private sector. In addition, Henderson (2015) asserts that efforts to reduce environmental impact only increase costs to the organization and that the benefits are accrued by the public alone. This study, however has discovered that SMEs in South Africa are, notwithstanding the costs, still implementing sustainability practices, mainly to increase energy efficiency but also to respond to the needs of their customers. This fact negates the statement that environmental actions only increase costs with no benefit to business, as SMEs would not engage in such activity for the public good only.

Furthermore, the results indicated that SMEs do have environmental policies in their organizations, a necessary starting point for any organization committed to improving environmental performance. An environmental policy shows the commitment of business to achieving environmental objectives and is created if top management and owners have a vested interest in sustainability, as is the case with SMEs in this study. The findings indicate that SMEs also have guidelines for implementing their environmental initiatives. These policies and guidelines are indicative of the co-ordination of processes adopted by SMEs towards achieving sustainability and defining future actions that the organization needs to take, in order to become environmentally friendly (McCarty *et al.* 2011).

The leading environmental initiative undertaken by the SMEs in this study was efforts to reduce their carbon footprint. All SMEs are contributing towards greenhouse gasses in their operations and are therefore tasked to reduce their energy usage (Robertson 2014). Integrating environmental concerns and opportunities into product development was among the least favourable sustainability practices. This integration implies that SMEs should design products and processes in environmentally responsible ways, including the design of packaging which can be easily recycled or decomposed. This would create a competitive edge, because consumers are seeking out products that are healthy and seen to be contributing positively to the environment. Consumers are increasingly becoming more conscious of the composition of ingredients and processes used in production and SMEs should take this into account in their businesses strategies.

The rankings of sustainability actions in order of importance showed that water use reduction was the most important aspect, followed by recycling and reduction in energy usage. These important aspects of sustainability are

attributed to the fact that costs of electricity and water are escalating, and reduction of their usage constitutes cost savings. Furthermore, of all the sustainability initiatives, water and electricity usage is the easiest to measure as they are easily quantifiable, and meter readings are available. In addition, campaigns from local municipalities on reducing the use of water and electricity, prolonged droughts in many parts of South Africa and declining dam levels, have played a major part in raising concerns about water and electricity usage. Recycling has been a popular aspect of sustainability in SMEs in South Africa. Scott (2013) argues that recycling has financial value because it recaptures the value of raw materials as well as the energy and manpower that went into converting them into products, thus reclaiming over 70% or more of its original value. It is also easier to recycle in the sense that even if it is not done internally by the SMEs, they have an option of outsourcing it to small businesses that are buying waste for recycling purposes. Another observation is that most of these SMEs have bins for sorting out waste which they regard according to their categorisation as an indication that recycling is being done.

On the other hand, air pollution was considered a less important category for addressing environmental sustainability by the SMEs. This is an area of concern considering that a report by the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) in South Africa (2014) shows that the total greenhouse gas emissions in South Africa have increased by 24.9% between 2000 to 2010. Blewitt and de Witt (2004) argue that having clean and safe air to breathe is as important to humans as safe water and food. According to the World Bank (2016), air pollution from industries causes more than 5.5 million deaths to people in the world, while in South Africa it kills 20 000 people yearly. This is a staggering figure given that deaths from air pollution could be reduced by adopting sustainable business practices thereby replacing the business activities that caused them. Industrial pollution is caused by old inefficient processes that use heavy materials and energy and produce unwanted by-products. These can be eliminated through the use of newer and cleaner technologies by businesses of all sectors and sizes, including SMEs that contribute to pollution. To assert this claim, Garbect (2015) conducted a study in India, based on SMEs in retail and manufacturing, and discovered that they are among the worst industrial polluters. The fact that SMEs consider air pollution as the least important category poses a challenge to their efforts towards achieving sustainable development.

Workplace Practices by SMEs to Address Workplace Issues

Results showed that improving workplace conditions was cited as the most important workplace practice by the employees (Figure 6). The importance of health and safety in the workplace has been emphasized by several authors (Jorgenson *et al.* 2014; Fallon & Rice 2015). The argument is that happy employees increase the productivity of the organization whereas dissatisfied employees increase costs due to a lack of motivation, fear and in extreme situations employee strikes (Granly & Welo 2014). Studies have shown that people in South Africa are not happy, as evidenced by the number of strikes of unhappy employees in South Africa. This leads to losses to organizations, including SMEs.

Education and training and HIV and AIDS management were cited as the least prioritized workplace issues (Figure 6). Education and training is, however, imperative to the transformation agenda in South Africa, and should be duly prioritized. Given the small number of employees in SMEs in South Africa, their human capital is considered their most important asset. Robertson (2014) argues that it is imperative that employees are developed continuously through education and training programmes in order to improve their performance and productivity. If SMEs are to remain competitive in the era of the fourth industrial revolution with its requirements for the continuous development of new methods, processes and technologies, SMEs should prioritise human capital development (OECD 2013). One of the main reasons cited as the reason why SMEs lack behind in human capital development, is the costs of training and development. However, this cost can be mitigated in South Africa through engaging local training providers and authorities as well as the sector education and training authorities (SETAs) in partnership. The supply and demand of the local labour market's neighbouring areas should be matched with the skills and training required, but in many countries all too often the provision of training for small businesses is overly centralised and supply driven (OECD 2013).

Another concern regarding workplace practices of SMEs in South Africa is the lack of HIV and AIDS management and support. The results indicate that SMEs regarded this aspect concerning their employees as the least important (4.25 out of 5). According to Statistics South Africa (2018), South Africa has the highest rates of HIV and AIDS in the world and it was estimated that 13.1% of the total population in South Africa was HIV positive in 2018. There-

fore, the lack of provision of HIV awareness and support programmes can be detrimental to the economy of the country. The impact of HIV/AIDs on SMEs is associated with increased absenteeism, decreased production levels, lowered staff motivation and loss of revenues. In addition, SMEs are the most affected of all businesses due to their small staff component and the continuous absenteeism of staff will have a higher negative impact on these businesses. SMEs need to make their employees aware of the impact of HIV, encourage them to go for testing and manage their lives better. Support programmes will reduce stigma and employees will be able to perform better (Louw & Venter 2013).

Conclusion

The main aim of the study was to determine the sustainable business practices of SMEs in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. First, the study intended to establish the actions taken by SMEs in order to reduce their impact on the environment and secondly, identifying workplace initiatives practiced by SMEs in order to enhance social and economic sustainability. The results indicated that SMEs are carrying out practices to reduce their environmental impact, with efforts to reduce carbon footprint taking priority. SMEs are also taking strong action to reduce their water and energy consumption in order to be reduce the impact on the environment. Environmental reporting received the least attention and was recorded as the least frequent aspect practised by SMEs. The main reason attributed to this is the lack of measures to report, and the costs associated with reporting. Workplace initiatives that are practiced by SMEs in order to enhance employees' welfare and their importance to the employees were identified as the improvement of physical workplace conditions while the provision of education and training and HIV/AIDS support and awareness programmes received the least attention.

The findings provide some direction to SMEs on how and in which areas to commit themselves to sustainability practices and programs. SMEs are encouraged to measure and keep records of their sustainability programs in order to benefit from opportunities available such as funding from interested impact investors. They are also encouraged to develop workplace skills plan to help in the development of their workforce through government funding and SETAs. The fight towards quenching the scourge of HIV/AIDs is the responsibility of all stakeholders in the country. Creating opportunities and awareness of managing the HIV/AIDs pandemic through non-governmental

organizations and other sectoral bodies should be given priority, as this could save the organizations loss of time wasted and indirect costs associated with effects of the disease on employees. Owners and managers of SMEs are also urged to embed sustainability programs into their strategic management plans and involve everybody in the organisation in activities that enhance sustainability, to improving their competitive advantage and contributing towards achieving the SDGs.

It is suggested that further research should focus on further exploring the sustainability practices of SMEs in-depth to ascertain the opportunities and challenges that they are experiencing in the execution of their programs.

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