

Anticipating for Sustainability: A Stopover in Congolese Family-Owned SMEs

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Abstract

Purpose : In a highly competitive environment, the question of the sustainability of family-owned SMEs has become a major concern for managers and academics. With this in mind, the objective of this research is to identify how anticipations contribute to the sustainability of family-owned SMEs. **Design/Approach / Methodology :** To do this, a qualitative methodology is used, through semi-structured interviews, with thirty-six actors in the field. **Findings :** It appears that anticipation as a life-giving force, a catalyst for the future, a vector of sustainability and a tool for good governance helps family-owned SMEs to live for a long time in an uncertain geographical sphere. **Practical implications :** It implies that SMEs should build their internal system such in a way that they are able to anticipate challenges in order to enhance their organisational sustainability.

Keywords: Anticipation; Sustainability; Family SMEs; Republic of Congo.

1. Introduction

The issue of anticipation in family-owned SMEs has become not only the leitmotiv of business owners, but also a major concern for researchers in universities and laboratories (Coutellec and Weil-Dubuc, 2016). Managers of family-owned SMEs need to strengthen their strategic positioning through anticipatory approaches (Carbonell and Nassè, 2021; Lesca and Blanco, 2002; Nassè, 2019) and scientific advances show in their work the multiple positive aspects (Granjou *et al.*, 2017) enjoyed by family-owned SMEs that permanently mobilize anticipations (Janissek-Muniz and Lesca, 2004).

In this perspective, accepting the implementation of an anticipatory process in the factual life of family SMEs is ultimately a combination of the present and the future to allow SMEs to be part of the long term (Moloumba Mokango P.V.K., 2020a) in order to benefit from a competitive advantage and a competitive positioning in their sector of activity. It is a question of placing expectations at the heart of corporate sustainability in order to allow the optimal production of small and medium-sized family businesses to ride a good wave (Cocula, 2002).

An abundant literature has emerged in recent years demonstrating the place of anticipation in the actual life of family-owned SMEs. For a family business, the question of transmission is central and requires ensuring the long-term sustainability of the business and therefore anticipating (Barbot-Grizzot, 2012). The research by Tsapi and Garandi (2020) argues that the dynamic capacities of expectations deserve to be deepened, especially in the field of family-owned SMEs. Lesca (1994), already highlighted the importance for these companies to capture weak signals in their environment through anticipatory monitoring. From this perspective, anticipation seems necessary for the life of the company (Lesca and Blanco, 2002). The work of Chalus-Sauvannet (2006) confirms that the integration of anticipatory monitoring at the heart of the organization of family SMEs is a necessary condition for the survival of the company in the medium and long term. However, anticipation is not always conjugated with the present for managers. Indeed, some business leaders think they can do without it or do not see it as a priority in an already busy agenda, but when problems arise because the environment becomes turbulent, it is often too late (Godet, 1991).

This issue of anticipation as a determining factor in the sustainability of family-owned SMEs has been little addressed at the international level and remains less prolific in the managerial literature of Congolese family-owned SMEs. However, it appears from a sustained observation that anticipations contribute considerably to preparing for the future while being in the present; This should make it possible, ipso facto, to sustain family-owned SMEs.

In this perspective, the choice of this research focused on the links that exist between, on the one hand, the development of expectations in family SMEs, and its sustainability, on the other hand, in a highly turbulent environment in the Republic of Congo. Such an approach requires dexterity and tact to see that the existence of an abundant literature on anticipation and sustainability de facto creates a missing link that constitutes a blind spot, an axis of research, which deserves to be studied for the purposes of clarification and recognition of a real and existing phenomenon. With this in mind, our research question is the following: how do anticipations enable the sustainability of Congolese family-owned SMEs? The sector that is able to operationalize our scientific approach is that of Congolese family SMEs, specialized in the production and marketing of goods and services in the field of agriculture. There are seven companies selected. They have a minimum lifespan of ten years and are strategically positioned in their sector of activity. These family-owned SMEs generate wealth and create jobs, thus contributing to the consolidation of the national economy.

This article proposes to identify the role of the anticipatory process in the ability of family-owned SMEs to remain dynamic in a logic of sustainability. We are based on the premise that the process of developing anticipatory capacities contains provisions that can help family-owned SMEs to develop a radar and consolidate a shield that gives them the opportunity to protect themselves from the attacks of competition, to capture and chisel the trends of crises of all kinds and, as a logical consequence, to live longer. This field research corroborates this premise. It demonstrates the link between the implementation of the anticipatory approach and the ability of a family SME to develop and sustain itself. The results highlight the approaches that must be respected in order for the sustainability of Congolese family SMEs to be effective, visible and useful for the competitiveness of Congolese family SMEs.

Our research has a triptych corpus. First, we present the theoretical framework of the research. Secondly, we explain the methodology of the research that was used. Thirdly, we present the results of the research which, as a consequence, feed into the scientific discussion.

2. The Theoretical Framework of the Research

To live for a long time in an uncertain geographical area, characterized by instability, complexity and permanent crisis, the search for the control of uncertainties seems the precious way to maintain oneself. This permanent desire to control uncertainties to the detriment of risks (Knight, 1921) involves the collection of data, the transformation of data into information, and the ability to detect information useful for detecting threats with a view to transforming them into opportunities (Chalus-Sauvannet, 2006). This reasoning makes it clear that expectations are, nowadays, the centripetal force and above all the survival locomotive of family SMEs in times of economic crisis, pandemics, natural disasters and even fair or unfair competition (Moloumba Mokango P. V. K. , 2021). If the anticipatory approach is considered not only as the specific aspect (Chouk and Lesca, 2004), but also as the backbone of the sustainability of the small and medium-sized family business. If environmental trends require small and medium-sized family businesses to be demanding and vigilant, then the development of strategic approaches to the growth of family SMEs, including specialization and diversification (Moloumba Mokango P. V. K. and Mzid, 2019) would necessarily be based on an understanding of the internal and external components that constitute the essential links in the business environment. However, this fundamental understanding of the environment, although the exercise itself remains subtle, remains the basis of anticipatory approaches.

2.1. Anticipations

The need for sustainability, fear of the future and the clear desire to erect barriers to entry require owners of small and medium-sized family businesses to develop the anticipatory capacities specific to their sector of activity. Considered as the backbone of organizational life, anticipation can be defined as an ability, desired and designed by family SMEs, to rely on the future to better understand the present (Miller, 2014). This ability to envisage the future by being in the present passes through a process that consists of defining specific, measurable, achievable and achievable objectives over time, of setting to music specific links between the goals pursued and the methods envisaged with the aim of clarifying in a relevant way a thought resulting from a long preparation. The postulate that characterizes anticipation is part of a logic according to which the future is defined in the present with a margin of unpredictability (Voiron-Canicio, 2012) that deserves to be studied in detail in order to be minimized in order to help family SMEs to be part of the long term. In a way, it is a question of carrying out in-depth investigations to determine a phenomenon that is almost certain to materialize and whose dates, place and actors capable of implementing it cannot be precisely identified. The phenomenon detected by anticipation does not come from the random fact expressed by Peguy (1992), but from a data detected by a detailed environmental study and transformed into information in the drawing to allow the decision-making process of managers of family SMEs.

The principles that characterize urgency, the obligations that constitute immediacy, the forces that define immediacy (Aubert, 2004) can no longer benefit from a strategic positioning in the daily life of family-owned SMEs. This category of company is governed by anticipations, which are accepted as a way of projecting oneself into the future through a construction (Smida and Condor, 2001) that takes into account environmental trends in order to identify the company's strategic approaches and build an action plan capable of giving the main orientations of the structure in the long term. This way of doing things, which aims to place anticipation at the heart of the organizational culture, has the specificity of integrating into its operation the future trends of family SMEs in order

to guide them in their actions. In this vein, the implementation of these actions in a coherent and well-defined process, taking into account the information drawn from the environmental sap, is important for the efficiency and effectiveness of the anticipatory approach. In order to succeed in the anticipatory approach, managers must develop anticipatory monitoring units within their family-owned SMEs. Indeed, anticipatory monitoring was born out of a fundamental need of companies, in general, and family-owned SMEs, in particular, to look far into the future (Chouk and Lesca, 2004). An idea that originated in the army (Aguilar, 1967), like strategy, the concept of anticipatory monitoring is based on the collection of information from the environment capable of providing factual and true knowledge about the future that really awaits the company (Chalus-Sauvannet, 2006). Anticipatory monitoring has the advantages of surveillance cameras, in a turbulent environment, with the aim of watching and monitoring all movements that could be a source of acts likely to disturb the serenity of an environment. Through these mechanisms inherent in its operation, anticipatory monitoring contributes to the sustainability of family SMEs, in times of economic crises, but also in calmer times.

Following this line of reasoning and with the major concern of defining anticipatory monitoring, the work of Lesca (2003), states that anticipatory monitoring is the collective and proactive process by which the human resources of SMEs voluntarily track down the weak signals of their external environment and seek to identify the opportunities and disadvantages that may be introduced. By analyzing this definition, from the point of view of the model developed by the author cited above, we observe a set of concepts that deserve to be enumerated in order to reinforce the particular interest of the process of implementing anticipatory monitoring in a small and medium-sized family business: memory, knowledge base, dissemination, access, choice of field of application, tracking, perception, feedback and collective selection. To this end, these concepts can be schematized as follows:

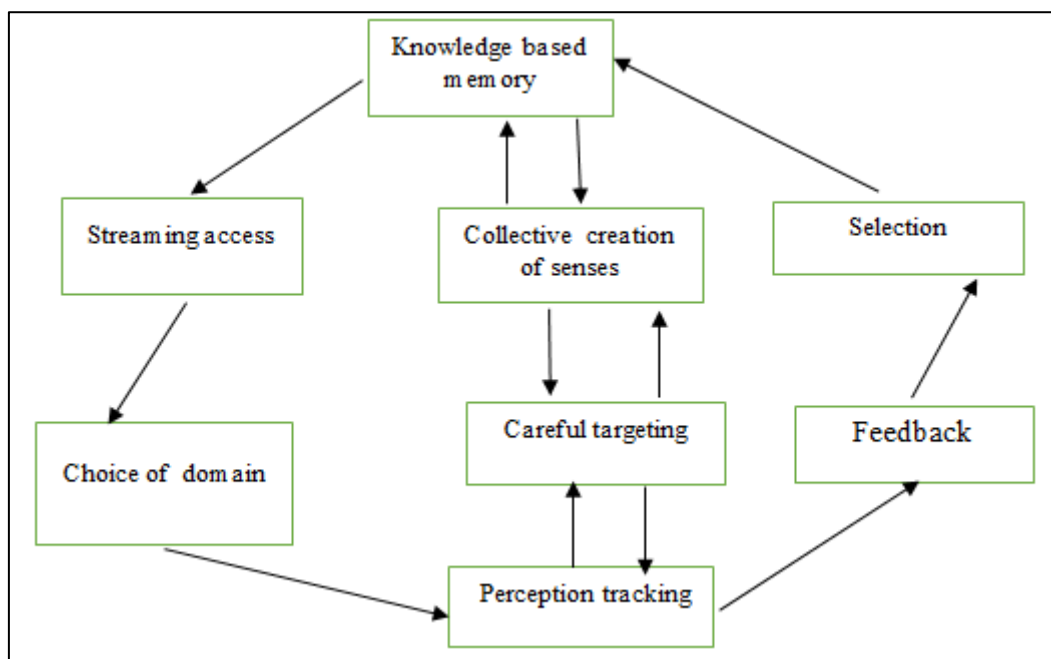


Figure-1. Reference model of the L.E.SCANning method

Source: Adapted from Lesca (2003)

This figure is part of an approach aimed at developing an anticipatory monitoring unit in a combinatorial way, taking into account actions and arranging them, to help business owners make decisions early and at the right time. Indeed, in an environment undergoing profound change, the anticipatory unit plays the role of catalyst and makes it possible to define the future by being in the present in order to serve the action that contributes to the survival, development and sustainability of the small and medium-sized family business in uncertain times (Lesourne *et al.*, 1996). With the anticipation unit, information is at the heart of the decision-making process of managers of family-owned SMEs. Indeed, information processed, according to established principles, by a company's anticipatory unit feeds the thinking of the owners of family SMEs and consolidates the strategic dimension since it gives them the opportunity to look for solutions to transform not only weak points into strengths, but also threats into opportunities (Chalus-Sauvannet, 2015). In doing so, the collection, processing and management of information become essential components of organizational life and, as a logical consequence, allow family SMEs to live for a long time. There are several types of anticipation that are mobilized while always having the idea of the future, while maintaining a very close link to knowledge and keeping a certain political ideology (Coutellec and Weil-Dubuc, 2016). Among these different types of anticipation, we can mention predictive anticipation, adaptive anticipation, projective anticipation. These expectations can be schematized as follows:

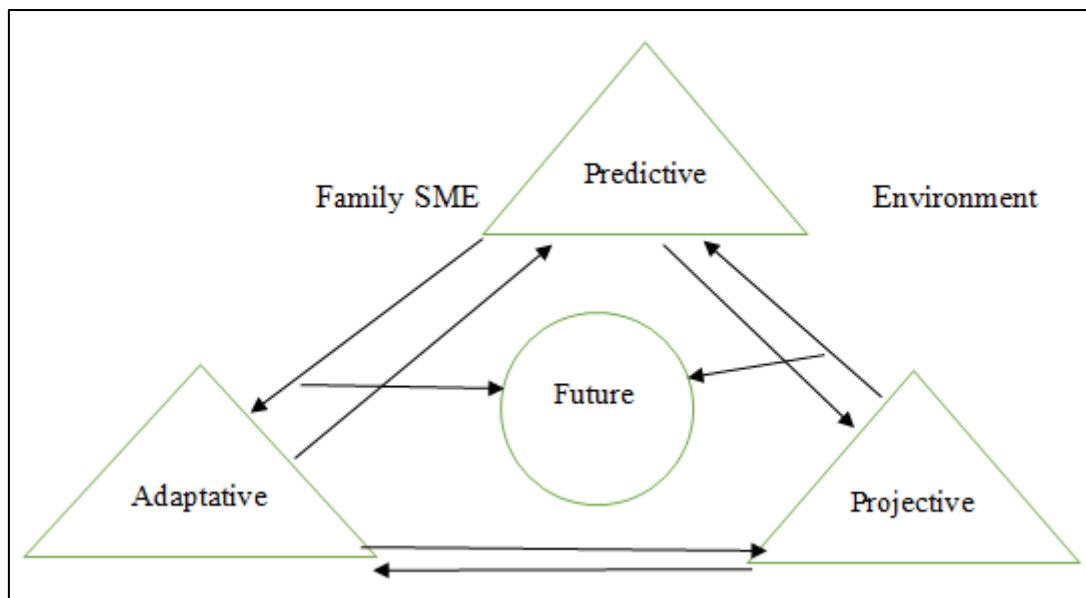


Figure-2. Different types of anticipation

Source: Adapted from Coutellec and Weil-Dubuc (2016)

This figure summarises the three types of anticipation that can be implemented in small and medium-sized family enterprises. It demonstrates, first of all, rightly, that predictive anticipations have the assets to better approach the future based on the events that have marked the family SME in its immediate and distant past. Specifically, predictive anticipation tries to build the future on the basis of the past in the hope that the future is the result of past phenomena. In addition, the work of Pierron (2016) develops an idea that seems to support the fundamental idea that aims to manage anticipation differently without taking into account predictions that could turn out to be random, thus causing the destruction of the already existing motivational base. The management of anticipatory capacities should include provisions that are geared towards taking into account the energies of human resources, which are the only source of creativity and competitiveness. Secondly, this figure evokes adaptive anticipation. Indeed, this type of anticipation is full of assets to create the conditionalities of a future that proposes environmental trends without presenting the characteristics of authoritative conclusions. This spirit of openness, so much advocated by adaptive anticipations, aims to consider the environment as an evolutionary process and not as a static reality built on a rock. In doing so, adaptive anticipation is at the heart of the systems that rationally produce knowledge (Firestein, 2012) for family-owned SMEs. Finally, this figure invokes the concept of projective anticipation. Indeed, projective anticipation is in line with utopia in order to better understand the strategic orientations coming from the environment on the basis of studies. The main idea supported by projective anticipations is that of thinking about the unthinkable and imagining what we should not imagine in order to remain in a form of fiction of the impossible. By behaving in this way, projective anticipation makes it possible to take measures that could protect the company against all forms of uncertainty that would arise in the future.

In the final analysis, this figure demonstrates that the future of the family SME is at the heart of in-depth analyses of the different types of anticipation. In this vein, it would be difficult to build the life of a family SME without integrating the idea of anticipation as the foundation of organizational sustainability.

2.2. The Concept of Sustainability in Family-Owned SMEs

The concept of sustainability is at the heart of the researchers' studies and remains the major leitmotiv for managers of small and medium-sized family businesses. Indeed, the manager of each family SME needs his company to be able to live for a long time, on the one hand, and researchers need to understand the reasons for this sustainability in order to further help family businesses, on the other hand. However, the work of Mignon (2009) shows that the question of the sustainability of small and medium-sized family enterprises seems to be a matter of concern and sensitivity. In fact, according to the author's work, only half of the small and medium-sized family businesses created are still alive after five years of existence. Since the issue of transmission is the navel of many small and medium-sized family businesses, the author's publications (Lank, 1992) nevertheless state that 15% of family businesses created have only the chance of reaching the next generation. In developing countries, such as the Republic of Congo, the lifespan of family-owned SMEs after their creation is a maximum of six months. It is for this reason that it is wise to pay particular attention to the issue of the sustainability of Congolese small and medium-sized family businesses. By sustainability, we mean the ability of a small and medium-sized family business to live for a long time in order to continue to produce goods and services whose perceived value is sustainably higher than that of the competition. From this perspective, a sustainable small and medium-sized family business is one that resists crises and different economic cycles (Rassoul, 2018) to continue to exist over the long term (Brechet, 1994) of an entrepreneurial project previously defined by an owner. In addition, the behaviour of family members can also be considered as a vector for the sustainability of small and medium-sized family businesses. Indeed, the owners of some of these entities have a dualistic behavior that takes into account both monetary and non-monetary objectives (Charlier, 2020) In this vein, the setting of the overall objectives of the small and medium-sized enterprise is not

only limited to the ability to create value for shareholders, but also takes into account the creation of wealth capable of integrating the social needs of employees, the driving force behind the production of quality goods and services, in a small and medium-sized family business. In addition, there are two main families of sustainability, each of which includes two types of sustainability. These two main families can be presented as follows:

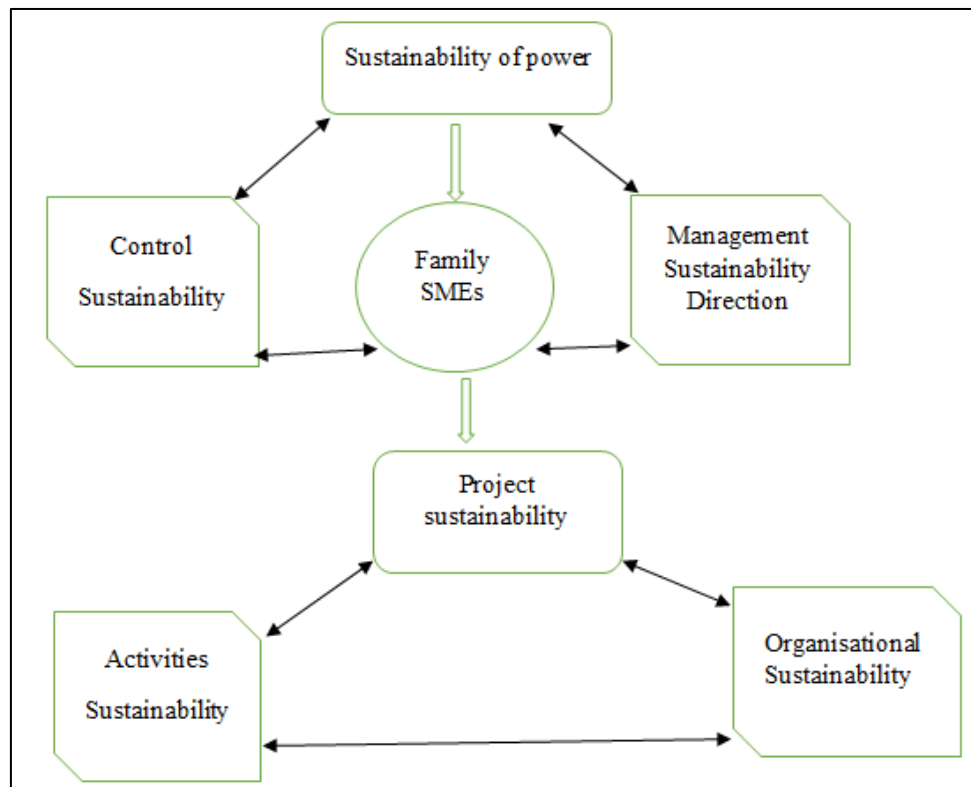


Figure-3. The different types of sustainability

Source: Adapted from Mignon (2002)

This figure presents, in a racy style, belonging to the art of managing, the two types of sustainability.

The first great perennality is called the perennial of power. It is full of two types of sustainability, namely the durability of control and the sustainability of management. The concept of sustainability of control is evoked when the capital of the small and medium-sized family enterprise is dominated by the same group of shareholders, while the continuity of management is evoked when the managers of the same enterprise belong to the same group that owns the share capital of the small and medium-sized family enterprise (Mignon, 2000). In contrast, the second group of sustainability is called project sustainability. It includes, among other things, the sustainability of activities, which is cited when the owners of the small and medium-sized family business decide to maintain the main activity of the latter, despite the competitive swell and the great economic and social difficulties experienced by the company. Organizational sustainability is evoked when the small and medium-sized family enterprise has the necessary assets of resilience in the face of threats from the external environment and the weaknesses of the internal component (De Geus, 1997). In the literature of strategic management, publications have been given to organizational sustainability. Indeed, although there is a form of paradox in defining the concept of organizational sustainability because of its complexity and ambiguity (Mignon, 2000), the concept of organizational sustainability has been able to make its way over time and today enjoys an undeniable positioning in the literature of strategic management, because the goal of any small and medium-sized family business is for it to become, despite the environmental swell, which is several hundred years old (Albouy, 1999). In the literature of strategic management, publications have been given to organizational sustainability. Indeed, although there is a form of paradox in defining the concept of organizational sustainability because of its complexity and ambiguity (Mignon, 2000), the concept of organizational sustainability has been able to make its way over time and today enjoys an undeniable positioning in the literature of strategic management, because the goal of any small and medium-sized family business is for it to become, despite the environmental swell, which is several hundred years old (Albouy, 1999). This organizational sustainability resists thanks to the company's ability and assets to position itself differently on the market in order to be retained in the lot of companies that the environment deems worthy of being adopted and assimilated. This reasoning is therefore part of a logic according to which the small and medium-sized family business can only be sustainable thanks to its willingness to build its foundation on a solid environmental foundation. Although not all small and medium-sized family businesses always have the inner capacity to live for a long time, even if these organizations are destined, by logical reasoning, to disappear (Dumez, 2009), organizational sustainability encourages family SMEs to enrich themselves with all the fertile cultures of innovation without forgetting their own roots. This is all the more true because sustainable small and medium-sized enterprises are naturally those that manage to strike the right balance between the need to preserve one's essence and the deep desire to move towards progress (Collins and Porras, 1994). In the same direction of innovation, the author's work (Moloumba Mokango P.

V. K., 2020b) evokes the notion of epigenesis, i.e., the ability to create something that has never existed. This epigenating approach can only be the result of an in-depth study that encourages the mobilization of proactive strategic approaches within small and medium-sized family enterprises. Following this line of reasoning, it is very useful to say that the overall strategy of the family SME, accompanied by a strategic positioning, defined by the top management, is also one of the elements that help the company to maintain itself in the long term.

The mobilization of this organizational sustainability, which constitutes, after all, the basis of this research, has dual stakes, particularly on the strategic dimension and on the organizational dimension (Benghozi, 2009) of family SMEs. Indeed, studies by Cocula (2002) rightly show that corporate strategy can only be defined for a maximum period of five years. Beyond this period, the strategy becomes less effective due to the uncertain vagaries of the environment. To this end, organizational sustainability requires that the strategy be readjusted to consolidate the company's strategic positioning. In this way, organizational sustainability consolidates the strategic issue and gives it a more attractive character. From an organisational point of view, the sustainability of family-owned SMEs requires rigour in terms of existing organisational skills. Indeed, the longer the family SME exists, the more mature the work teams become and they are required to be managers by taking into account the factors related to maturity. From this perspective, organizational sustainability requires the rational development of human resources and the capitalization of the achievements and experiences of human resources in order to make the production of quality goods and services more reliable. In addition, the management of organizational sustainability lies in the approach of the manager of the family SME to align himself in a reasoning that takes into account the principle of change in continuity (Gratton, 2014). In this vein, and in order to successfully manage this organizational sustainability, managers of small and medium-sized family businesses must be recruited on an objective basis to enable the company to work in a process of continuity of a movement (Lorino, 2007) that integrates not only the ingredients of reliability, but also the seeds of stability.

Beyond the above-mentioned elements, organizational sustainability brings benefits in kind to small and medium-sized family businesses. With this in mind, its perception differs from one level of management to another. For managers, organizational sustainability is intimately linked to organizational performance, i.e., a company's ability to produce quality goods and services.

For employees, in a Congolese context, by way of illustration, where the salary of an individual can directly cover a dozen people, in the context of a simulacrum of social cohesion, the sustainability of the small and medium-sized family business refers to the maintenance of remuneration. For shareholders, sustainability is the expression of a continuation of investment and, by the same token, of a dividend payment at the end of the year.

2.3. The Link Between Anticipation and Sustainability

It is illusory to dissociate the concepts of anticipation and sustainability in the life of family-owned SMEs. There seems to be an irrevocable marriage between anticipation and the sustainability of companies. Indeed, the anticipatory dimension is intended to enable the family SME to survive, develop and live for a long time. With this in mind, family-owned SMEs must make the most of anticipatory approaches (Godet, 1991) to help them become competitive in order to ensure their sustainability. In other words, it is a question of mobilising the Greek triangle of strategic foresight so that, through anticipations, highlighted through an anticipatory unit that draws data from the field, the family SME continues to exist in a highly competitive environment. This Greek triangle can be schematized as follows:

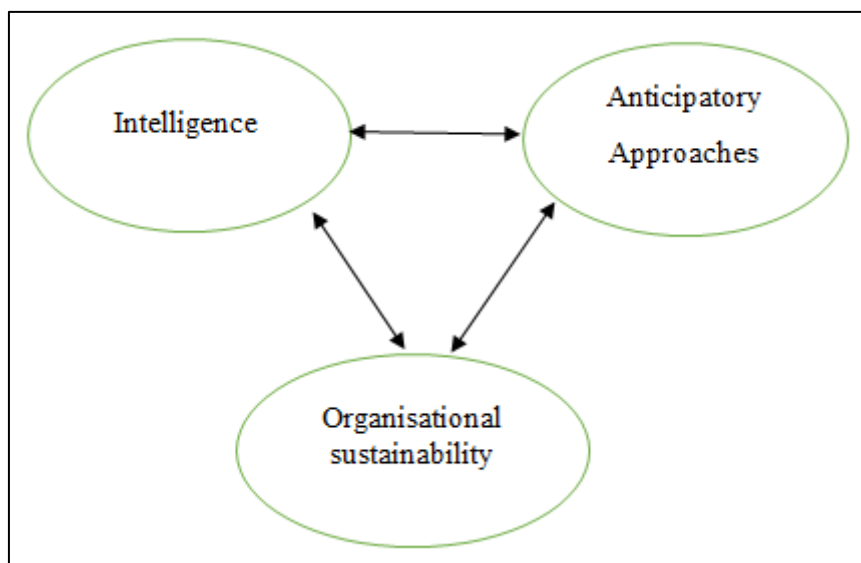


Figure-4. Adapted Greek Triangle

Source: Adapted from the work of Godet (1991)

This figure, which takes up the approach of the Greek triangle of strategic foresight, demonstrates that strategic intelligence plays an important role in the anticipatory approach. It collects data, processes it, and presents it to those at the executive level. This data helps with strategic anticipation, i.e., the ability to project oneself into the future, by

making decisions in the present that will impact the future. Through this irrevocable duality, the small and medium-sized family business becomes an artisan of sustainability.

From this Greek triangle, it emerges that the family-owned SMEs that develop anticipatory capacities are those that have the deep skills to sustain themselves. A singular marriage of organizational fashion (Allouche and Amann, 2002), the delicate and factual link between anticipation and sustainability finds its alchemy in a deep desire to make the small and medium-sized family enterprise a source that generates wealth and creates jobs.

In addition, anticipation is the lever for the sustainability of family-owned SMEs. Indeed, the company that sets up an anticipatory unit in its operation improves its ability to build the future by being in the present. Through this approach, the small and medium-sized family business defines its objectives in a precise and clear way, enriches its reflections on the future, consolidates the goals to be achieved (Miller, 2014) with the aim of creating a rational cohesion between the objectives set and the information from the environment to better predict the future.

With this in mind, anticipatory approaches strengthen the clarity of decisions, consolidate the legitimacy of investments and improve the milestones that can enable the small and medium-sized family business to resist against all odds to align itself in a path of sustainability.

In addition, the relationship between anticipation and sustainability can also be explained by the fact that anticipation is the determining factor in the survival of small and medium-sized family enterprises through a participatory approach to human resources. Indeed, one of the mistakes to be made in the implementation of an anticipatory strategy is to think that the actions to be carried out in the future must be the result of strategic intention imposed by the superstructure that exists at the level of top management.

However, it is recognized that it is a bad thing to impose a good idea on one's collaborators (Godet, 1991). In this perspective, anticipation, by requiring in its feasibility the mobilization of a participative management oriented towards taking into account the proposals of employees, because it is always necessary to save the proposal of the other, creates the conditions for social cohesion that reinforces the primordial nature of sustainability. This reasoning can be schematized as follows:

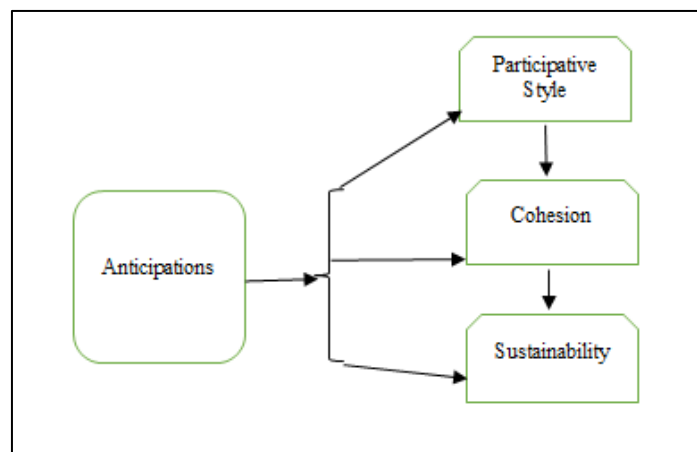


Figure-5. The survival of family-owned SMEs through anticipation

Source: Authors' construct, 2023

This figure is the expression of the contributions of the anticipatory process in the ability of family SMEs to sustain themselves through social cohesion that amplifies high-end production allowing the company to continue to live. To this social cohesion, the literature adds the concept of increased vigilance, which aims to help organizational actors to open up to the outside world by collecting data, transformed into information in order to help managers of family SMEs in their decision-making process (Chalus-Sauvannet, 2006). In doing so, anticipatory approaches become an impetus for companies that dream of going beyond the decade of life to be counted by those who are in the dimension of organizations that are considered to be multi-centenarians.

Finally, the relationship between expectations and sustainability can be explained by the fact that the company is like a ship that has a radar with three safety options: aviation safety, surface safety and safety at depth (Lesca, 2008). This radar is the metaphorical expression of the anticipations that help the managers of family-owned SMEs to project themselves into the future, by being in the present, through a rational and optimal management of human potential, financial means, material and intangible resources, especially information and time. Indeed, in a globalized environment, dominated by fast technology and marketing approaches mobilized on social networks, good governance is an essential determinant in the sustainability of family-owned SMEs. Indeed, in a globalized environment, dominated by fast technology and marketing approaches mobilized on social networks, good governance is an essential determinant in the sustainability of family-owned SMEs.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

For this research, we opted for qualitative methodology. This choice can be explained by our research topic, which has an exploratory dimension (Trudel et al., 2006). Indeed, to our knowledge, the question of the link between expectations and the sustainability of family SMEs is less prolific in the strategic literature of the Republic of Congo. However, exploratory topics can only be addressed through qualitative methodology. In addition, our

topic focuses on the links between, on the one hand, anticipations and, on the other hand, the sustainability of Congolese family-owned SMEs. It is a question of identifying the functionalities of this report. This way of doing things is the expression of the qualitative methodology that can be mobilized in the study of human behavior and phenomena and remains indispensable in a social context where scientific research materializes (Ouest and Centre Africain de Recherche en Education ROCARE, 2007).

Through qualitative methodology, we refuse to lock ourselves in an office or laboratory to analyze the facts. We went to the field to get in touch with the actors and to better construct together the phenomenon studied through the logic of co-construction, because the qualitative methodology remains a local approach (Paillé, 2007). It helps to make sense of the phenomenon and remains essential for the study of management sciences and management. The choice of qualitative methodology can also be explained by our desire to understand the fine subtlety of the links that exist between expectations and the sustainability of the Congolese family SME.

In addition, in the course of our research, we asked ourselves how expectations help family-owned SMEs to live for a long time in a highly competitive world, characterized by complexity, instability and permanent crisis. However, questions related to how are the responsibility of qualitative methodology (Yin *et al.*, 2012).

3.2. Context

The capital city of Congo, Brazzaville, serves as the research context. The nation's capital is home to people of several ethnic backgrounds living side by side. Based on observations, the majority of businesses are held by families. There is not enough government assistance, thus, the enterprises are unsustainable, and there is not much genuine competition.

3.3. Method of data collection

To collect the data, we designed an exploratory interview guide. This interview guide was submitted to five stakeholders in the Congolese small and medium-sized family business sector. They are : a Central Director, an SME Capacity Building Specialist, an SME Researcher and the SME Advisor at the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises, Informal Sector and Handicrafts. This exploratory interview guide allowed us to better immerse ourselves in the Congolese family-owned SME sector. At the end of this work, a definitive interview guide composed of three main parts was designed on the basis of the literature developed in order to meet the objectives of the research. The first part addresses the question of anticipation. The second deals with the issue of sustainability and the third concerns the link between anticipation and sustainability.

3.4. Data Collection Period

In addition, this interview guide was submitted, during the months of April and May 2023, to thirty-six (36) actors in the field through semi-structured interviews (Martin *et al.*, 2016). There are twenty (20) female managers and sixteen (16) male managers. The gap between the two types of managers can be explained by the fact that in the Republic of Congo, companies operating in agriculture are more managed by women than by men. The latter, that is, men prefer bureaucratic activities.

3.5. Unit of Analysis

Generally speaking, the interviewed managers have a university degree, with more than five years' experience in the life of family-owned SMEs. The position that these actors in the field occupy in family-owned SMEs gives them the ability to apply the anticipations within their company over the long term. These are team leaders, operational managers, middle managers and directors working at the four levels of management of a family-owned SME.

3.6. Duration of Interviews

These semi-structured interviews lasted an average of one hour and twenty minutes (1 hour and 20 minutes) per participant. As the barrier measures were lifted in the Republic of Congo, our interviews took place face-to-face in order to reinforce the postulate of proximity so required by qualitative techniques. Although the exercise was not easy, we tried to be ourselves, asking the same questions, to all the actors in the field, in the same way.

3.7. Data Processing Technique

To process the qualitative data made available to us, we chose the technique of thematic content analysis. The purpose of this technique is to enable the comprehension of texts containing qualitative data in order to transform an intuitive reading into a constructed reading capable of giving the deeper meaning of the phenomenon (Feller, 1977).

To this end, as part of our data processing, we have taken the liberty, first of all, for traceability and security purposes, to transcribe the data made available to us on the article's log. Then, we made a floating reading to better understand the quintessence of each sentence pronounced by each actor in the field (Bardin, 1977). From this first preliminary reading, we carried out a more in-depth reading to identify not only what was said and what was not said by the participants interviewed, but also for a deeper understanding of the innuendo of the actors in the field. The next logical step was to define and delimit the corpus that ultimately constitutes the foundation on which the fundamentals of thematic content analysis are based (Richard, 2022).

3.8. Data Coding

Following this approach, we proceeded to free coding and set in motion a categorization process (Siméon *et al.*, 2016). This approach was carried out independently, in a spirit of brevity, exclusivity and relevance. All in all, the comparison of the results was of paramount importance in the implementation of a provisional grid of results.

3.9. Validity

To consolidate the validity of the data, we proceeded to vary the data sources (internal validity), followed by the generalization of the results (external validity).

3.10. Ethical considerations

According to Nassè (2021) ethical considerations in research are important and they should be observed. Thus, or Nassè (2021) respondent's answers should be confidential and they have to be used for the research purpose. This research upholds the highest ethical standards, by considering each respondent's rights and well-being as a priority. Informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary involvement are guaranteed by the ethical and private handling of all data collecting, processing, and interpretation processes.

4. Research Results

The research we have carried out with dexterity has confirmed that anticipation is one of the elements that allow family-owned SMEs to be sustainable. This assumption is supported by a demonstration that takes shape in the following lines.

4.1. Anticipations: an Invigorating Force for Sustainability

Indeed, the studies that we have operationalized within family SMEs rightly demonstrate that the relationship between expectations and the sustainability of small and medium-sized family businesses can be explained by the ability of expectations to position themselves as an energy that creates conditions to allow family SMEs to have vitality, remarkable production of goods and services and an iron economic health. This reasoning is all the more true, because anticipations encourage companies to take a participatory approach to human resources.

This approach, in the context of team management, evokes the principle of purpose, the principle of efficiency, the principle of unity and the principle of diversity as determining factors of living well together. By internalizing, respecting and applying these principles, anticipations limit social tensions in favor of social cohesion. However, it has been shown that social cohesion combined with taking into account the social and economic needs of human resources improves the production of goods and services, which allows small and medium-sized enterprises to produce in order to continue to produce and, de facto, to live for a long time in a highly competitive environment.

Indeed, the production of quality goods and services is not only a determinant that invigorates family SMEs, but also remains a mandatory condition for distinguishing themselves and contributing to the sustainability of small and medium-sized family enterprises in a globalized world.

This argument is supported by the following verbatim:

"Anticipations help our structure in the proposal of quality services. Thanks to this production, we continue to maintain our positioning, despite the competition that has become tough" (Rodrigue).

Another respondent adds:

"In a market economy, companies must distinguish themselves by producing high-end goods and services if they want to continue to live. We are in such a situation that either you distinguish yourself by this means, or you disappear. Our anticipation unit helps us in this sense, we are getting ahead of the competitors, we continue to be leaders" (Ardèche).

4.2. Anticipations: a catalyst from the future to the present

By its *raison d'être*, anticipations aim to prepare for the future by being in the present. In a way, it is a question of collecting data on the environment through certain tools such as economic intelligence, business intelligence and foresight. This data collection makes it possible to track down important information that can positively or negatively impact the company's environment.

Through tracking, solution approaches are proposed in order to choose the best solution and allow the owners of small and medium-sized family businesses to make decisions about the future while the business is still in the present. This reasoning leads to the conclusion that the anticipations of their presence in family-owned SMEs trigger a reaction that conditions the survival and life of family-owned SMEs. It is true that the future is still uncertain. It is also true that it is not always possible to guess the whole future by being in the present. However, it is also true that family-owned SMEs that have developed anticipatory capacities, through the intermediary of anticipatory units, manage to live longer than those that think of moving towards anticipation when it is already too late.

In line with this argument, an actress says: *"Anticipation is a tool that defines what is going to happen when it hasn't happened yet, you are like a little soothsayer or a little marabout who has the eyes to see what others don't see. In the same way that the marabout takes measures to prevent evil from happening, anticipation also follows the same path, you take measures to prevent attacks from competitors or others from destabilizing your functioning because you are already warned"* (Diane).

4.3. Anticipation as a Vector of Sustainability for Family-Owned SMEs

The vigilance of small and medium-sized family businesses is strongly developed by strategic monitoring units or anticipatory units. This vigilance protects small and medium-sized family businesses from the competitive approaches put forward by those who offer, on the same market, the same products as the company, but also plays the preponderant role of capturing, within the framework of intelligence, the techniques and strategies of competitors in order to better identify their strengths and weaknesses in order to finally reduce them to nothing by a strategy of surgical attack.

Through this reasoning, the vigilance developed by anticipations puts organizational actors in a form of responsibility for the future life of family SMEs. From this perspective, this anticipatory vigilance is a vector of sustainability for family SMEs and provides its share of support in the system that reinforces the relevance of sustainability. It should also be noted that simple vigilance is not enough. It must be accompanied by a global strategy to consolidate the strategic positioning of the family-owned SME so that it is able to follow in the footsteps of sustainability. In this context, this dimension of a vector of sustainability through anticipation can only play its full role when a desire for change accompanied by structural reorganizations is imposed as a mandatory condition in the organizational life of family-owned SMEs.

This anticipatory vigilance would also require that data be made available to departments capable of fully playing the mission of anticipatory monitoring, transformed into reliable information, processed in a timely manner with all the rigor required to ensure that anticipatory decisions are taken early and at the right time. Without developing such a strategic approach, anticipatory vigilance becomes illusory and unproductive.

This conception is supported by the following discourse:

"We know that our cell is a deterrent that plays a real role, but we also know that without the organizational reforms that have been made in recent years, we would have enormous difficulty in getting out of it" (Octavie).

In the same vein, one actor says:

"The ability of our company to live for a long time while others disappeared barely three months after their creation is the result of our careful surveillance". (Narcie)

4.4. Anticipation: à Tool for Good Governance of Long-Term Family-Owned SMEs

Nowadays, family-owned SMEs are comparable to a ship whose purpose is to leave port A to sail day and night until it reaches its destination, which is considered port B. From the point of view of this navigation, anticipation is considered as a radar that has three dimensions. The first dimension aims to communicate information in the air to reassure the captain of the boat about all the swells likely to prevent the seaworthiness of the boat, in other words, the growth of family SMEs. The second dimension is essentially intended to play the role of informing the captain of all the dangers that would come on the water to constitute a kind of brake on seaworthiness, that is to say, on the development of the company in times of competition, within the framework of a market economy. The third dimension is underwater, and it deals with concerns about torpedoing the ship, in other words, strategic approaches aimed at preventing small and medium-sized enterprises from living for long. These three dimensions, evoked in the form of a metaphor, are components of anticipation. Their purpose is to communicate reliable information to the captain of the boat, i.e. the owner of the small and medium-sized family business, in order to enable him to anticipate his decision-making process through a rigorous approach and to contribute, at the same time, to the sustainability of the family SME. In this perspective, anticipations contribute to the establishment of good governance that has the roots that can support the sustainability of small and medium-sized family enterprises in a market economy, in times of economic crisis and in times of health crisis.

This argument is supported by the following statements:

"In one of the exchanges I had with the owner of the company, she encouraged me to always anticipate in the management of the company to avoid inconveniences" (Risnelle).

Vehemently supporting the previous actor's layman, one participant argues:

"Preventing things puts us in a strong position when it comes to making an important decision about our customers, our suppliers, our products" (Félicité).

5. Discussion of results

The results of our research, operationalized in family-owned SMEs, demonstrate, firstly; that anticipation is a life-giving force for sustainability. Indeed, anticipations value to an advanced degree the ability of teams to combine their energies in order to achieve a common goal. A team that works within an anticipatory unit must understand that a single coal is not enough to light a fire, but that the combination of forces is, after all, the precious open sesame that aims to improve social cohesion and take into account the social and economic needs of employees, the only source of optimal productivity in a market economy where competition reigns legally. This conception is in line with the reflections of [Godet \(1991\)](#) who insist on the imperative need to pay particular attention to the contributions of teams to consolidate social cohesion. However, the same author nevertheless emphasizes the double subtlety that is required of team managers to prevent collective consensus from turning into selfish logic in the short term to the detriment of the general interest, in the long term. The second subtlety would be that managers are not part of a logic of imposing ideas, but of a vision whose objective is to ensure that ideas come from employees in order to allow their total adherence.

Second, our results assert that expectations are a catalyst from the future to the present. Indeed, anticipations are based on the collection of data on the environment in order to better identify the trends that come back again and again, transforming them into reliable information to enable decision-makers to prepare for the future by being in the

present. This argument is also supported by the work of Chalus-Sauvannet (2006) who clearly expresses the interest of projecting oneself into the future by means of anticipations so that the family SME can survive.

However, the work of Dumez (2009) argues that anticipations do not always allow us to define the present while being in the future because of the ambiguity of the concept of sustainability and its profound paradox. Indeed, an organization with five stages, including the stage of constitution, the stage of agitation, the stage of stabilization and the stage of action and dispersal. This reasoning assumes that the notion of sustainability is both ambiguous and complex because any family SME is bound to disappear and there is, unfortunately, no eternal organization. However, there are some family-owned SMEs that take a long time to disappear than others. This disappearance can be abrupt or slow, but it always happens eventually, one way or another.

In addition, our fieldwork indicates that expectations are factors in the sustainability of family-owned SMEs. Indeed, in organizational life, the strategic intelligence unit enjoys a dominant positioning. It sets up a monitoring system to monitor the SME's environment in order to boost its performance and contribute to its sustainability. This reasoning is very close to the work of Chalus-Sauvannet (2006) who considers that the purpose of surveillance is to collect data, to transform this data into real information, to capitalize on the global skills on the macroeconomic environment, but also on the meso environment, the internal and external component in order to position the SME through an aggressive strategic approach. Through this monitoring, small and medium-sized enterprises can live a long time compared to other companies that do not place anticipatory approaches at the heart of their sustainability.

Finally, studies show that anticipation is a tool for good governance of long-term family-owned SMEs. Indeed, in a logic of discontinuity in continuity, the anticipatory unit, thus developed within a family SME, has three possibilities for analysing the environment of competitors, substitute products, new entrants and the global trends that emerge around the immediate and distant environment of the company. Through this life-saving mechanism, the family-owned SME therefore has a radar that improves its governance and places it in a logic of sustainability. This conception is in line with the framework outlined by the publications of Lesca (2008) which, in keeping with the allegory of the ship with a radar, believes that the ability of the family SME to collect information on its environment gives it the means to develop a form of good governance that motivates employees, reassures shareholders and boosts the production of the company's goods and services in order to make it competitive, efficient and sustainable. If the radar, in the context of a ship, aims to detect the danger in time to allow the captain of the ship to act quickly to remove the danger from the iceberg, for example, from the perspective of the family SME, it is a question of looking far ahead to detect a threat or an opportunity in order to allow the company's managers to make not only a decision, but also a decision to execute it on time and promptly to anticipate adverse effects or to detect the warning signs of any opportunity.

6. Conclusion

Our research has made it possible, through a rigorous approach, to demonstrate that the anticipations developed in Congolese family SMEs allow them to exist for a long time in a context where many companies disappear three months after their creation. These anticipations are part of a global strategy which aim is to think that it is very difficult to know everything that can happen to a family-owned SME, but it is otherwise possible to mobilise anticipatory approaches, within these structures, to detect, on the one hand, the harmful effects likely to destabilise organisational life, and on the other hand, to identify opportunities in advance to help managers act quickly.

In a highly competitive area, characterized by economic trends aimed at opening up the Congolese market to the international market in order to consolidate the economic cushion through the creation of wealth and fight against unemployment through facilities that can allow the creation of an SME in a short time, anticipation through anticipation is becoming more than ever a mandatory condition and a necessary strategic option for the sustainability of the projects. Congolese family-owned SMEs.

However, every process is governed by principles. In this respect, the implementation of anticipatory approaches can only be successful in the development of human resources, which involves not only successful recruitment, but also the ability of managers to take into account the needs of human capital, the only source of productivity of quality goods and services. With this in mind, the integration of cultural values.

It is true that all family-owned SMEs, as well as all organisations, are destined to disappear. It is also true that this disappearance can take place abruptly or slowly. It is also true that, in the Congolese context, the managers who have enabled their family SMEs to enter the circular wheel to win the fight for sustainability are those who have put in place the appropriate appropriate conditions through anticipation.

Finally, our study was operationalized in seven Congolese family-owned SMEs operating in a specific environment, with specific realities and particular strategic approaches. From that point of view, it is by no means an authoritative conclusion. This would be an inordinate position that researchers humbly refuse to assume. Rather, we hope that other studies, under different circumstances, will be carried out at the African and European level in order to corroborate this state of affairs so that the eternal expectations can be perpetuated within the strategic literature of family SMEs.

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