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International Scientific Conference
on the Occasion of the Hungarian Science Festival

Sopron, 2025. november 6.
6 November 2025, Sopron

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FENNTARTHATÓSÁGI ÁTMENET IDŐSZAKÁBAN**

DEVELOPMENT TRAJECTORIES AND NEW DIVIDES IN TIMES OF SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS

Szerkesztők / Editors:

RESPERGER Richárd, SZÉLES Zsuzsanna, TÓTH Balázs István

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RESPERGER Richárd – SZÉLES Zsuzsanna – TÓTH Balázs István



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Bridging the Divide: A Systematic Literature Review of Sustainability Pathways for SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa Amid Global Sustainability Transitions

Eulalia ANG'EDU

PhD Student

*University of Sopron, Alexandre Lamfalussy Faculty of Economics,
István Széchenyi Economics and Management Doctoral School*

Dr. Katalin DIÓSSI PhD

Assistant Professor

University of Sopron, Alexandre Lamfalussy Faculty of Economics

Abstract:

This study examines how sustainability is defined and practiced among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the region's position within global sustainability transitions. Using a systematic literature review (SLR) approach based on PRISMA guidelines, the research analyzes 30 peer-reviewed articles from the Scopus and Web of Science databases published between 2000 and 2025. The review process involved clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, title and abstract screening, and data extraction from relevant studies focused on SME sustainability within the region. Findings reveal a sharp contrast between global and regional research patterns, with Sub-Saharan Africa contributing a limited share of the global literature despite increasing interest after the transition from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Most studies emphasize managerial practices, innovation, and corporate social responsibility as emerging drivers of sustainable SME performance, particularly in countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda. The analysis shows that institutional gaps, limited resources, and publication imbalances have widened the sustainability knowledge divide between Sub-Saharan Africa and other regions. This paper contributes to the discourse on inclusive development by identifying future research opportunities and proposing the need for context-specific sustainability frameworks to strengthen SMEs' role in achieving long-term sustainable growth.

Keywords: sustainability transitions, systematic literature review, Sub-Saharan Africa, SMEs, development divides

JEL Codes: L26, O17, O55, Q56

1. Introduction (significance of the topic, set goals, research questions)

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are essential engines of employment, innovation, and inclusive growth, particularly within developing regions. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), SMEs comprise more than 90 percent of businesses and contribute substantially to GDP and employment creation (Endris & Kassegn, 2022). Yet despite this crucial role, the sustainability performance and transformative capacity of African SMEs remain under-examined compared with those firms in Europe or Asia (Durst et al., 2022; Oduro & Haylemariam, 2025). As the world enters a period of fast-tracked sustainability transitions driven by the Paris Agreement, digital transformation, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), understanding how African businesses can align with global sustainability imperatives has become both an economic and developmental necessity.

From a global view, the discussion on sustainability has evolved from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which prioritized poverty reduction and social welfare, to the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that explicitly integrate economic, environmental, and institutional aspects (de Jong & Vijge, 2021; Montiel et al., 2021). While the SDG framework has legitimized private-sector engagement in sustainable development, the integration of SMEs from SSA into this global agenda has been limited by institutional gaps, data shortfalls, and structural inequalities (Awuor, 2023). Cordes and Marinova (2023) suggest a sustainability knowledge divide continues between academia in the global North and the South, which hinders the creation of context-specific paths that take into account African realities like financial exclusion, informality, and a lack of coherence in policy (Chege & Wang, 2020; Okpara & Mboga, 2024).

Contemporary advances in systematic literature review (SLR) methodologies (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006; Sauer & Seuring, 2023) provide a rigorous avenue for synthesizing fragmented knowledge on this topic. Drawing on these methodological developments, this study employs a PRISMA-guided SLR of peer-reviewed literature published between 2000 and 2025 to map how sustainability is defined, practiced and theorized among SMEs in SSA. By consolidating empirical and conceptual findings across diverse sectors and countries, the paper responds to calls for a more evidence-driven understanding of SME sustainability in the region (Leger et al., 2025; Zaman et al., 2025).

The primary objective of this research is to examine how sustainability has been conceptualized and operationalized among African SMEs within the broader context of global sustainability transitions. Three secondary objectives guide the analysis:

1. To identify thematic patterns, methodological approaches, and temporal trends in SME sustainability research across SSA;
2. To compare the regional research landscape with global developments in SME sustainability, and
3. To highlight institutional and policy factors that constrain or enable the integration of SMEs into national and global sustainability agendas.

Defining this specifically is first, to identify the thematic patterns, methodological approaches and temporal trends in SME sustainability research across SSA; second, to compare the regional research landscape with global developments in SME sustainability; lastly to highlight institutional and policy factors that constrain or enable the integration of SMEs into national and global sustainability agendas. The study's scope is confined to English-language, peer-reviewed articles retrieved from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. To address these gaps, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What thematic patterns, methodological approaches, and temporal trends characterise SME sustainability research in Sub-Saharan Africa?
2. How does the Sub-Saharan African research landscape compare with global developments in SME sustainability?
3. Which institutional and policy factors enable or constrain SME integration into national and global sustainability transitions?

The study covers a 25-year period (2000–2025) to capture the shift from MDGs to SDGs and the resulting surge in sustainability-related publications. While the review acknowledges limitations inherent to database selection and publication bias, these are mitigated through transparent inclusion criteria and cross-regional benchmarking. The original contribution of this paper lies in bridging global sustainability transition theory with empirical evidence from SSA. It advances a contextualized understanding of SME sustainability trajectories and offers policy-relevant insights for narrowing the research and practice divide.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review; Section 3 presents the theoretical framework; Section 4 presents details of the SLR methodology; Section 5 discusses the main findings; and Section 6 concludes with implications for research, policy and SME development.

2. Literature review

2.1. Global perspectives on Sustainability Transitions and SMEs

Global sustainability research has evolved from normative, goal-oriented frameworks such as Millennium Development goals (MDGs) to more integrated, system-level approaches under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (de Jong & Vijge, 2021; Montiel et al., 2021). This transition represents a paradigmatic shift from social welfare and poverty alleviation to multi-dimensional sustainability, economic, social, and environmental. Within this global shift, SMEs are increasingly recognized as critical actors for achieving inclusive and green growth. However, empirical investigations into how SMEs operationalize sustainability remain geographically concentrated in developed economies (Durst et al., 2022; Martins et al., 2022).

Existing global reviews highlight that most SME sustainability studies prioritize Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), innovation, and green marketing (Zaman et al., 2025), yet they often neglect the institutional contexts that shape these behaviors. Moreover, many works remain prescriptive rather than analytical, emphasizing “best practices” instead of unpacking structural asymmetries in resource access, governance, or knowledge transfer (Cordes & Marinova, 2023). Thus, while research has mapped the mechanics of SME sustainability in advanced economies, it has fallen short to theorize how these dynamics operate in structurally different environments, particularly in SSA. This gap underpins the rationale of the current study. By systematically reviewing SSA-specific research, this paper moves beyond generic sustainability rhetoric to expose how global transitions manifest in contexts of institutional fragility, limited financing, and informal entrepreneurship.

2.2. Regional insights: SME Sustainability in Sub-Saharan Africa

Regional literature on SMEs and sustainability in SSA remains fragmented and largely descriptive, often driven by donor agendas rather than theoretical frameworks (Awuor, 2023; Endris & Kassegn, 2022). Studies typically document managerial practices, CSR initiatives, or innovation adoptions at the firm level but rarely integrate these findings into broader sustainability transition discourses (Oduro & Haylemariam, 2025). Methodically, most employ case studies or cross-sectional surveys with limited generalizability, leaving gaps in comparative and longitudinal analyses (Leger et al., 2025)

Critically, few studies interrogate the interactions between institutional weakness and sustainable performance. For instance, regulatory vacuums, inconsistent policy enforcement, and financial exclusion hinder SME participation in green innovation and circular-economy initiatives (Durst et al., 2022). Moreover, research outputs from SSA constitute less than 10 percent of the global SME-sustainability literature, revealing both a quantitative and epistemic divide (Cordes & Marinova, 2023). This under-representation results in sustainability models that are externally imposed rather than contextually designed. Addressing this deficit, the present study formulates a research puzzle that links the global diffusion of sustainability frameworks with their uneven regional adoption and representation.

2.3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical bases of this study combine Sustainability transition Theory (STT) and Institutional Theory, supported by insights from the Resource-Based View (RBV). Together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional lens for understanding how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) navigate global sustainability imperatives amid structural constraints and contextual heterogeneity (*Figure 1*).

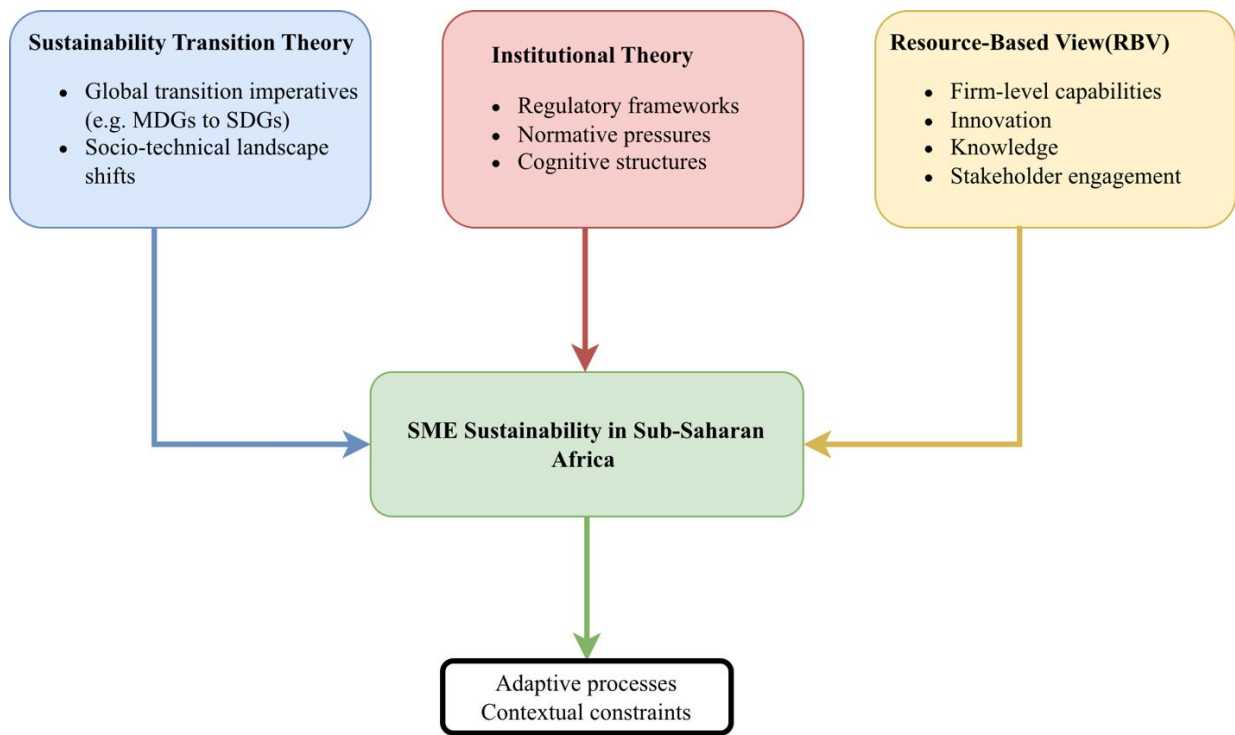


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Integrating Sustainability Transition, Institutional, and Resource-Based Perspectives

Source: Authors analysis

3. Methodology, data sources

To present an extensive overview of the status of sustainability research in the context of SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa, the study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) of articles published between 2000 and 2025. This review employs a structured and evidence-driven process that involves identifying, screening, and critically examining prior research (Saunders et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is guided by principles of openness and inclusivity, ensuring efforts are made to reduce potential bias (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006). According to the proposition of Cordes and Marinova (2023), Awuor (2023) and Zaman et. al (2025), SLR should follow PRISMA step wise process. This seven-step design enhances methodological coherence and ensures that both thematic and geographical trends are robustly captured.

This study adopted the same and the following steps shown in (fig.1) were followed:

- (1) first we developed a search procedure with Boolean operators and keyword clusters;
- (2) after that we identified databases (Scopus and Web of Science);
- (3) following this we defined the criteria for inclusion and exclusion;
- (4) after which we screened articles based on a combination of abstract/titles;
- (5) we then assessed the quality of articles using citation impact and methodological rigor;
- (6) and then extracted the data and did coding of variables such as country, sector, theme, and method;
- (7) finally we did comparative analysis contrasting SSA findings with global SME sustainability literature (Awuor, 2023; Leger et al., 2025).

3.1. Systematic Literature Review Procedure

First, we searched the Scopus and Web of Science databases using Boolean operators to have all the inclusive search terms with their synonyms within each string. The search yielded 1000 records, of which 600 were screened, 120 records remained after exclusion criteria and dupli-

cate removal. Following title/abstract screening and full-text assessment, 30 articles were included in the final synthesis. To methodically explore the databases for suitable studies, keyword searches were created, comparable to search codes containing essential terms that align with the research objectives as shown in *Table 1*. The Scopus and Web of Science databases were queried using the key terms, which were selected based on the keywords used in related research and in the aims of this study (Zaman et al., 2025). Articles were excluded if (1) they were not published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal; (2) they were not published within the 25-year period between 2000 and 2025; (3) they were published in any other language than English or (4) they did not focus on the sub-Saharan Africa region solely.

An additional search through content analysis was performed to identify emerging themes from the selected papers and to benchmark the progress of Sub-Saharan Africa against global developments and understand the contextual factors influencing sustainability in SMEs (Maphosa & Maphosa, 2020). And further to compare the region research to the rest of the world in order to compare the region research to the rest of the world in order to identify similarities and differences in the trends, themes, and methodological approaches to sustainability in SMEs.

Table 1: Key words for database search

Core theme	Keywords and synonyms Used in Boolean strings
Sustainability	"Sustainable" OR "Sustainability" OR "Corporate social responsibility" OR "CSR" OR "Environmental Social Governance" OR "ESG" OR "Sustainable Development Goals" OR "SDG"
SME	"SME" OR "Small firms" OR "Medium business" OR "Medium firms" OR "Medium business" OR "Small and Medium enterprise"
Sub-Saharan Africa	"Angola" OR "Benin" OR "Botswana" OR "Burkina Faso" OR "Burundi" OR "Cabo Verde" OR "Cameroon" OR "Central African Republic" OR "Chad" OR "Comoros" OR "Côte d'Ivoire" OR "Democratic Republic of the Congo" OR "Djibouti" OR "Equatorial Guinea" OR "Eritrea" OR "Eswatini" OR "Ethiopia" OR "Gabon" OR "Gambia" OR "Ghana" OR "Guinea" OR "Guinea-Bissau" OR "Kenya" OR "Lesotho" OR "Liberia" OR "Madagascar" OR "Malawi" OR "Mali" OR "Mauritania" OR "Mauritius" OR "Mozambique" OR "Namibia" OR "Niger" OR "Nigeria" OR "Republic of the Congo" OR "Rwanda" OR "São Tomé and Príncipe" OR "Senegal" OR "Seychelles" OR "Sierra Leone" OR "Somalia" OR "South Africa" OR "South Sudan" OR "Tanzania" OR "Togo" OR "Uganda" OR "Zambia" OR "Zimbabwe"

Source: Authors' compilation based on the SLR protocol

3.2. Data sources and Quality Assurance

The dataset comprised 30 peer-reviewed articles from Scopus and Web of Science that met all inclusion criteria. Each article was assessed using a two-stage validation protocol:

- (1) Relevance scoring, based on thematic alignment with SME sustainability and regional focus;
- (2) Secondary verification of bibliographic accuracy and DOI presence was performed using the CrossRef Simple Query Tool. To enhance reliability, all data extraction and coding processes were independently cross-checked.

This combination of structured search logic, formula-based analytical rigor, and multi-stage validation distinguishes this study from prior descriptive reviews. It positions the paper as a methodologically grounded and analytically innovative contribution to the sustainability

transitions literature in developing economies. *Figure 2* presents the stepwise methodology screening process used in this study’s PRISMA-guided Systematic Literature Review (SLR).

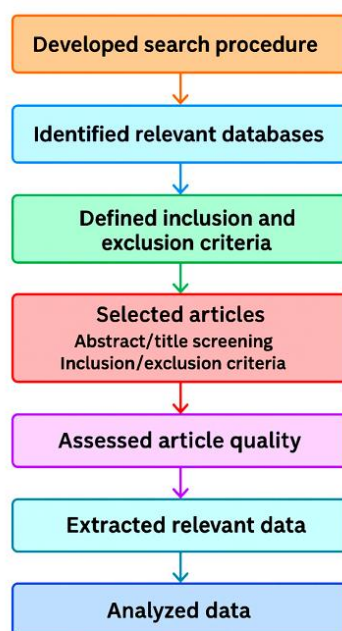


Figure 2: Flow of methodology screening (PRISMA Process)

Source: Authors analysis

4. Results, Analysis and findings

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Overview

The SLR identified 30 peer-reviewed studies on SME sustainability in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) published between 2000 and 2025 as shown in *Table 2*. These studies reveal significant heterogeneity in geographical coverage, methodological rigor, and sustainability focus areas. While global SME sustainability research accelerated after 2015 with the SDG agenda, Africa’s contribution remains marginal, representing less than 10% of global outputs (Martins et al., 2022; Oduro & Haylemariam, 2025). Within SSA, academic attention has grown sharply since 2019, driven by the diffusion of SDG-aligned policy discourse and international donor priorities (de Jong & Vijge, 2021).

Table 2: Summary of Reviewed papers

No.	Year	Focus area	Country & Industry	Relevance to Sustainability
1	2025	Innovation	Ethiopia – manufacturing, and construction	Innovation in production.
2	2025	Financial literacy	Ghana – manufacturing, retail, and services	Long-term succession and stability
3	2025	Innovation	South Africa – retail	Innovation and efficiency.
4	2023	Practices	Nigeria	Better financial management.
5	2023	Practices	Tanzania – manufacturing	Green marketing practices.
6	2023	Practices	Cameroon – agrobusiness, trade, service, industry, transport	Resilience for business continuity.
7	2024	Triple Bottom Line	Uganda – agro-processing	Sustainability principles.

No.	Year	Focus area	Country & Industry	Relevance to Sustainability
8	2021	Practices	Kenya – horticultural processing	Compliance with eco-friendly practices.
9	2021	CSR	Eritrea – manufacturing and service	CSR initiatives.
10	2019	Practices	Côte d’Ivoire – agriculture, services	Explores drivers of sustainable growth.
11	2023	Circular Economy	South Africa – paper manufacturing and chemical industries	Resource efficiency and zero-emission sustainability.
12	2024	Practices	Ghana – manufacturing & service	Transparency
13	2024	Innovation	Nigeria – cross-sector	Adaptive and resilient business models.
14	2018	Supply Chain Management	Uganda – manufacturing	Responsible supply chains.
15	2025	Innovation	Somalia	Digital operations.
16	2024	Practices	Ethiopia	Marketing and business strategy.
17	2023	CSR	Angola	Social responsibility
18	2020	Innovation	Kenya – agribusiness	Eco-sustainable practices.
19	2023	Innovation	Ghana -manufacturing,micro-finance, tourism	Digital transformation and communication.
20	2021	Innovation	South Africa - Manufacturing	Financial practices.
21	2024	Practices	Côte d’Ivoire – Service industry	Nature of CSR practice.
22	2025	Triple Bottom Line	Uganda – Service sector	Necessity of sustainable financing
23	2025	Innovation	Ghana - ride-hailing, e-commerce	Digital, environmental, social, governance (DESG) frameworks
24	2020	Circular economy	Uganda - Manufacturing	Environmental commitments
25	2024	Innovation	Kenya - agribusiness	Environmental stability
26	2024	CSR	Nigeria - cross-industry	CSR motivations, perceptions, and barriers
27	2022	Performance Framework – Triple Bottom Line	Ethiopia	Contributions of MSMEs
28	2022	Circular economy	Ghana	External pressure, and circular supply chain
29	2022	CSR and innovation	Nigeria – manufacturing, service, construction	Green process innovation
30	2022	Practices	Tanzania	Mediating role of entrepreneur’s competence

Source: Authors’ compilation from SLR dataset

4.2. Temporal Evolution of SME Sustainability Research

Figure 4 below illustrates the publication trend between 2000 and 2025, showing minimal activity before 2012, followed by a marked acceleration post-2015, coinciding with the launch of the SDGs. The earlier MDG era primarily emphasized poverty and social outcomes, sidelining enterprise sustainability (United Nations, 2000). After 2015, however, research output shifted towards private-sector sustainability roles, with studies examining innovation (Zaman et al., 2025), CSR (Cordes & Marinova, 2023) and circular economy practices (Durst et al., 2022). The SDG Framework thus catalyzed academic diversification, stimulating comparative and sector specific research across sectors (Montiel et al., 2021).

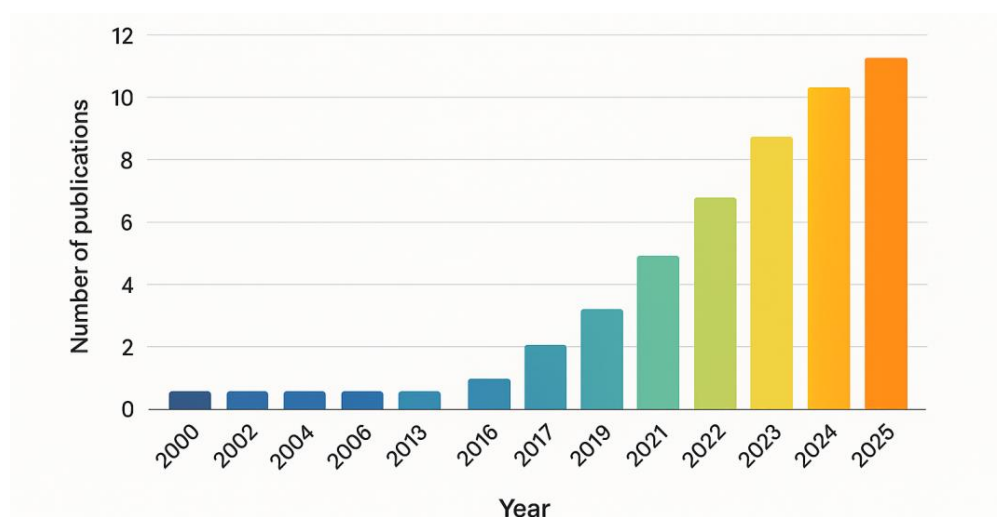


Figure 4: Annual publication trend of SME literature in SSA (2000–2025)

Source: Authors analysis

The publication trend mirrors the global policy transition from developmental aid logic (MDGSs) to sustainability innovation logic (SDGs). As institutional agendas evolved, so did academic inquiry, moving from descriptive reporting of SME constraints to theory-informed analyses on resilience, digitalization and environmental strategy.

4.3. Regional Distribution and thematic patterns

From a region perspective, Southern Africa (41.8%) dominates the literature, followed by West Africa (34.3%), East Africa (20.9%), and a marginal Central Africa of (3%). This hierarchy mirrors broader development gradients within the continent. From *Table 3*, we see that nations with established academic systems and stable governance environments tend to exhibit higher research productivity. South Africa, for instance, benefits from mature institutional frameworks access to international research funding, and integration into global academic networks. Conversely, Central Africa suffers from chronic underfunding, conflict, and limited access to indexed journals, which constrains scholarly output (Awuor, 2023). Language exclusion of French could also be a contributing factor to this, given that the inclusion criteria excluded French articles.

Table 3: Summary of main contributing countries to SME Sustainability literature in SSA between 2000 and 2025

Region	% of Publications	Main Contributing Countries
Southern Africa	41.80%	South Africa, Botswana, Namibia
West Africa	34.30%	Ghana, Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire
East Africa	20.90%	Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia
Central Africa	3.00%	Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Source: Author analysis

The data for this figure were derived from the 30 validated studies included in the PRISMA-based review. Each paper was coded according to the country of study and then grouped *Figure 5* into the four regional blocs (Southern, West, East and Central Africa) as defined by the African Union classification (AU, 2025). Percentages were calculated based on the relative share of studies per region within the full dataset.

The regional distribution of SME sustainability research across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) reveals both quantitative and qualitative imbalances in scholarly attention. The SLR results show that most publications are concentrated in a few relatively advanced economies, primarily South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, which together account for over 90% of the region’s output between 2000 and 2025. This pattern reflects structural inequalities in research infrastructure, institutional capacity, and policy engagement across the continent (Durst et al., 2022).

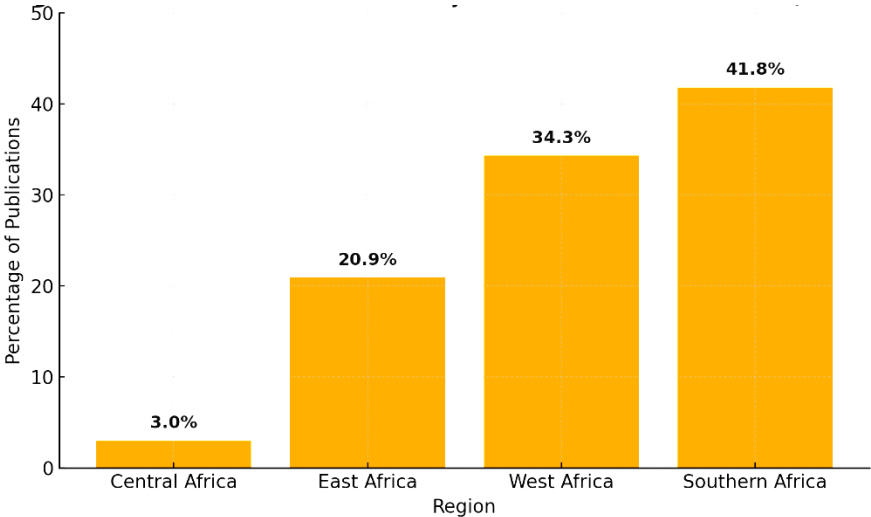


Figure 5: Regional distribution of SME Sustainability studies In Sub-Saharan Africa
Source: Authors analysis

Thematically, five primary domains emerge from the reviewed literature as shown in *Figure 6* above. The predominance of innovation-oriented studies underscores the growing role of technology and digital transformation in enhancing SME resilience and sustainability outcomes (Zaman et al., 2025). Studies such as those from Nigeria and South Africa emphasize fintech adoption, digital payments, and smart supply chains as levers of environmental and economic sustainability (Cordes & Marinova, 2023). This concentration reflects both institutional capacity and research infrastructure disparities. South Africa leads due to stronger academic net-

works, policy integration, and journal visibility (Durst et al., 2022). Conversely, Central Africa’s underrepresentation highlights the persistence of data scarcity and limited research funding. Thematically, the reviewed studies cluster around five major domains. Innovation and Digitalization (30%) – technological upgrading, fintech, IoT integration. CSR and Stakeholder Engagement (20%) – social legitimacy and reporting. Environmental Sustainability (15%) – green supply chains and resource efficiency. Managerial Practices and Resilience (25%) – leadership, succession, and crisis adaptation. Triple Bottom Line Frameworks (10%) – integrated sustainability metrics.

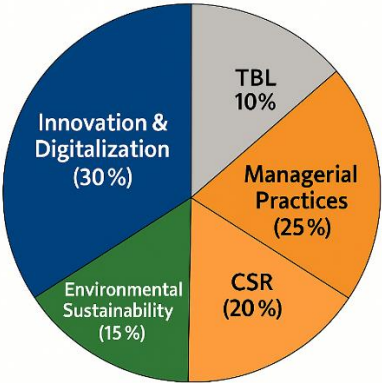


Figure 6: Thematic composition of the literature
Source: Author analysis

These themes collectively illustrate a gradual shift from micro-level managerial practices toward more systemic sustainability orientations, reflecting SSA’s incremental alignment with global transition pathways.

By contrast, CSR-related works often stem from Ghana and Eritrea, focusing on the reputational benefits of ethical business practices and their alignment with SDG objectives (Martins et al., 2022). Environmental management systems (EMS) research, led by Kenya and Uganda, highlights compliance with eco-friendly production and green marketing (Endris & Kassegn, 2022). The growing adoption of triple-bottom-line (TBL) approaches, balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives, reflects a conceptual evolution in how SMEs in SSA define sustainability performance. However, most studies remain case-specific and lack regional integration, which limits the transferability of insights across countries.

This uneven distribution of knowledge production reveals a critical institutional divide consistent with the paper’s theoretical framing. According to Institutional theory, nations with more developed governance structures, sustainability reporting norms, and policy coherence generate stronger research ecosystems (de Jong & Vijge, 2021). Meanwhile, Resource-Based View (RBV) dynamics explains why SMEs in resource-rich but institutionally weak contexts struggle to leverage internal capabilities for sustainability advancement (Durst et al., 2022; Kiwanuka & Sibindi, 2025).

The results confirm that Africa’s sustainability transition is uneven, not because of a lack of entrepreneurial potential but due to institutional asymmetry, where formal and informal mechanisms for research, finance, and policy support remain fragmented. Hence, the findings substantiate the study’s central argument: that SME sustainability in SSA reflects a broader knowledge and capacity divide between global frameworks and regional realities. To close this gap, policymakers and scholars must build cross-country research networks, improve access to green finance and data, and embed context-sensitive indicators within sustainability assessment frameworks.

Important to acknowledge is that the spatial distribution in Figure 5, may also reflect linguistic and indexing biases inherent in the databases selection process. The systematic review relied exclusively on English-language, peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and Web of

Science, following PRISMA methodological standards (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006; Sauer & Seuring, 2023). While this approach ensured quality and replicability, it inadvertently excluded publications from French-speaking (Francophone) Sub-Saharan African countries, whose academic outputs are frequently disseminated through regional or non-indexed journals, such as Cairn.info or HAL-SHS. As a result, countries including Senegal, Cote d’Ivoire, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Cameroon appear underrepresented in the dataset – not necessarily due to lack of scholarly activity, but because of the language and visibility barriers that limit their inclusion in international databases (Cordes & Marinova, 2023; Durst et al., 2022). This limitation highlights a broader epistemic divide in African sustainability research, where English-language dominance reinforces asymmetries in knowledge recognition and dissemination.

4.4. Global research output of SME sustainability (2000–2025)

The *Figure 7* reveals a pronounced divide between high-output regions in the Global North and low-output areas in the Global South. Darker shades across Europe, North America, and East Asia indicate strong institutional research capacity and policy integration, while lighter tones in Sub-Saharan Africa highlight limited scholarly visibility and resource access. SSA SME sustainability routes are benchmarked against worldwide transition patterns utilizing secondary data from published academic articles in order to operationalize the global comparison. In order to find convergence, divergence, and context-specific restrictions, the analysis employs a structured thematic comparison and focuses on important indicators such as innovations like fintech, social legitimacy and reporting, green supply chains, crisis adaption, and integrated sustainability measures. This spatial asymmetry underscores the structural and epistemic inequalities that shape global sustainability transitions. The map visually reinforces the argument that Sub-Saharan Africa’s underrepresentation reflects deeper institutional gaps in knowledge output, data infrastructure, and policy alignments.

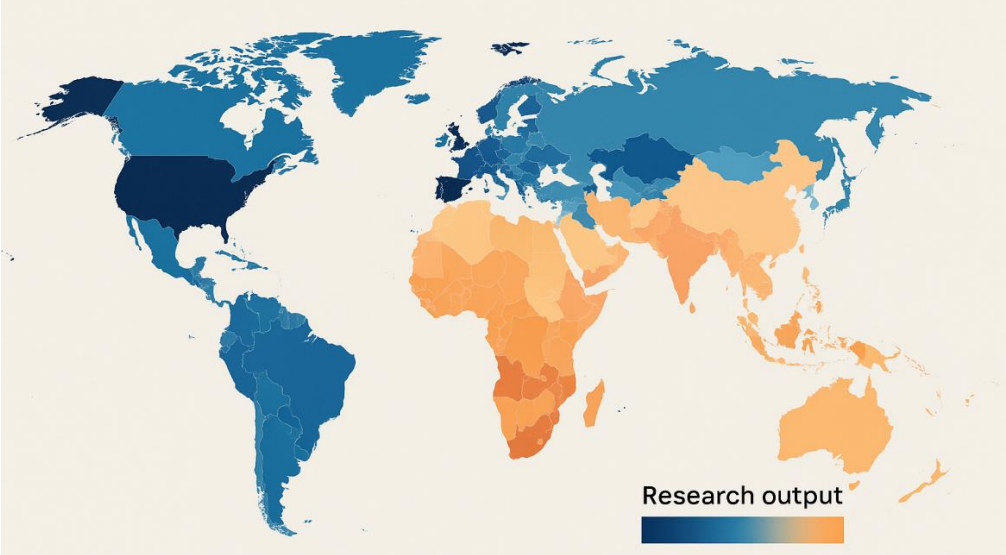


Figure 7: The Global imbalance in SME-sustainability research compared to SSA
Source: Author analysis

4.5. Interpretation in Theoretical context

The findings reinforce the theoretical framework proposed earlier. The sustainability transition theory (STT) explains the temporal shift post – 2015 as a response to global sustainability pressures. Institutional theory accounts for the regional disparities, as stronger policy systems yield higher publication outputs. Meanwhile, the Resource-Based view (RBV) clarifies why SMEs that leverage innovation and learning capabilities show stronger sustainability outcomes. Thus, the empirical patterns confirm the paper's central argument: the sustainability knowledge divide between the global and regional contexts is both structural and institutional, requiring localized frameworks and stronger research capacity in SSA.

5. Conclusions and Future research suggestions.

This study set out to bridge the knowledge and institutional divide in the field of SME sustainability within Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), positioning it within the broader discourse of global sustainability transitions. Through a PRISMA-guided systematic literature review of thirty peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2025, the research synthesized fragmented insights to reveal the temporal, spatial and thematic evolution of SME sustainability in the region. The results clearly demonstrate that while global sustainability research has matured, particularly since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the African research landscape remains uneven, characterized by low representation, limited theoretical integration, and heavy dependence on donor-driven agendas (Cordes & Marinova, 2023; Durst et al., 2022).

The study contributes to the academic debate by offering an integrated analytical framework that links global sustainability transition theory (STT), institutional theory, and the resource-based view (RBV). This theoretical convergence underscores that SME sustainability in SSA is not solely a matter of firm-level behavior but also of institutional embeddedness and capacity asymmetries. Countries such as South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria exhibit stronger sustainability performance and academic engagement because their institutional ecosystems' policy frameworks, educational systems and access to finance are more aligned with global sustainability disclosure (de Jong & Vijge, 2021; Oduro & Haylemariam, 2025). Conversely, Central and smaller East African states remain peripheral due to fragmented governance, insufficient data infrastructure, and weak links between academia, industry, and policymaking (Awuor, 2023).

Empirically, the research confirms a post-2015 surge in SME sustainability studies that parallels the rise of the SDG agenda (Montiel et al., 2021). The thematic analysis revealed five dominant clusters: innovation and digitalization, managerial and entrepreneurial practices, CSR and stakeholder engagement, environmental sustainability, and triple-bottom-line frameworks. These clusters collectively reflect a transition from the descriptive, single-case analyses toward multidimensional models that incorporate both environmental and social performance. Yet, despite this progress, many studies remain contextually narrow and methodologically weak, failing to generate scalable insights applicable across the diverse SSA landscape.

Theoretically, the findings expand the sustainability transition discourse by grounding it in Global south realities. They demonstrate that global transition processes are not universally linear but instead contextually negotiated through institutional adaptation, cultural embeddedness, and resource constraints. The observed spatial pattern where research clusters around a few academic hubs confirms that sustainability transitions are uneven and path-dependent, shaped by national policy coherence and research capacity (Zaman et al., 2025).

From a policy perspective, the study emphasizes the need for regional collaboration and knowledge integration. Establishing cross-country research networks, harmonizing sustainability reporting frameworks, and strengthening university-industry linkages could significantly improve research density and policy relevance. Governments should incentivize green innova-

tion among SMEs by expanding access to sustainability finance, data, and training, while international donors should prioritize capacity-building partnerships rather than isolated project funding.

In conclusion, this paper contributes original value by positioning SME sustainability in SSA as a dynamic intersection between global transition imperatives and local adaptive realities. It advances both theory and practice by proposing a context-sensitive framework that integrates institutional capacity, firm-level resources, and global policy influences. The findings suggest that narrowing Africa's sustainability divide requires not just more studies, but more theory-driven, comparative, and empirically grounded research that reflects region's complex socio-economic fabric. Ultimately, the paper calls for a re-imagination of sustainability transitions, one that views African SMEs not as passive recipients of global norms but as active agents in shaping inclusive, resilient, and locally embedded sustainability pathways (Amaeshi et al., 2016).

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Web resources were last accessed on 31 March 2026.

Appendix

No.	Year	Title of Article	Focus	Country & Industry	Relevance to Sustainability
1	2025	Factors affecting innovativeness of small and medium enterprises in Benishangul Gumuz Regional State, Ethiopia	Innovation	Ethiopia – manufacturing, woodwork, metalwork, and construction	Promotes sustainable growth through innovation and technological advancement in production.
2	2025	Enhancing SME performance through succession planning, family influence, and successor attributes: evidence from Ghana’s hospitality sector	Financial & Non-financial Performance	Ghana – manufacturing, retail, and services	Supports sustainability through long-term succession and performance stability.
3	2025	An overview of factors influencing the adoption of IoT payment systems in South Africa’s small and medium-sized retail enterprises	Innovation	South Africa – retail	Encourages digital sustainability via technological innovation and efficiency.
4	2023	Financial literacy, financial capabilities, and sustainable business model practice among small business owners in Nigeria	Managerial and Entrepreneurial Practices	Nigeria	Promotes economic sustainability through better financial management.
5	2023	Strategic green marketing orientation and environmental sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa: Does green absorptive capacity moderate? Evidence from Tanzania	Managerial and Entrepreneurial Practices	Tanzania – manufacturing	Enhances environmental sustainability through green marketing practices.
6	2023	Business climate and sustainability of Cameroonian small and medium enterprises in times of COVID-19	Shapes the Managerial and Entrepreneurial Practices	Cameroon – agrobusiness, trade, service, industry, transport	Focuses on resilience and sustainable business continuity.
7	2024	Triple bottom line practices and the growth of agro-processing enterprises in Uganda	Performance Framework – Triple Bottom Line	Uganda – agro-processing	Integrates environmental, social, and economic sustainability principles.
8	2021	Current practices concerning the environmental management systems among horticultural processing MSMEs in Kenya	Managerial and Entrepreneurial Practices	Kenya – horticultural processing	Promotes environmental sustainability and compliance with eco-friendly practices.
9	2021	How does CSR enhance the financial performance of SMEs? The mediating role of firm reputation	CSR	Eritrea – manufacturing and service	Promotes social and environmental sustainability through CSR initiatives.

No.	Year	Title of Article	Focus	Country & Industry	Relevance to Sustainability
10	2019	Do Firm and Entrepreneur Characteristics Play a Role in SMEs' Sustainable Growth in a Middle-Income Economy like Côte d'Ivoire?	Managerial and Entrepreneurial Practices	Côte d'Ivoire – agriculture, industry, services	Explores drivers of sustainable growth and business development.
11	2023	From resources to sustainability: a practice-based view of net zero economy implementation in small and medium business-to-business firms	Circular Economy	South Africa – paper manufacturing and chemical industries	Promotes resource efficiency and zero-emission sustainability.
12	2024	Stakeholder pressure and SMEs sustainability information disclosures: why perceived benefits and sustainability knowledge matter	Managerial and Entrepreneurial Practices	Ghana – manufacturing & service	Encourages transparency and sustainable reporting practices.
13	2024	Business model innovation and SMEs' resilience: technological roadmap in Nigeria	Innovation	Nigeria – cross-sector	Supports sustainability through adaptive and resilient business models.
14	2018	Green supply chain practice adoption and firm performance: Manufacturing SMEs in Uganda	Supply Chain Management	Uganda – manufacturing	Promotes sustainability through environmentally responsible supply chains.
15	2025	Exploring the effect of financial technology on the sustainability of small and medium enterprises in Mogadishu, Somalia	Innovation	Somalia	Strengthens financial inclusion and sustainable digital operations.
16	2024	Linking business sustainable development with entrepreneurial marketing practices: Evidence from small and medium enterprises in Ethiopia	Managerial and Entrepreneurial Practices	Ethiopia	Integrates sustainability into marketing and business strategy.
17	2023	CSR information, environmental awareness and CSR diffusion in SMEs of Angola	CSR	Angola	Promotes social responsibility and environmental sustainability.
18	2020	The influence of technology innovation on SME performance through environmental sustainability practices in Kenya	Innovation	Kenya – agribusiness	Links technological advancement with eco-sustainable practices.
19	2023	Social media adoption in SMEs sustainability: evidence from an emerging economy	Innovation	Ghana – manufacturing/production, micro-finance, tourism	Facilitates sustainability through digital transformation and communication.

No.	Year	Title of Article	Focus	Country & Industry	Relevance to Sustainability
20	2021	Innovative management accounting practices for sustainability of manufacturing small and medium enterprises	Innovation	South Africa - Manufacturing	Enhances sustainable management through innovative financial practices.
21	2024	Pratiques de la responsabilité sociale de l'entreprise (RSE) dans les petites et moyennes entreprises (PME) : engagement organisationnel et ancrage territorial en Côte d'Ivoire dans le contexte Covid-19	Managerial and Entrepreneurial Practices	Côte d'Ivoire – Service industry	To understand the nature of SMEs' CSR practice.
22	2025	Green Financing Landscape for Green Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in Uganda	Performance Framework – Triple Bottom Line	Uganda – Service sector	Highlights the necessity of sustainable financing mechanisms to facilitate this transition
23	2025	Sustainability practices and complementor innovation capability: a PLS-SEM serial mediation model of market pressure and strategic alliances	Innovation	Ghana - ride-hailing, e-commerce, and fintech sectors	Explores how digital, environmental, social, and governance (DESG) frameworks affect complementor sustainability innovation capability (CIC) in platform ecosystems
24	2020	Environmental commitment and environmental sustainability practices of manufacturing small and medium enterprises in Uganda	Circular economy	Uganda - Manufacturing	Explore the association between environmental commitment and environmental sustainability practices
25	2024	The influence of technology innovation on SME performance through environmental sustainability practices in Kenya	Innovation	Kenya - agribusiness	the association between innovation, environmental sustainability and its impact on small business performance
26	2024	CSR in SMEs in a Sub-Saharan Africa: Motivations, Perceptions, Practices, and Barriers to Implementation	CSR	Nigeria - cross-industry	to provide insight into SMEs' CSR motivations, perceptions, practices, and barriers in Nigeria
27	2022	The role of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to the sustainable development of sub-Saharan Africa and its challenges: a systematic review of evidence from Ethiopia	Performance Framework – Triple Bottom Line	Ethiopia	This review aimed to investigate existing literature on the contribution of MSMEs to the sustainable development of Ethiopia and its challenges.

No.	Year	Title of Article	Focus	Country & Industry	Relevance to Sustainability
28	2022	Exploring the role of external pressure, environmental sustainability commitment, engagement, alliance and circular supply chain capability in circular economy performance	Circular economy	Ghana	explores the role of external pressure, engagement capability (ENC), alliance capability (ACA), environmental sustainability commitment (ESC), and circular supply chain capability in circular economy performance.
29	2022	CSR and green process innovation as antecedents of micro, small, and medium enterprise performance: Moderating role of perceived environmental volatility	CSR and innovation	Nigeria – manufacturing, service, construction	we examine the role of green process innovation and perceived environmental volatility in linking CSR to MSME performance.
30	2022	Entrepreneurs' competencies and sustainability of small and medium enterprises in Tanzania. A mediating effect of entrepreneurial innovations	Managerial and Entrepreneurial Practices	Tanzania	This study, therefore, aims at looking into the mediating role of entrepreneurial innovations on entrepreneurs' competencies and the sustainability of SMEs in Tanzania

Source: Authors' compilation from SLR dataset