

Uncovering Factors Associated with Malaysian Agribusiness Small Medium Enterprises (ASMEs) Business Sustainability: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract: Agribusiness Small Medium Enterprises (ASMEs) could strengthen the local economy by creating job opportunities besides acting as the fundamental unit for larger firms. Even though ASMEs have comparative advantages and is important for the local economy. It is harder for them to sustain the industry compared to their larger counterparts, especially during their preliminary 5 years. Therefore, this study is aimed to determine factors of Malaysian ASMEs sustainability through a focus group discussion (FGD) with 11 local agribusiness practitioners followed by a qualitative analysis by using ATLAS.ti 7. As a result, four (4) factors, namely entrepreneurial passion and motivation, entrepreneurship skills, business management and business relations were found to influence Malaysian ASMEs business sustainability. The findings of this study would aid both policy makers and new agricultural entrepreneurs. However, a quantitative study involving more ASMEs owners is required to rectify and demonstrate the relationship between factors of ASMEs business sustainability.

Key words: Agribusiness small medium enterprises • Business sustainability • Business interest and motivation • Entrepreneurship skills • Business management • Business relations.

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture has been the backbone of Malaysian economy prior to independence till now. In 2013, it had contributed 23% of export earnings, 7.2% of GDP and employed 10.9% of the workforce. Even though services, manufacturing and mining sectors contribute more to the financial gain of the nation, agriculture is still the major concern among policymakers as it supplies food and creates rural job opportunities [1]. Various policies were implemented to increase the earning of local agricultural practitioners, including allocation of RM 280 million for agribusiness entrepreneurship development and marketing assistance [2]. However, high concentration of smallholders in this sector is justified as a reason for this sector's underperformance [3]. In contrast to that, Cesar and Calum [4] had found that small scale businesses have a competitive advantage over their larger counterparts due to the gap in recent demand for highly specialized end

products and flexibility in feeding those demands. However, they might fail within their preliminary five years [5-7] as they face harder challenges than larger firms. In other words, sustaining a small firm in the agriculture industry is a major challenge for business owners. Thus, information on factors associated with small business sustainability is crucial for both entrepreneurs and policymakers.

Asa and Navneel [8] on the other hand, stated that economic and social limitations of policy initiatives could arise when policymakers rely too intemperately on the small business sector as a whole. In Malaysia, survey on the small business performance is conducted by SME Corp Malaysia but sector specific data is still in scarce. Therefore, a specific study addressing agribusiness SMEs is a need for both policy makers and agribusiness owners. In addition, Kiat Gan and Mahmoud Khalid [9] had argued that factors affecting a business would vary according to corporate governance, legal framework and institutional

environment. Thus, it is important to study the factors of Malaysian ASMEs business sustainability. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the factors of Malaysian ASMEs business sustainability.

Malaysian Agribusiness Small Medium Enterprises (ASMEs): After the redefinition of SMEs in Malaysia, 98.5% of local businesses are SMEs and 93.3% of micro-scaled businesses are agribusinesses. Besides that, a small business could strengthen the local economy as it creates new job opportunities and acts as the fundamental unit of a larger firm. Their existence is very crucial to complete the supply chain, especially in the agriculture sector. Their high adaptability to the changing economic climate due to small resource accumulation and high consumer loyalty sustains the local economic flow - even in harsh economic conditions. Thus, agricultural small businesses aid the nation's economy through its continuous existence by paying taxes, paying wages to the local community and providing cheaper food as an alternative to expensive imported goods. However, they should continuously grow in size to combat structural challenges addressed by Rozhan [1] which includes uneconomic production scale, low rate of technical adaptability, poor commercial investment and unfilled gaps in the supply chain.

Business Sustainability: According to SME Corp Malaysia's 2015 in the First Quartile Survey, Malaysian SMEs are experiencing weaker sales including exports, narrowing profit margin and signs of rising competition. Throughout its lifecycle, an enterprise would experience periods of growth, aging and death or decline of growth rate [10]. In order to combat this stage of stagnation, enterprises should understand the underlying factors which might aid them to sustain in the industry. Traditionally, business sustainability was indicated solely by studying the financial performance [11] of a firm. However, non-financial performances, including satisfaction of the business owner, his workers and customers should also be considered [12]. Apart from that, sustainability was not a major consideration in the business strategy of most small businesses, causing them to compromise with the harsh challenges right after start-up and vanish from the industry [13]. Emphasis should be more on sustaining a business venture than funding it, this resource is appropriately allocated and feasible to challenges. For instance, a firm could still sustain the market even after facing a huge financial loss if it has built trust with its suppliers, employees and customers who are satisfied to support its recovery.

Chutamas *et al* [14] also had justified that understanding business sustainability factors could aid new business venture apart from reducing the risk of failure. They had isolated SMEs characteristic, management know-how, products and services, customer and market, the way of doing business and cooperation, resources and finance, strategy and external environment as factors contributing to agribusiness sustainability. Asa and Navneel [8] had listed behavior of a small firm in terms of market and competition, government relations and networks, organizations, leadership and human resource management, business strategies, products and innovations as the factors contributing to business sustainability. However, all the identified factors were scattered among previous studies causing a clear picture of how each determinant does interact is still an unsolved puzzle. In addition, these findings are not necessarily complying with Malaysian economic conditions.

Methods: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is a reliable method to clarify, extend, qualify or challenge data collected through other methods [15]. As FGD allows argument between participants regarding an issue, range of opinions and ideas could be driven. Therefore, it is appropriate to conduct an FGD with local ASMEs owners to test the factors of business sustainability found in previous studies prior to studying the factors associated with Malaysian ASMEs business sustainability. Introductory letters from the Faculty of Bioresources and Food Industry (FBIM), University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) were sent to local ASMEs owners to obtain permission for and cooperation with, the conduct of the study. A total of 11 ASMEs owners were gathered for a FGD session as shown in Table 1. Open-ended questions as in Table 2 were used to facilitate participants' expression of thoughts and experiences. A total of nine themes were considered for discussion, namely entrepreneurship skills, business management, human resource, business relations, business and product innovation, marketing, social, government and recent issues. The 150 minutes conversation were recorded and then transcribed into text. The transcribed text was then analyzed using ATLAS.ti 7 Qualitative Data Analysis Software. Initial coding was done according to the themes addressed before. Then, pattern coding was carried out to group interdependent quotations of initial codes. As a result, four (4) factors, namely business interest and motivation, entrepreneurship skills, business management and business relations were found to influence Malaysian ASMEs business sustainability.

Table 1: List of FGD participants business details.

| Respondent | Business detail |
|------------|--|
| R1 | Rock melon fertigation |
| R2 | Mushroom cultivation and processed food products |
| R3 | Cucumber fertigation and sugarcane planting |
| R4 | Rock melon, cucumber and chili fertigation |
| R5 | Tilapia and catfish seed stock supplier |
| R6 | Fertigation of vegetables and fruits, business consultation services and farm input supply |
| R7 | Bird's nest farming |
| R8 | Vegetables and fruits seed fertigation and entrepreneurship training |
| R9 | Vegetables and fruits seed fertigation |
| R10 | Vegetables and fruits seed fertigation |
| R11 | Vegetables and fruits seed fertigation |

Table 2: List of themes and respective questions used in FGD.

| Themes | Questions |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Entrepreneurship skills | What do you think are the important skills of an entrepreneur? How these skills aid your business? What had caused you to practice agribusiness? How do you enhance your entrepreneurship skills? |
| Business management | How do you manage problems of your business? Would you like to expand your business scale in the future? How do you plan to expand your business? |
| Human resource | What characteristics do you expect your workers to possess? Do you prefer local or foreign worker for your firm? How good is your relation between your workers? |
| Business relations | How do you sustain abeneficial relationship with your customers? Do you trust your customers for credit sales? |
| Business and product innovations | Are you intended to innovate your products? What prevents you from business innovation? |
| Marketing | How do you market your products? |
| Social | How is your family's support for your business? |
| Government | What government policies are beneficial for your firm and what are not? |
| Recent issues | What are the recent issues that impact your business? |

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Factor 1: Entrepreneurial Passion and Motivation:

Participants had argued about their business interest concluding into two distinguishable outcomes, either solely passion or incorporation of other motivations with passion, including educational background, financial ability, market demand, technical ability, job satisfaction and family had urged them to sustain in this industry. Apart from that, passion was identified crucial to initiate a business idea, but other motivational factors aid the entrepreneurs to overcome challenges in sustaining their business performance as one entrepreneur said:

Passion is just a start-up factor, but other aspects including knowledge and educational background determines success. Without knowledge and educational background, many could start business relying on passion but hardly sustain. (R8)

Passion triggers an entrepreneur to start a business venture. Apart from that, as entrepreneurs are subjected to face continuous uncertainties, passion is important to trigger their creativity and innovativeness to approach problems [16]. They should possess a strong passion towards their business in order to overcome challenges and improvise their performance [16]. Entrepreneurship passion could be either obsessive or harmonious [17]. Harmonious passionate entrepreneurs do not require any other motivational factors for them to sustain being an entrepreneur [16, 17]. Their desire towards business would drive them to face challenges and remain doing their business. Obsessive passionate entrepreneurs in contrast, do refer to external motivational factors in order to like their business [16, 17]. They often seek for perfection [18] in a business venture and might change their business ideas in accordance to the motivational factors. In short, both passion and motivation is crucial for any entrepreneur to start, operate and alter his

business in order to sustain in the industry. Financial gain, better work autonomy and family legacy are identified as the common motivational factors for entrepreneurship by Stephen, Hart and Mickiewicz [19].

1 a) Financial Gain: When entrepreneurs' passion was motivated by financial gain, they tend to implement product innovation or alteration of business idea depending on the market demand. For instance:

I started my business as a hobby. I liked to plant durian trees, but big land and huge workforce is needed. Durian price is also very low as it is a seasonal fruit. However, in fertigation system, little workforce is needed that woman also could conduct the tasks. The return is also satisfying. (R4)

R4 started by planting durian trees, faced challenge of oversupply and cheap price, thus started vegetable fertigation as this business venture is more flexible, easier and provides rapid return.

1 b) Family Legacy: When an entrepreneur's passion is motivated by family legacy, he/she would expect family members to continue his business venture. This is proven through:

I trained my wife to manage mushroom production and currently focusing on processed food production. Later on, I would train my son for processed food production. (R2)

R2 diversified his products when he faced climatic challenge to produce mushroom due to El-Nino phenomenon. Then, he trained his family members to handle different products so that together they could cover a wider consumer segment.

1 c) Better Work Autonomy: Better work autonomy was also identified to motivate entrepreneurship passion of R1, a rock melon cultivator who agreed that he had more interest to do business compared to his initial career as an architect due to time flexibility and could allocate more time with family. As he said:

I quit my job as an architect to start my agribusiness as it is less stressful. As an architect, I had job pressure to meet people and datelines. (R1)

Factor 2: Entrepreneurship Skills: Motivation is important to excite the entrepreneur in developing his/her business, but he/she must possess the skills to do so. Educational background, technical experience, calculated risk-taking ability, marketing and networking skills were highlighted by the respondents as important skills that an entrepreneur should have to sustain his/her business. Apart from skills, respondents also had listed characteristics, including self-discipline, commitment and independence which are crucial for business sustainability.

Respondents also had different measures to develop their skills and build desired characteristics, such as seeking for a mentor, attending seminars, referring to producers from other countries and discussing in social media groups of fellow ASMEs owners. Even though the respondents had listed various skills needed by an entrepreneur, their discussion regarding entrepreneurial skills development are solely focused on technical knowledge and skills as follow:

I was a fresh graduate when I started my business, thus I seek for a mentor to guide me. (R5)

I attend many seminars, participate in business associations and visited Thailand to learn low-cost technologies as I found locally available technology expensive. I found Thailand's mushroom cultivation and seed stock development less complicated than Malaysia, thus implemented it in my farm. (R2)

We (entrepreneurs) should research about development in other countries through online reading and traveling (to the countries). (R1)

However, technical ability is just the bottom layer of skill required by an entrepreneur. The skills required by an entrepreneur were demonstrated as a hierarchy by Knight [20], which includes craft person level to the promoter level and ultimately the general manager level. Managerial incompetence could arise when the proprietor only possess qualities of the lowest level of the hierarchy [21]. This is observable in R4 as he said:

I would only manage my farm, for marketing and sales purposes I need the involvement of others. (R4)

This phenomenon is common among Malaysian agribusiness owners and causes marketing structural problem of the industry [22]. When an entrepreneur is lack

in marketing abilities, he/she tends to rely on another stake-holder to collect, promote and distribute his/her product, causing the supply chain to be longer. Longer supply chain is a reason for high market price of local agricultural products. Apart from that, lack of agribusiness owners' marketing skills cause them to be exploited by middlemen [23].

In addition, at the general manager level, decision making skill is very important for an entrepreneur to grab the opportunity to launch or diversify his/her business venture. According to Mudavanhu *et al* [5], a better quality decision which reduces the risk of business failure more likely arise from a well-educated owner. This finding is in line with R8's opinion:

Education is important for an entrepreneur for risk taking. Apart from that, through proper knowledge regarding agriculture, a farmer could understand the prospect of his desired cultivation (prior to starting his farm). (R8)

Factor 3: Business Management: Business management could be understood as the execution of the skills discussed above, thus it involves business planning, organizational management, knowledge-based resources management, property-based- resource management and production management.

3a) Business Planning: All of the respondents agreed to have the aim to expand their business in the near future. However, only few of them mentioned their business plan as follow:

After this, I would venture mushroom based processed food production, such as nugget and "serunding" (floss), but I am unclear about the market demand. Apart from that, I would improvise my sauce producing infrastructure by stages to comply with Halal certification within two years. (R2)

Currently, I am planting watermelon, but I found the market price is very low. Since I have 10 acres of land, I'm planning to cultivate vegetables and sugarcane. I would sell my sugarcane juice in the next Ramadhan month. As many of my acquaintances are interested to do business but lack of capital, I would seek for help from business association to provide required machineries for sugar cane juice selling. Sugar cane juice gives

better return than bulk sales of sugar cane itself. However, I might face problem in term of price to purchase the required machines. Apart from that, one year period is required between cultivation to harvesting of sugarcane, thus I would cultivate vegetables during that period. (R3)

According to Lightelm [24], an entrepreneur's decision making ability could be executed through compiling and updating a business plan which considers possible risks, competitors' analysis and new business venture opportunities. Referring to the business expansion plans by R2 and R3, it could be concluded that, they are more focused on business venture opportunity, but unclear about their competitors and market demand. In term of risk taking, R2 do not address any possible risk, but R3 had identified price of machine as a risk factor. However, he depends on external source (aid from association) to solve his problem. Often poor business planning is the cause why small scale agribusinesses are actively starting as much as they fail.

3b) Organisational Management: On the other hand, certain entrepreneurs might have good skills and could plan their business venture well, but reluctant to delegate tasks within their firms as they are obsessed with personal control and prestige [21]. This would lead to execution barrier and management incompetence in small businesses [21]. Thus, it is important to structure and monitor the workflow among employees. R3 do not possess this problem as he said:

When I delegate a task for my worker, I would put full trust and would not disturb his/her work. (R3)

Appropriate solution for skill and execution deficiency within a firm is either by forming a management team (linking expert resources to decisions tasks) or hiring an external advisor [21]. None of the other respondents had discussed either about the management team or external consultant of their firm.

3c) Knowledge Based Resources Management: Knowledge based resources are intangible and crucial for small business development. It is appropriate to have workers with specialized skills and knowledge in their particular tasks. Apart from the ability, commitment of the worker towards the firm's development enhances his/her

performance which in turn develops the business through knowledge based specialization [25]. Some of the respondents agreed that they prefer foreign labor to local for the following reasons:

Local workers take a lot of leaves for family events. Foreign workers are more committed. They also possess emotional stability when scolded. (R3)

Foreign workers are more durable to harsh weather. (R11)

Foreign workers are more focused and possess better physical endurance to weather. They also hardly fall sick. Local workers are pampered. (R1)

In contrast to that, R2 and R8 employ local people and overcome problems through contracting and collaborating with their workers.

I used the contract concept to employ my workers. I employ my neighbors whom mostly are poor paddy planters. Thus, during their free time, they work for me. I have around 6-8 workers. I pay them according to their work (amount of mushrooms harvested). My workers have time flexibility and could spend as much time as they need with their families. Their salary is used to purchase daily needs, including rice and fish. (R2)

Investment in employees' development will enhance learning and performance, yet small firms are facing difficulties to cater appropriate system in the organization due to financial constraint [26]. However, building collaboration with employees was made possible by R6:

My company enforces collaboration between our employees through STEP concept, which Students (fresh graduates) are Trained to become Entrepreneurs and become business Partners of my firm. Most of my workers sustain in my firm to gain technical knowledge and experience. (R8)

3d) Property Based Resource Management: Small firms often possess inadequate facilities and limited in-house technology as they selectively invest only in money-generating activities due to financial constraints [21]. This finding is in line with R2's financial constraint to invest on infrastructure complying with Malaysian Halal certification standards for his sauce products. R8 had also stated his concern about accessibility of local innovations

to local farmers. He believes that many innovations restricted to the institutional level and are not commercialized. Apart from that, two years of accreditation period prior to patenting causes innovations to be duplicated prior to patent declaration. As a result, they have to spend huge cost to import foreign equipment. In addition, R2 had stated that cost for seed stock development in Malaysia is ten thousand folds of the cost in Thailand. This had caused him to adopt the cheaper technology for his farm.

Apart from accessing potential capital assistance, small scale agribusiness owners also should separate their income and profit for reinvestment and debt reduction purposes. Proper financial record keeping and accounting is crucial for them to build trust and sustain growth during hardships [27]. This is in line with R1's opinion regarding financial record keeping as follow:

We (local agribusiness owners) could conduct a business but could not prepare proper credit assistance proposal. Sales record keeping is also crucial to get financial assistance. (R1)

3e) Production Management: Firms that survived several years subsequently after entry are those which were able to adjust to different products and produce a viable product [28]. This is agreed by R2 who diversified his product from fresh mushroom to various sauces when climate is unsuitable to mushroom cultivation. Apart from that, R4 also had decided to cultivate better priced watermelon instead of seasonal fruit which are sold at low price. R5, a freshwater fish breeder had decided to diversify his product and in the progress to produce an established product, Tilapia fish fillet. R1 is intended to produce rock melon juice and ice-cream to be sold at kiosks in shopping complexes.

Performance of the product is the critical success factor that can lead to the sustenance of the SMEs [29] R6 had discussed the importance of product development according to consumers' need. He stated that consumers demand is now high on ready to eat products such as peeled fruits. Investing in the R&D of product could improve demand condition and cause competitive advantage of the firm [30]. R2 intended to innovate his mushroom into processed food products such as nuggets and burger. R8 on the other hand intended to optimize every part of his rock melon as it edible from seed to skin. In fact, he shared that rock melon seeds could be developed into supplement pills for men health. In short,

respondents are aware of the business management aspects, but they lack in capability either in term of knowledge or resource to proceed with their intention.

Factor 4: Business Relations: Business relations could be categorized into business to business (B2B), business to customer (B2C) and business to government (B2G).

4 a) B2B Relationship: Business cooperation between agribusiness small holders are driven by the aim to commercialize their product with minimal competition as it provides better bargaining power, access to better prices, credit assistance and technical training [31]. R7 stated that he discusses with fellow entrepreneurs through social media whenever he needs consultation regarding his business. He agreed that with the aid social-media he could attain various solutions for a problem and implement the most reliable one. R1 on the other hand, seek for other rock melon producers to meet his consumer demand as his seed stock is controlled by supplier. R2 had made 2 years contract with a hypermarket to sell his products. R4 believes that, as a producer he requires a support structure from other stakeholders to market his product. He prefers to seek help from fellow entrepreneurs as it is more feasible than depending on government agencies. He also stated that often collaboration with government agencies remain at the discussion phase.

4 b) B2C Relationship: Customer loyalty which plays a significant role in fostering profitability and business sustainability could be categorized into behavioural, attitudinal and composite loyalty [32]. R5 provides after sales service, including transportation and fish rearing consultation to breed purchasers. Apart from that, he built consumer loyalty through replacing dead seed stock upon arrival at his customer's place. By doing this, he might face financial loss at initial phase, but his consumer loyalty would develop into a mouth-to-mouth marketing asset which would elevate his sales and reputation in the market. R3 also do conduct similar strategy by befriending with his customers and offer them to be his distributor by offering discounts. However, none of the respondents agreed to practice credit sales as they are afraid of the risk, except for R8 who offers dated check payment method to trusted customers. R1 had a bad experience in credit sales and would never compromise to credit sales.

4 c) B2G Relationship: High level of bureaucracy in government agencies hinders efficient and productive business operations among Malaysian SMEs [33]. This is

similar to the statements by R1 and R4 which agrees that financial and marketing assistance from the government is delayed due to bureaucracy. Apart from that, R2 also stated that officers are also not always available for consultation as they are busy with administrative tasks such as meetings. In addition, certain officers are lack in knowledge regarding recent technological development and stick to the method learned by them. Having a contrasting view on financial assistance by government to entrepreneurs, R3 and R6 do agree that Malaysian ASMEs owners should be independent, thus appropriate financial assistance should be loan which requires a payback. This is because it will become a motivation for the entrepreneur to increase his firms gain apart from depending on continuous incentives and subsidies. R3 suggested that stricter enforcement is required to ensure that financial assistance allocated is exactly spent on developing the business. He also suggested that it is better to give required tools compared to cash as it could prevent misleading purchases. R2 also supported this and adds on to the importance of knowledge transfer from research institutes to entrepreneurs. He voiced his dissatisfaction regarding huge cost of mushroom burger making technology offered by a government owned research institute. R6 is also concerned about the mutual benefit that might be gained through academic institute – government – entrepreneur collaboration to reduce risks of business failure.

CONCLUSIONS

As the Ancient Chinese proverb goes: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime". Rather than subsidising agricultural sector and promoting local ASMEs owners dependency on government initiatives, it is far more beneficial to educate them with knowledge regarding their business sustainability. Since very few studies were done regarding this subject in the national scale, this paper would be the pioneer reference for factors determining Malaysian ASMEs business sustainability. Four factors, namely entrepreneurial passion and motivation, entrepreneurial skills, business management and business relations were identified as responsible for ASMEs' sustainability. However, as limited respondents are involved in this study, it might be inappropriate to justify this finding for ASMEs throughout Malaysia. Thus, another quantitative study involving ASMEs throughout the country is crucial to rectify this finding. Apart from

that, the business sustainability factors are interdependent, thus the relationship among them is also crucial for better understanding.

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