Sustainability Analysis of SMEs Facing Economic Adversity: A Case Study of Hotel Sector Companies in the City of Tete (2018–2023)

Agness Serafina de Sousa Manuel, Criscêncio Luís Sande Botão, Marteza Alfredo Catine Guivala, Iara dos Santos Jafar Marques

Unizambeze University, Health Science Faculty, Cidade de Tete, Tete, Mozambique

DOI: https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1307000184

Received: 22 July 2026; Accepted: 27 July 2026; Published: 06 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the sustainability of hotel companies in the face of economic adversity. Methodologically, the study employed explanatory research descriptive in nature and qualitative in approach based on a literature review and semi-structured interviews. Data collection relied on primary sources (interviews with managers of the companies studied) and secondary sources (scientific literature and relevant documents). The results indicate that managers are knowledgeable about sustainability and implement practices aligned with the three pillars of sustainable development. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that it is possible to reconcile sustainability, business strategy, and competitive advantage within the tourism sector, although the main obstacles to implementing sustainable practices relate to the availability of financial resources and stakeholder awareness.

However, limitations were identified regarding the ability to capture knowledge and apply sustainability indicators to evaluate performance; addressing these areas could contribute to future studies. Furthermore, dividing the period of analysis (2018-2023) into three distinct phases pre-pandemic stability (2018-2019), acute shock (2020-2021), and recovery/inflationary adjustment (2022-2023) would provide a more comprehensive and structured approach to the topic. Nevertheless, we recognize that this temporal segmentation falls beyond the scope of the present study and may be addressed in future research to provide a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon across these different periods.

Keywords – Sustainability, economic adversity, hospitality industry

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the global economy has experienced a slowdown stemming from economic adversities caused by environmental, social, and economic phenomena. These phenomena constrain corporate sustainability thereby jeopardizing the potential for medium- and long-term business success and subject companies to internal and external pressures, compelling them to rethink their management practices in order to overcome economic challenges and ensure that future generations can meet their own needs.

This study aims to analyze the sustainability of companies in the hotel sector in the face of economic adversity. It presents the experiences of hotel businesses in the city of Tete between 2018 and 2023 a period during which Mozambique faced major economic challenges stemming from consecutive shocks, including the "hidden debts" scandal, cyclones, an insurgency, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Many companies, particularly in the hotel sector, encountered economic and financial difficulties due to pressure on fuel and food prices and a drop in customer numbers; these factors caused revenues to plummet significantly, leading to financial decline and economic unsustainability.

According to Katsoulakos (2006), corporate sustainability integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions while also considering stakeholder satisfaction. It represents a set of management practices that seek to balance the organization's impacts and meet stakeholder expectations. Stakeholder engagement is fundamental to creating sustainable strategies, although operationalizing this process presents challenges. To address these difficulties, tools have been developed to assist in integrating stakeholder expectations into strategic planning.

From an economic perspective, sustainability entails fostering business growth without compromising the resources of future generations. Thus, organizations must adopt sustainable practices that reconcile profitability, social responsibility, and environmental preservation, ensuring their long-term viability.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach aimed at understanding and analyzing the sustainability of hotel companies in the face of economic adversity, prioritizing the interpretation of phenomena and participants' perspectives over quantification. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the reality under study, with the researcher serving as the primary data collection instrument through interviews and document analysis (Godoy, 1995; Silva & Menezes, 2005; Minayo, 2007; Malhotra, 2012).

In terms of objectives, the research is classified as explanatory, as it seeks to identify the factors influencing the sustainability of hotel companies and to understand the causes of the observed phenomena (Gil, 2007; 2010). The study relied on a literature review to establish a theoretical foundation (Gil, 2008) and employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection technique. A case study design with purposive sampling was adopted, involving three managers (G1, G2, and G3) knowledgeable about the subject matter, while ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured individual interviews consisting of open-ended questions, allowing participants to present their perceptions regarding corporate sustainability. This method afforded greater flexibility and enabled a deeper exploration of responses (Tegethof, 2007; Máximo-Esteves, 2007; Ghiglione & Matalon, 1993). Secondary sources such as books, scientific articles, dissertations, and reports were also utilized (Lakatos & Marconi, 2001). The data were organized and analyzed using content analysis, enabling the identification of categories, patterns, and relationships among the findings; these were subsequently compared with the scientific literature to ensure greater consistency in interpretation (Almeida, 2007; Smith, 2000).

Problem Statement

Corporate sustainability is viewed as an integral part of economic development; its implementation along with the adoption of best practices regarding environmental, social, and economic management fosters efficient progress within the business sector. Furthermore, it helps address economic adversities, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which severely destabilized the economies of numerous nations including Mozambique and disproportionately impacted small and medium-sized enterprises. These businesses were compelled to adopt strategic positioning to remain sustainable, as the restrictions on the movement of people and goods imposed by the Mozambican government brought about drastic changes in business management.

The measures adopted to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus significantly affected SMEs particularly those in the hospitality sector, as their business relies on social interaction resulting in financial losses due to a drop in customers and reduced business volume; to cope with these challenges, these companies were forced to restructure in order to adapt to the prevailing reality. Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, other adversities such as the "hidden debts" scandal, cyclones, and the insurgency also slowed down the economy, particularly in Mozambique.

Given that the hotel industry represents the largest sector within the tourism economy, it must be viewed as a key element in the sustainable management of tourist destinations. Raising awareness regarding the adoption of sustainable best practices and environmental management programs for lodging establishments marks the beginning of a process aimed at achieving economic sustainability a factor currently lacking, the neglect of which undermines the systemic balance among stakeholders: government, businesses, and society. Based on these observations, this study focuses on understanding the business management strategies adopted by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) particularly in the hotel sector to enable them to remain sustainable in the face of economic adversity and ensure their financial viability.

Thus, the following question arises: how do SMEs manage to remain sustainable in the face of economic adversity?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sustainability and Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a multidimensional and dynamic concept, the evolution of which is linked to social, economic, and environmental changes (Gladwin, Kennelly & Krause, 1995; Rogers et al., 2008). The concept gained greater prominence with the Brundtland Report, which defined it as the ability to meet present needs without compromising future generations (WCED, 1987). According to Sachs (2000), sustainability integrates social, economic, environmental, ecological, territorial, cultural, and political dimensions, fostering a balance between development and preservation. In this context, sustainable development seeks to reconcile economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection (Silva & Quelhas, 2006); it is represented by the Triple Bottom Line model, which combines economic, social, and environmental dimensions within the sustainable management of organizations (Dou & Sarkis, 2010; Hansen et al., 2009).

Corporate Sustainability

Corporate sustainability entails integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions into organizational management, aiming to reconcile competitiveness and profitability with social responsibility and environmental preservation (Fiksel, Low & Thomas, 2004). In this context, companies adopt environmental management practices, promote the rational use of natural resources, and develop programs that reinforce their commitment to society and the environment (Székely & Knirsch, 2005). According to Vellani and Ribeiro (2009), being sustainable means fostering economic development without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. For Silva et al. (2009), this approach represents a new way of managing business reducing environmental impacts without sacrificing profitability while Sachs (2002) argues that sustainability requires the integration of economic, ecological, and social strategies. However, implementation remains a challenge for many organizations, depending largely on strengthening relationships with key stakeholders, namely customers, suppliers, employees, the government, and society.

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Economic, Social, and Environmental Sustainability

Economic sustainability refers to the capacity of organizations to foster long-term growth and profitability through the efficient use of resources and the creation of sustainable value (Barbosa, 2008). This pillar encompasses financial management, investments, innovation, and the adoption of sustainable technologies, seeking to balance economic performance, social responsibility, and environmental preservation (Costa, 2019; Rosa & Pozza, 2012). Sustainable economic development relies on investment in science, technology, economic inclusion, and the responsible use of natural resources, thereby strengthening organizational competitiveness (Willard, 2012; UNDP, 2017).

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VI June 2026

Social sustainability is associated with the promotion of well-being, equity, inclusion, and the improvement of the population's quality of life (Barbosa, 2008). It encompasses aspects such as education, health, civic participation, and the fair distribution of resources. According to Omann and Spangenberg (2002), its realization depends on active citizen participation, efficient institutions, and policies geared toward equality and social development. The use of social indicators makes it possible to identify challenges and guide strategies to strengthen social cohesion (Woodcraft, 2012).

Environmental sustainability refers to the protection of natural resources, the reduction of environmental impacts, and the conservation of ecosystems for future generations (Leff, 2011). It is based on balancing economic development with nature preservation, involving practices such as pollution reduction, energy efficiency, waste management, and biodiversity conservation (Barbosa, 2008; Dias, 2017). Thus, the three pillars of sustainability economic, social, and environmental must be integrated to ensure management that is responsible, competitive, and oriented toward sustainable development.

Effects of Economic Adversity in Mozambique

Economic adversity in Mozambique stems from a combination of internal and external factors, such as political and social instability, climate shocks, financial crises, public debt, and reliance on foreign capital (Castel-Branco, 2017). Despite previous economic growth, the country faces structural vulnerabilities due to its dependence on foreign aid, foreign direct investment, and the export of primary commodities (World Bank, 2022; Castel-Branco & Ossemane, 2010). The "Hidden Debts" crisis valued at over USD 2.2 billion exacerbated the fiscal situation and contributed to a reduction in international financial support, affecting essential sectors such as health, education, and public transport (IESE, 2021).

Subsequently, the country faced new challenges stemming from tropical cyclones, the COVID-19 pandemic, political-military instability, terrorism in Cabo Delgado, and the impacts of the Russia-Ukraine conflict factors that reduced economic growth, limited investment, and increased social vulnerability (World Bank, 2022; IESE, 2021). Extreme weather events, such as cyclones Idai, Kenneth, Chalane, and Eloise, caused extensive damage to infrastructure, agriculture, and livelihoods, highlighting the country's vulnerability to climate change (World Bank, 2020; Germanwatch, 2021). COVID-19 exacerbated these issues by affecting businesses, employment, and incomes, particularly in the tourism, hospitality, and services sectors (ILO, 2021).

Sustainability in the Hotel Industry

The hotel industry plays a pivotal role in the tourism value chain, often bearing the responsibility of raising guest awareness about the destination and directing them toward other links in the value chain (Bachmeier, 2017). However, a sustainable hotel must be environmentally responsible, economically viable, culturally diverse, and socially just and active (Bachmeier, 2017). Nevertheless, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) projects that tourism's contribution to CO_2 emissions could rise by 150% over the next 30 years if no mitigation measures are taken (International Tourism Partnership, 2014). Consequently, hotels part of this industry have a fundamental role to play in reducing these emissions (International Tourism Partnership, 2014).

The goal of transforming a hotel into a sustainable one is to minimize its negative environmental impact as much as possible by reducing resource consumption and adopting practices that convert the hotel's waste into raw materials that can subsequently be utilized by others (Alexander & Kennedy, 2002). Achieving this shift requires keeping the ultimate goal of "zero waste" in mind; this enhances hotel efficiency, offers economic advantages, reduces the burden of waste extraction from the natural environment, and ensures greater resource availability (Alexander & Kennedy, 2002).

Sustainable Management Practices in the Hotel Industry

Sustainability has become a strategic element for hotel organizations, driven by growing consumer concern, legal requirements, and the need to reduce operating costs (Deloitte, 2012; Farias et al., 2010). In this context, hotels seek to balance economic competitiveness with the reduction of environmental and social impacts (Lubin & Esty, 2010; Bansal, 2005).

Sustainable management practices in the hotel industry encompass economic, social, and environmental dimensions, aiming to improve organizational performance and generate sustainable value (Oriade et al., 2021). Economically, key aspects include job creation, revenue generation, and the enhancement of local activities through the hiring of regional labor and suppliers (Zaei & Zaei, 2013; Mbaiwa, 2005). The social dimension relates to inclusion, cultural appreciation, community cooperation, and the improvement of relationships among tourists, businesses, and local communities (Lee & Park, 2009; Ribeiro et al., 2017).

The environmental dimension focuses on reducing the impacts caused by high consumption of water, energy, and materials through practices such as recycling, waste management, energy efficiency, the use of renewable energy, and biodiversity conservation (Erdogan & Baris, 2007; Scholz et al., 2020). The adoption of these practices depends on employee training, management capacity, innovation, and organizational learning (Leonidou et al., 2015; Pereira et al., 2021). Thus, sustainable management in the hospitality industry contributes to cost reduction, customer satisfaction, environmental preservation, and the strengthening of the competitiveness of tourism enterprises (Peres & Resende, 2011).

Sustainability Challenges in Hotel Enterprises

Implementing sustainable practices in the hotel sector poses a challenge due to high initial costs, a lack of knowledge, limitations regarding qualified human resources, and difficulties in promoting sustainable initiatives (Sloan et al., 2013; Dabour, 2003). Although the initial investment often exceeds that of conventional alternatives, sustainable solutions tend to generate long-term reductions in operating costs, alongside environmental and sociocultural benefits (International Tourism Partnership, 2014; Sloan et al., 2013).

A key obstacle is the insufficient awareness among managers regarding the benefits of sustainability, which leads many hotels to focus solely on implementation costs. A lack of continuous staff training, combined with high employee turnover, hinders the effective adoption of sustainable practices. Furthermore, a lack of technical knowledge and strategies for promoting sustainable tourism can reduce the competitiveness of hotel enterprises (Sloan et al., 2013; Dabour, 2003).

To overcome these challenges, hotel companies need to adopt management strategies focused on innovation, adaptation to market changes, and the creation of sustainable competitive advantages. Business strategy enables the alignment of an organization's internal resources with opportunities and threats in the external environment, fostering differentiation and greater value for customers (Chiavenato, 2009; Hocayen da Silva & Teixeira, 2008). In this context, strategic information management, the improvement of internal processes, and an understanding of evolving consumer needs are essential factors for competitiveness in the hotel sector (O'Connor, 2001; Stern, 1997; Hamel, 2002). Thus, cooperation, innovation, and continuous adaptation become fundamental for hotel companies to address the sector's economic and sustainability challenges (Anjos, 2004).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The study was conducted at three hotel establishments in the city of Tete identified as Hotel A, Hotel B, and Hotel C while ensuring the anonymity of the participating institutions. In accordance with Law No. 19/97 of October 1, these establishments provide temporary accommodation and complementary services in exchange for payment. The units analyzed are four-star urban hotels classified as medium-sized enterprises, offering accommodation, dining, leisure, and business services.

The research involved three hotel managers, selected based on the relevance of the information they could provide to the study (Lanka et al., 2021). The participants were male, aged between 36 and 54, with secondary and higher education backgrounds and between eight and eighteen years of professional experience in hotel management. Data analysis was organized into three categories: sustainability challenges, management strategies adopted, and SME sustainability in the face of economic difficulties.

The analysis indicates that hotel companies face challenges related to financial difficulties, inflation, high operating costs, the tax burden, limited access to credit, customer retention, and the hiring of skilled labor.

According to managers, these constraints affect the ability to meet financial obligations and make investments a situation linked to the financial difficulties described by Mselmi, Lahiani, and Hamza (2017).

Participants demonstrated an understanding of corporate sustainability, acknowledging the importance of integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions, in line with Sachs (2000). However, they highlighted that implementing sustainable practices faces obstacles, primarily due to the high initial investment costs associated with efficient technologies, waste management, and sustainable equipment. Nevertheless, they recognize future benefits, such as reduced operating costs and an improved corporate image (ITP, 2014).

DISCUSSION

Regarding sustainability challenges in hotel companies, the results show that these businesses face various challenges linked to economic instability, notably financial difficulties, rising operating costs, limited access to credit, the tax burden, competition, and customer retention. These findings corroborate SEBRAE (2016), which identifies bureaucracy, financing difficulties, and tax burdens as factors influencing the performance of SMEs.

It was also found that managers are knowledgeable about corporate sustainability, recognizing the importance of integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This perspective aligns with Vellani and Ribeiro (2009), who argue that sustainability involves promoting economic development without compromising the resources of future generations. However, the implementation of sustainable practices remains constrained by high initial costs, even though such practices can yield long-term benefits such as reduced expenses, an improved corporate image, and greater competitiveness (Sloan et al., 2013).

Regarding the management strategies adopted by hotel companies, the results demonstrate that these firms use strategic planning as a tool to face economic challenges and adapt to market changes. According to Chiavenato (2003), strategic planning enables the definition of objectives, guides decision-making, and reduces organizational uncertainty. The companies analyzed seek to align their mission, vision, and values with sustainability principles, prioritizing customer satisfaction, innovation, service diversification, and adaptation to new market demands. This reality aligns with the views of Grizendi (2011) and Bessant and Tidd (2009), who highlight innovation as an essential element for creating value and gaining competitive advantages. The importance of stakeholders in corporate strategies was also evident, as customers, suppliers, employees, and the local community contribute to developing sustainable solutions. As noted by Borga et al. (2006), stakeholder engagement strengthens relationships based on trust, reduces risks, and improves decision-making.

Regarding the sustainability of hotel SMEs in the face of economic adversity, the results reveal that the companies studied implement sustainable practices based on the three pillars of sustainability. In the environmental dimension, notable measures include reducing water and energy consumption, using LED lighting, separating waste, and reducing plastic use practices that address the environmental impacts associated with hotel operations (Erdogan & Baris, 2007; Scholz et al., 2020). In the economic dimension, the adoption of cost-reduction strategies, the valuing of local suppliers, and service improvements were observed, all contributing to regional economic development (Zaei & Zaei, 2013). In the social dimension, key initiatives include valuing employees, providing professional training, and supporting the community.

However, a limitation was identified regarding the use of sustainability indicators to measure organizational performance. According to Van Bellen (2005), the lack of appropriate indicators hinders an integrated assessment of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Thus, it is necessary to develop assessment mechanisms tailored to the reality of Mozambican hotel companies.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data obtained, the article concludes that these companies face financial difficulties, limited access to credit, high interest rates, bureaucracy, and challenges in meeting obligations to employees and suppliers, factors that constrain their competitiveness. Furthermore, they adopt strategic plans involving goal setting, analysis of internal and external environments, decision-making, and the alignment of their mission, vision, and values with sustainability principles. It was also found that the companies implement practices aligned with the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. Key measures include reducing environmental impacts (environmental pillar), valuing local employees and suppliers (social pillar), and contributing to community development (economic pillar). Finally, the study revealed limitations in the companies' use of sustainability indicators, as they rely primarily on management strategies to assess their sustainability performance. However, while breaking down the analysis period (2018-2023) into pre-pandemic stability (2018-2019), the acute shock (2020-2021), and recovery/inflationary adjustment (2022-2023) would offer a more nuanced perspective on the subject, we anticipate that future studies may address this temporal segmentation.

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ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VI June 2026

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