

## Article

# Factors Influencing Sustainable Entrepreneurship in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Iran: A Case Study of Food Industry

Gholamhossein Hosseininia \* and Ali Ramezani

Department of Entrepreneurship in Technology, Faculty of Entrepreneurship, University of Tehran, Tehran 1417466191, Iran; Ali.ramezani.1988@gmail.com

\* Correspondence: hosseininia@ut.ac.ir

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**Abstract:** This study sought to establish the social and environmental factors that influence sustainable entrepreneurship (SE) in Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It also attempted to identify whether the demographic background of the entrepreneur influences the SE in SMEs of the Iranian food industry. A mixed method approach, employing the use of questionnaires and interviews from a sample size of approximately 130 participants and 12 owner-managers of SMEs in food industry, was used to collect data. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and several inferential analyses. Findings showed that certain characteristics of the entrepreneur, including work experience and education, have a significant impact on SE. Furthermore, out of the eight identified factors, according to the participants' perception, the most important factors towards sustainable performance of SMEs in food industry are social factors, including customer orientation, as well as human resources and environmental factors, including recycling and the future of Earth. This research paper concludes that considering the social and environmental aspects of sustainability and employing experienced staff would majorly contribute to the pursuit of SE in SMEs of food industry.

**Keywords:** small business; entrepreneurship; venture strategies; regional economic; developing economies; management

## 1. Introduction

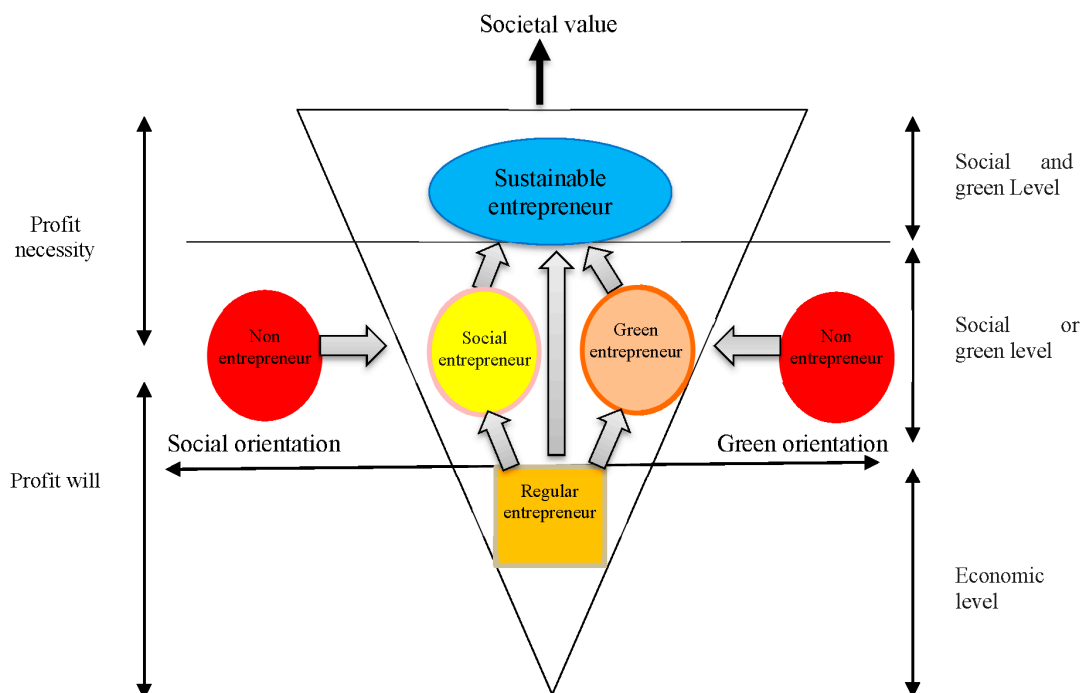
SMEs play a very important role in the industrialization and development of an economy as they make-up over 98 percent of all enterprises in Europe, which in turn, employ more than half of those employed in the European Union [1–3]. Furthermore, SMEs constitute the majority of enterprises in developing countries and are considered as one of the most important factors in economic and social growth, employment, local development [4] and poverty reduction [5]. Considering the growing importance of the SMEs, many researchers have focused on the issues related to its development and it has therefore become the main topic for a number of analyses.

On the other hand, the review of existing work highlights that the amount of academic literature on SE has grown significantly over the last few decades [6–9]. According to Kuckertz and Wagner (2010) [6], the main literature on SE has often focused on the environmental aspects of entrepreneurship [8–15], while other investigations in this area have mainly dealt with the social dimension of SE [16–18]. The influence of socioeconomic status, religion and personality attributes on SE have all been considered to varying degrees [19]. Accordingly, Sinha (1996) [20], Mazzarol et al. (1999) [19] and Kristiansen et al. (2003) [21] identified demographic factors that have considerably impact the success of entrepreneurial performance. Moreover, a review by Hall et al. (2010) [22] reveals the extant of the

methodologies of SE. Although the scarcity of academic works and publications calls for more research as well as the potential development of this area, the existing research predominantly focused on only one aspect (namely the social or environmental pillars). In doing so, researchers miss the rich potential of this unique field of study, as Young and Tilley (2006) [23] emphasize that special targets are gained from the “whole enterprise design” by incorporating environmental, social and economic components of sustainability within the organizational design. Though a few studies in environmental management, social studies and general business are examples of movement towards the development of enterprise in sustainability, academic investigation regarding the combination of sustainable development and entrepreneurship is quite nascent. The newness of the field offers great opportunities to discover new basis and relationships in the field of sustainable entrepreneurship in SMEs [24]. It is important to note that when it comes to the performance of SMEs in addressing sustainable development, it turns out that SMEs have been largely ignored [25]. Bradford and Fraser (2008) [26] and Condon (2004) [27] have noted that SMEs were more limited when it came to adapting sustainability strategies and practices than the large firms, mainly due to the financial and recourse limitations. Therefore, there is a significant need to pay more attention to the sustainability of SMEs.

The literature review of this topic showed that although many studies have focused on the SE in different countries in recent decades, there is lack of research on the simultaneous influences of the main social and environmental factors of sustainable development in SMEs. In Iran, SMEs constitute the majority of enterprises (75%) and contribute approximately 30% of the value-added to the country's economy [4]. Though SMEs play a significant role in the economic growth of Iran, they have not been sufficiently considered due to the bias of different researchers towards larger and listed enterprises in Iran [28]. Moreover, there are 7370 active food industry units in Iran that produce more than 25 million tons of agricultural products. These units, 94% of which are SMEs, rank second with respect to the productive industry in Iran. Statistics also show that the importance of food industries in the economy and production of Iran require more attention [28]. Because it is necessary that Iran enters into the global market and finds its own niche, due to the country's potential food industry, research in this area could influence and vastly improve said industry [28]. Furthermore, since this business is not similar to the large entities, when it comes to the enterprise strategies for sustainable development, SMEs need particular attention [25]. Given that, it is worth recognizing the factors that influence sustainable entrepreneurship. To address this issue, this study seeks to understand and explore the factors that affect the SE of SMEs as perceived by the owner-managers and entrepreneurs of SMEs in the Iranian food sector. More specifically, the study seeks to investigate: (1) the extent that the characteristics of an entrepreneur affect the SE of SMEs in food industry; (2) the major social and environmental factors that influence the sustainable development of SMEs; and (3) the relationship between the selected factors and SE.

Richomme-Huet and Freyman (2011) [29] argue that through the combination of ecological, social, and economic values that “sustainable entrepreneurship is focused on the preservation of nature, life support, and community in the pursuit of perceived opportunities to bring into existence future products, processes, and services for gain, where gain is broadly construed to include economic and non-economic gains to individuals, the economy, and society”. However, despite the growing literature [14,30–32], little is known about how entrepreneurs can become sustainable or the mechanisms that might make it possible. However, in order to become sustainable, social or green, entrepreneurs should add the missing dimensions in order to complete their profile. A central feature of this discussion is the concept of trajectory [29]. We have constructed a theoretical framework in order to identify the profile of an entrepreneur according to the venture created, the activities, the motivations and values they defend when they decide to create it (Figure 1). We propose that entrepreneurs are able to change their initial position from regular to sustainable options, not passing by social or environmental issues, with a direct trajectory; or can moderate the change, step by step, degree by degree, passing by social or green issues under specific conditions, constraints or personal values, with an indirect trajectory.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual formwork of the study (adopted from: Richomme-Huet and Freyman, 2011 [29]).

## 2. Methodology

A mixed method approach, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, was conducted in this study [33]. A qualitative semi-structured interview approach was used in order to gain in-depth and detailed perspectives from 12 owner-managers [34]. Following that, in order to collect quantitative data, a questionnaire-based survey was employed. The questionnaire was completed through face-to-face interviews and by electronic delivery via the Internet (using a *t*-test, we already compared data collected from the two groups of participants face-to-face interview and electronic, and, given no significant difference between variables, all the participants have been considered as one group). Other required quantitative data were collected through official documents obtained from the study enterprises.

### 2.1. Study Sample

The interviewees included owner-managers, entrepreneurs and experts from active SMEs within the food industry in Iran. This paper has used the Europe Union's definition of SMEs (2003) [35], which defines medium- and small-sized enterprises as those with less than 250 and 50 persons, respectively. In this research, SMEs with less than 250 employees were chosen. Accordingly, during the three specialized exhibitions of food industry held in Tehran in 2012, questionnaires were distributed among the owner-managers, entrepreneurs and experts of the SMEs.

#### 2.1.1. Study Sample for Qualitative Part

When choosing the sample, the non-probability approach and purposive sampling was selected. Meaning that the sample was not selected through a random sampling method, yet some managers were more likely to be chosen over others. Indeed, every individual of the total population of the SMEs did not have an equal chance of being included in the study [34,36,37]. By using purposive sampling, the researcher identified 12 owner-managers of SMEs as the most appropriate to be included in this study and able to gain a deeper understanding of the situation of SMEs' sustainability in the food industry of Iran. The most appropriate owner-managers were selected based on the following criteria:

- (1) Those who have a minimum of 10 years' experience working.
- (2) Those who are a managing director, board chairman and technical manager.

### 2.1.2. Study Sample for Quantitative Part

The sample size is calculated based on Cochran's formula [38].

$$n = \frac{Z^2 pq}{d^2} \quad (1)$$

where  $n$  is sample size,  $d$  is precision level,  $Z$  is confidence level,  $p$  is variability of population and  $q$  is  $(1 - p)$ .

In this study, it is assumed that the variability of population is 0.5 (maximum variability), confidence level of 95% and precision level of  $\pm 9\%$ . Hence, the resulting sample size is:

$$\frac{(1.96)^2 (0.5) (0.5)}{(0.09)^2} = 119 \quad (2)$$

As a result of using Cochran's formula to calculate sample size, a minimum of 120 final samples was needed for the study. The sample was selected through a random sampling method. The companies were selected based on the following criteria:

- (1) The company was active in the food industry or related industries.
- (2) The company had less than 250 employees.
- (3) The company had, at least, one of the social and environmental factors as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Factors influensing on selecting the companies.

Environmental Factors	Social Factors
Waste Recycling	Improving the employees' Subsistence situation
Indoor and outdoor growing of trees and flowers	Financial support of a local organization (Music bands, sports teams, etc.)
No environmental pollution in producing	Donations to Charitable Organizations
Proper sewage disposal system of the enterprise	Training courses for employees
Preventing the potential loss of resources	Considering the employee insurance
Durable products	Providing Home-to-Work Transportation
The proper use of agricultural land for cultivation	Compliance with workplace standards
Proper use of renewable energy sources	—
Obtaining ISO (International Organization for Standardization) certification	—

## 2.2. Data Collection

### 2.2.1. Interview

The data collection for the qualitative study took place in 2012. Primary data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews and open-ended questions with 12 managers of SMEs in food industry in order to gain a deeper understanding of the situation regarding SMEs' sustainability in the food industry of Iran and in order to develop the survey questionnaire for the study. A semi-structured interview consists of a checklist of issues and pertinent questions that the researcher asks during the interview in order to find their answer [39]. Thus, semi-structured interviews were selected as the qualitative method in this study [40]. Our goal in choosing the semi-structured interview technique was essentially to encourage the interviewees to freely discuss

their own opinions on the social and environmental factors influencing SMEs' movements towards sustainability. During the interview, an open-ended flexible approach to interviewing, which is strongly recommended by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) [41], was utilized. In order to raise the reliability of the answers, all interviews were recorded, then transcribed material was delivered to the respondents. Statements were revised based on the comments of the respondents and eventually the material was confirmed by the interviewees [2]. When questioned about the environmental factors, SME managers pointed out that considering the standards, physical standards of the workplace, future of Earth and environment and recycling were the main challenges of reaching sustainability. With respect to the social aspect, the SME managers responded that considering social supports, human resources, customer orientation and the staff training are the most important factors of the sustainable performance of SMEs.

### 2.2.2. Questionnaire

Using a questionnaire (Appendix A), this study was conducted through a survey in 2012. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the questionnaire was developed into three sections based on the review of the pertinent literature and the results of the semi-structured interview. The scales used to measure different constructs were confirmed scales by other studies including Schuman and Presser (1981) [42] and Carifio and Perla (2007) [43]. In the first part of the questionnaire, data regarding the personal attributes of the study population were collected. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of four open-ended questions that aimed at underlining and finding out the entrepreneurs' initial viewpoints of sustainability. Finally, in the third section of the questionnaire, the respondents were provided with 30 close-ended questions using 5-point Likert scale (from "0" (strongly *disagree*) to "5" (strongly *agree*)) in order to identify, evaluate and rate the main components of SE in SMEs in food industry (Annex). The questionnaire was approved through face validity and the reliability of the main indices of the study was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) as shown in Table 2. The questionnaire was distributed among 200 participants. After following up, 156 questionnaires were returned, which showed that 78% of the respondents answered the questionnaire. Due to incomplete responses for some of the questions, 26 questionnaires were not analyzed. The final analysis was performed for over 130 questionnaires.

**Table 2.** Cronbach's alpha for the main scales of the study.

Pillar	Variable	$\alpha^a$
Environmental	Considering the Standards	0.711
	Considering the physical standards of workplace	0.800
	Considering the future of Earth and Environment	0.718
	Considering Recycling	0.882
Social	Considering social Supports	0.851
	Considering human resources	0.752
	Customer orientation (CO)	0.700
	Considering the staff training	0.892
Total	Total variables	0.844

<sup>a</sup>  $\alpha \geq 0.9$ : excellent;  $0.9 > \alpha \geq 0.8$ : good;  $0.8 > \alpha \geq 0.7$ : acceptable.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

#### 2.3.1. Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic coding technique that is suitable for the semi-structured interviews carried out in this study [2]. The analysis process was adjusted into four steps following the phases developed by Sefiani and Bown 2013 [2]:

- (1) Transcript: The transcripts were transferred into a text and audio formats according to the detailed statements presented.
- (2) Familiarization with the data: Following this, the researcher read all interviews in detail. The researcher also had to come to understand and to become familiar with the existing data.
- (3) Coding Framework: The data were then coded into different categories. Subsequently, the interviews were arranged.
- (4) Thematic charting: The content was then presented in the form of specific themes.

### 2.3.2. Quantitative Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and inferential analysis were applied in order to analyze the quantitative data using SPSS software (version 22). Some descriptive analyses included mean, median, standard deviation, inter-quartile range, frequency counts and percentage. Furthermore, some inferential analyses were applied in order to discover the factors influencing SE of SMEs in food industry. In this study, multiple linear regression was conducted in order to evaluate the relationship between every selected factor (as the independent variables) and the score of SE (as the dependent variable). Another major goal of this study was to assess the effect of each of the eight factors on sustainable entrepreneurship in SMEs using the Friedman test.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Qualitative Data Analysis

#### Thematic Analysis

The interview data were analyzed by means of thematic analysis. The final themes from the interviews related to the view of the managers of SMEs regarding the main variables affecting SMEs' sustainability are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Final coded factors resulting from the thematic analysis.

Pillar	Variable	Final Code	Related Question No. (Appendix A)
Environmental	Considering the Standards	FC 1	2, 4, 15, 30
	Considering the physical standards of workplace	FC 2	9, 20, 27, 28
	Considering the future of Earth and Environment	FC 3	1, 13, 14, 18, 21, 26
	Considering Recycling	FC 4	3, 19, 22, 24
Social	Considering social Supports	FC 5	7, 8
	Considering human resources	FC 6	5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 29
	Customer orientation (CO)	FC 7	23, 25, 29
	Considering the staff training	FC 8	16, 17

FC: Final Code.

According to the table, from the managers' point of view, the two main aspects, including environmental and social factors, were found to be the most effective in the sustainable performance of SMEs in food industry. When questioned about the environmental factors, SME managers pointed out that the standards, physical standards of the workplace, the future of Earth and the environment and recycling, are the main challenges of sustainability. With respect to the social aspect, the SME managers responded that social supports, human resources, customer orientation and the staff training are the most important factors for the sustainable performance of SMEs.

### 3.2. Quantitative Data Analysis

This study applies the responses from the questionnaire, which had 30 questions, representing the two main pillars and related variables. Table 4 offers a summary of the general questions available in questionnaire.

**Table 4.** Relationship between the coded variables and the questionnaire.

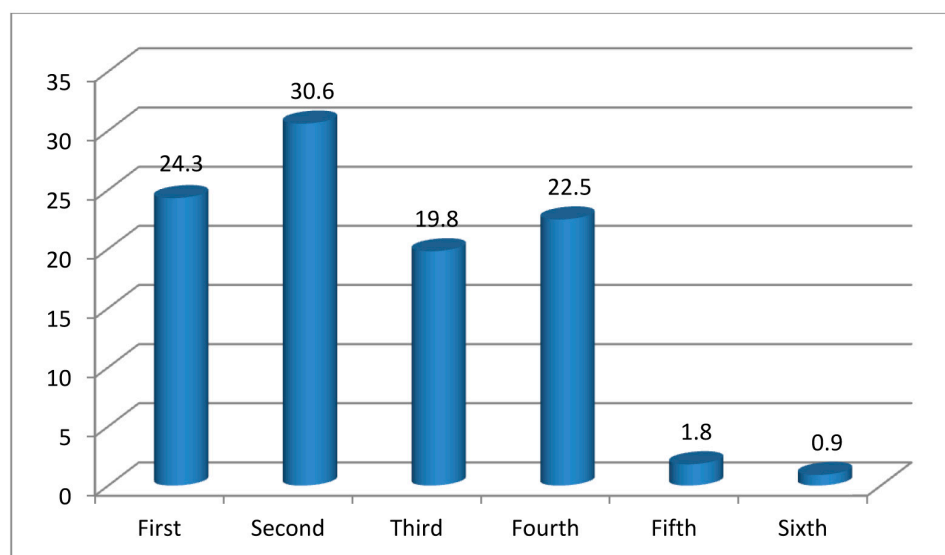
Pillar	Component of the Question	Coded Variable	Question No.
Environmental	Waste Recycling	Considering Recycling	3
	Indoor and outdoor growing of trees and flowers	Considering the future of Earth and Environment	1,4
	No environmental pollution in producing	Cuts of greenhouse gas emissions/ Considering Sustainable packaging	13, 22, 25
	Proper sewage disposal system of the enterprise	Considering Recycling	14
	Preventing the potential loss of resources	Considering the future of Earth and Environment	16, 18, 19, 23, 30
	Durable products	Customer orientation (CO)	22, 23, 25
	The proper use of agricultural land for cultivation	Considering the future of Earth and Environment	18, 19, 23, 24
	Proper use of renewable energy sources	Considering the future of Earth and Environment	16, 21, 24
	Obtaining ISO (International Organization for Standardization) certification	Considering the Standards	15
	The way of communication with supervisors	Trust to the environmental scientists	15
Social	Improving the employees' Subsistence situation and their families	Considering the well-being of employees and their families	2, 5, 6, 10, 11
	Financial support of a local organization (Music bands, sports teams, etc.)	Social Supports	7, 8
	Donations to Charitable Organizations	Social Supports	7, 8
	Training courses for employees	Considering the staff training	17
	Considering the employee insurance	Considering the well-being of employees and their families	11
	Providing home-to-work transportation	Considering the well-being of employees and their families	12, 29
	Compliance with workplace standards	Considering the physical standards of workplace	9, 20, 27, 28
General	New opportunities for sustainability	Advantages of sustainability	26
	Moving towards sustainability	Defining sustainability and sustainable entrepreneurship	24

### 3.2.1. General Profile of the Respondents

In this section, we aim to describe the samples through the characteristics of the entrepreneurs. According to the findings of this study, 90% of the sample were male and 10% were female. In respect to age, almost 40% of the total participants were in the range of 30–39 years old, whereas 32.5% were between 20 and 30 years old. The age of the remaining participants (26.8%) were between 40 and 49, while only one entrepreneur had more than 50 years old. In terms of education level, while one-fifth of the respondents had an Associate degree, the majority of the participants held a bachelor degree in their own major (39.7%). Entrepreneurs with master degrees and PhDs comprised only 23.8% and 4.8% of the respondents, respectively. The work experience of more than half of the sample population (59%) had less than five years, compared to the 30% of participants who had 5–9 years of experience in their jobs. With an exception of one person, who had more than 20 years of working experience, the other two ranges (10–14 and 15–19) had the lowest work experience, with just 7% and 3.5%.



As shown in Figure 1, among all of the respondents who had a background in enterprise establishments, 27 and 34 individuals had established one and two enterprises, respectively. Entrepreneurs with experience in establishing three and four enterprises included 19.8% and 22.5% of the participants (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Number of enterprises established by participants.

### 3.2.2. Descriptive Analysis of the Main Variables

While measures of central tendency are used to estimate the “normal” values of a dataset, measures of dispersion are important when describing the spread of the data, or its variation around a central value. According to Table 5, the descriptive analysis of the main questions of the questionnaire was carried out using measures of central tendency (mean) and measures of variability (standard deviation). Moreover, in order to check for the normality of the data, a Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test was conducted. The results of the normality test showed that the Significant value of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test for all selected factors is below 0.05. Thus, the data significantly deviate from a normal distribution (Table 5).

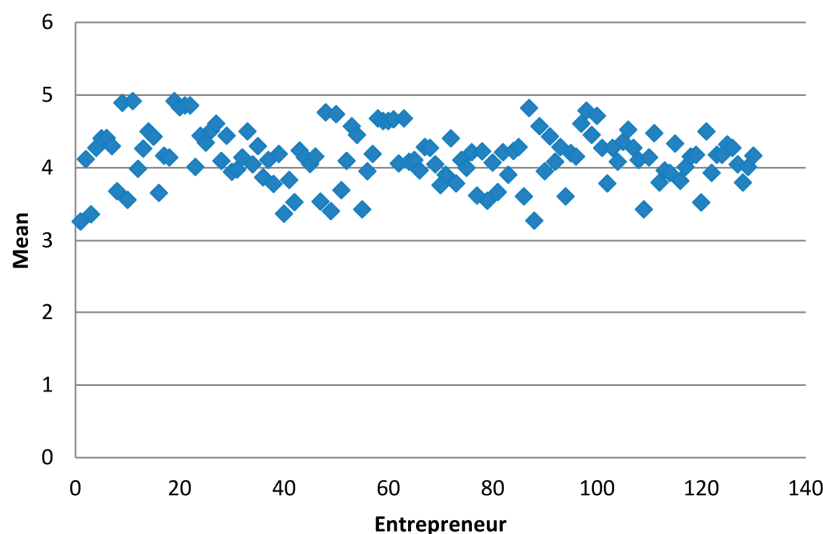
**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics and one-sample Kolmogorov–Smirnov test of the main scales of the study.

Pillar	Variable	Number of Related Questions	Mean	Std. Dev.	Asymptotic Significance (2-Tailed)
Environmental	Considering the Standards	4	4.2019	0.49	0.001
	Considering the physical standards of workplace	4	4.2442	0.67	0.001
	Considering the future of Earth and Environment	2	4.0235	0.64	0.049
	Considering Recycling	6	4.0686	0.72	0.007
Social	Considering social Supports	4	4.5159	0.65	0.000
	Considering human resources	2	4.1465	0.53	0.003
	Customer orientation (CO)	6	3.9359	0.73	0.000
	Considering the staff training	4	3.8800	0.92	0.000

### 3.2.3. Sustainable Entrepreneurship Scores Achieved by Respondents

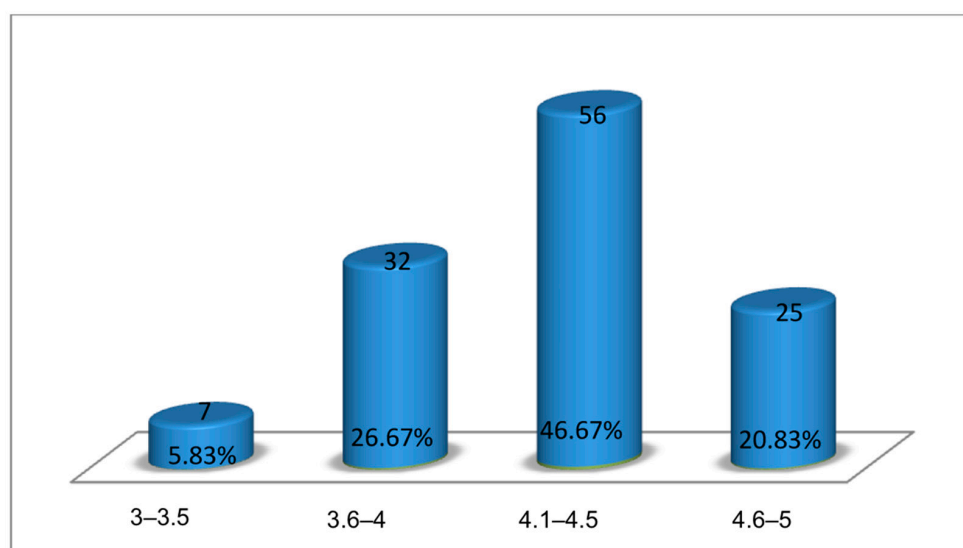
The following chart shows the mean scores of the SE according to the selected indicators clarified by the 130 respondents to the questionnaire (Figure 3).





**Figure 3.** Distribution of the mean scores of sustainable entrepreneurship for the sample, based on the selected variables.

Figure 3 shows the results of classification of the mean scores of SE for the sample entrepreneurs. According to the table, while the majority of the participants (46.67%) have achieved a sustainability score between 4.1 and 4.5, the figure for 32 individuals is within the range of 3.6–4. Entrepreneurs with a maximum score of SE only comprised one-fifth (20.83%) of the respondents, compared to the 5.83% who gained the minimum score range, between 3 and 3.5 (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Mean scores of sustainable entrepreneurship for the sample, based on the selected variables.

### 3.2.4. Correlation Analysis

According to Munikrishnan and Veerakumaran (2012) [44], a fundamental dimension of the successful performance of enterprises includes the demographic factors and characteristics of the entrepreneur, such as age, gender, work experience and education. Given that, the Pearson correlation analysis was applied in this study in order to discover the relationship between the two identified pillars and the entrepreneur characteristics. The Pearson correlation analysis results in Table 6 show that the gender and age of entrepreneurs do not have a relationship with SE. In contrast, there is a significant positive relationship between the work experience ( $R$ -value of 0.121 with a  $p$ -value of 0.009)

and education ( $R$ -value of 0.121 with a  $p$ -value of 0.000) of entrepreneurs with both studied pillars of the SE of SMEs in food industry. Surprisingly, a number of established enterprises have a negative relationship with both dimensions of SE.

**Table 6.** Correlations between entrepreneurs' characteristics and two main pillars of sustainable entrepreneurship (results of Pearson correlation).

Characteristic		Environmental Dimension	Social Dimension
Gender	Pearson Correlation	−0.008	0.102
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.932	0.254
	N	126	126
Working experience	Pearson Correlation	0.139	0.104 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.141	0.009
	N	114	114
Education	Pearson Correlation	0.060 **	0.014 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000
	N	126	126
Age	Pearson Correlation	0.018	0.041
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.84	0.655
	N	124	124
Number of established enterprises	Pearson Correlation	−0.116 **	−0.059 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000
	N	111	111

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$  and therefore, the independent variable is significantly correlated to the dependent variable.

### 3.2.5. Factors Influencing Sustainable Entrepreneurship, Using Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

In this section, a multi-variable regression analysis was conducted in order to assess the relationship between every selected factor (as the independent variable) and the coefficient of SE (as the dependent variable). Tables 7 and 8 provide the results of the regression analysis on the influence of “considering the standards”, “physical standards of workplace”, “future of the earth and the environment”, “recycling”, “social supports”, “human resources”, “customer orientation”, “the staff training”, “gender” and “age” on the sustainable performance of SMEs in food industry.

**Table 7.** Model summary.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
1	0.952 <sup>a</sup>	0.907	0.897	0.12461	97.131	0.000 <sup>a</sup>
2	0.952 <sup>b</sup>	0.907	0.898	0.12400	109.003	0.000 <sup>b</sup>
3	0.952 <sup>c</sup>	0.906	0.899	0.12353	123.535	0.000 <sup>c</sup>
4	0.951 <sup>d</sup>	0.904	0.898	0.12442	138.819	0.000 <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Predictors: (Constant), Age, Considering the social supports, Considering the recycling, Gender, Considering the staff training, Considering the future of earth and environment, Considering the physical standards of workplace, Considering human resources, Considering the customer orientation, and Considering the standards; <sup>b</sup> Predictors: (Constant), Considering the social supports, Considering the recycling, Gender, Considering the staff training, Considering the future of earth and environment, Considering the physical standards of workplace, Considering human resources, Considering the customer orientation, and Considering the standards; <sup>c</sup> Predictors: (Constant), Considering the social supports, Considering the recycling, Considering the staff training, Considering the future of earth and environment, Considering the physical standards of workplace, Considering human resources, Considering the customer orientation, and Considering the standards; <sup>d</sup> Predictors: (Constant), Considering the social supports, Considering the recycling, Considering the staff training, Considering the future of earth and environment, Considering the physical standards of workplace, Considering human resources, and Considering the standards.

**Table 8.** Multi-variable regression analysis of factors influencing the sustainable entrepreneurship.

	Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	0.410	0.162		2.532	0.013
	Social supports	0.040	0.018	0.070	2.215	0.029
	Considering the standards	0.156	0.039	0.201	4.024	0.000
	Physical standards of workplace	0.081	0.025	0.141	3.296	0.001
	Staff training	0.034	0.016	0.079	2.172	0.032
	Future of the earth and the environment	0.201	0.022	0.344	9.210	0.000
	Recycling	0.255	0.021	0.444	11.928	0.000
	Human resources	0.166	0.032	0.230	5.260	0.000
	Customer orientation	−0.037	0.023	−0.072	−1.572	0.119
	Gender	0.020	0.043	0.015	0.474	0.636
	Age	$-5.542 \times 10^{-6}$	0.002	0.000	−0.003	0.997
2	(Constant)	0.410	0.154		2.658	0.009
	Social supports	0.040	0.018	0.070	2.227	0.028
	Considering the standards	0.156	0.038	0.201	4.068	0.000
	Physical standards of workplace	0.081	0.024	0.141	3.313	0.001
	Staff training	0.034	0.016	0.079	2.184	0.031
	Future of the earth and the environment	0.201	0.021	0.344	9.400	0.000
	Recycling	0.255	0.021	0.444	11.994	0.000
	Human resources	0.166	0.031	0.230	5.424	0.000
	Customer orientation	−0.037	0.023	−0.072	−1.609	0.111
	Gender	0.020	0.042	0.015	0.477	0.634
3	(Constant)	0.427	0.149		2.869	0.005
	Social supports	0.040	0.018	0.070	2.230	0.028
	Considering the standards	0.155	0.038	0.201	4.069	0.000
	Physical standards of workplace	0.080	0.024	0.140	3.298	0.001
	Staff training	0.034	0.016	0.079	2.184	0.031
	Future of the earth and the environment	0.203	0.021	0.346	9.565	0.000
	Recycling	0.256	0.021	0.446	12.144	0.000
	Human resources	0.166	0.031	0.229	5.436	0.000
	Customer orientation	−0.036	0.023	−0.070	−1.578	0.118
4	(Constant)	0.477	0.147		3.254	0.002
	Social supports	0.038	0.018	0.066	2.090	0.039
	Considering the standards	0.156	0.038	0.202	4.076	0.000
	Physical standards of workplace	0.076	0.024	0.133	3.135	0.002
	Staff training	0.028	0.015	0.066	1.859	0.066
	Future of the earth and the environment	0.199	0.021	0.340	9.389	0.000
	Recycling	0.249	0.021	0.435	11.986	0.000
	Human resources	0.140	0.026	0.194	5.390	0.000

As shown in the tables, there are four models of sustainable performance of SMEs in food industry. The first model is the collaboration of the “age”, “considering the social supports”, “considering the recycling”, “gender”, “considering the staff training”, “considering the future of earth and environment”, “considering the physical standards of workplace”, “considering human resources”, “considering the customer orientation” and “considering the standards”. In the second model, “age” was removed. In the third model “gender” was removed, and in the fourth, “considering the customer orientation” was removed. Moreover, as Table 8 shows, most independent variable significantly influence SE which are social supports, considering the standards, physical standards of workplace, staff training, future of the earth and the environment, recycling and human resources.

### 3.2.6. Friedman Test

Another major goal of research is to assess the importance of each of the eight factors in sustainable entrepreneurship in SMEs. Owing to this weighty matter, the Friedman test is used. According to Table 9, recycling, among all the environmental factors, and customer orientation, among the social factors, allocated most importance to themselves. Considering the future of the Earth and the environment, the physical standards of the workplace and standards, are the next important

environmental factors. With regard to the social factors, human resources is the second most important factor, whereas staff training and social supports are the third and fourth most important factors.

**Table 9.** Evaluation of the importance of each factor through the average rating of each factor in the Friedman Test.

Pillar	Variable	Mean Rank	Sig.
Social	Customer orientation (CO)	5.57	0.000
	Considering human resources	4.95	
Environmental	Considering Recycling	4.49	0.000
	Considering the future of Earth and Environment	4.45	
Social	Considering the staff training	4.33	0.000
Environmental	Considering the physical standards of workplace	4.24	0.000
	Considering the Standards	4.02	
Social	Considering social Supports	3.68	0.000

Final ranking of the selected factors is presented in Table 10, which is based on the average rank resulting from the quantitative and qualitative analysis in this research.

**Table 10.** Final ranking of each factor according to the quantitative and qualitative data.

Pillar	Variable	Rank in Quantitative Analysis	Rank in Qualitative Analysis	Final Rank
Social	Customer orientation (CO)	1	1	1
	Considering human resources	2	2	2
Environmental	Considering recycling	3	2	3
	Considering the future of the earth and environment	4	2	4
Social	Considering the staff training	5	7	5
Environmental	Considering the Standards	7	6	6
Social	Considering social Supports	8	5	7
Environmental	Considering the physical standards of workplace	6	8	8

According to Table 10, it can be found that CO and human resources are the most important social factors, considering that recycling and the future of the earth and the environment are the key environmental factors towards sustainable performance of SMEs in food industry.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study intended to examine the effects of social and environmental factors as well as the influence of the demographic background of the entrepreneurs on the SE of SMEs in the Iranian food industry by investigating the perspectives of owner-managers, entrepreneurs and experts. Similarly, Dean and McMullen (2007) [8], Cohen and Winn (2007) [9], and Shepherd et al. (2011) [30] have developed a new type of entrepreneur, which has emerged, in line with sustainable development and its triple bottom line (the balancing of social, economic, and environmental perspectives), called the sustainable entrepreneur. With regards to the demographic background, the results of the correlation analysis showed that working and managerial experience, education and the number of previously established entrepreneurship have a significant relationship with the sustainable entrepreneurship of SMEs in food industry. The result is confirmed by Dickson and Solomon (2008) [45] and by Cooper et al. (1994) [46] who have indicated that the chances of both a successful and high growth among SMEs has had strong positive correlations with the education level and industry-specific knowledge. Moreover, Zimmerer and Scarborough (1998) [47] stated that the lack of suitable managerial and experiential potential is main cause of enterprise failure. However, Meng and

Liang (1996) [48] found that 30% of successful entrepreneurs have no work experience, compared to only 3% of unsuccessful entrepreneurs that do not have any job experience (significant at  $p = 0.01$ ). In addition, in their study, Lee and Denslow (2005) [49] found that lack of experience is one of the major determinants that influence entrepreneurial performance. In relation to the education and according to Meng and Liang (1996) [48], Staw (1991) [50], and Holt (1992) [51], within the entrepreneurial world, the firms whose employees have higher levels of education are more successful due to the fact that an university education gives them the opportunity to achieve knowledge and modern managerial skills. They then become more aware of what is truly going on in the business world and therefore will be in a position to use their learned skills in business management. Similarly, Thapa (2007) [52], in his study in Nepal, has found that education is positively associated with entrepreneurial success. However, Minniti and Bygrave (2003) [53] have argued that more education is not necessarily a reason behind more success in entrepreneurship. Similarly, Mazzarol et al. (1999) [19] stated that demographic factors such as age, gender, education and work experience have a considerable impact on entrepreneurial intention and venture. However, as the correlation analyses revealed in our study, gender and age is not related to SE. This seems to point to the conclusion that the SE of SMEs in the Iranian food industry is driven by the education and work experience of the entrepreneur and not its gender or age base. Based on the Pearson correlation analysis, it has been noted that age and gender does not exert any influence on SE. Despite this, Kristiansen et al. (2003) [21] and Sinha (1996) [20] found a significant relationship between age of an entrepreneur and business success in their study.

In relation to the two studied pillars of SE, including social and environmental dimensions, the regression analysis showed that the main social factors that significantly affect the score of SE within SMEs are “considering customer orientation”, “human resources”, “staff training” and “social Supports”. The results also showed that considering recycling, the future of the earth, standards and physical standards of workplace are the main environmental variables, which have a strong relationship with the sustainable performance of SMEs in food industry.

Importantly, according to the results of both qualitative and quantitative studies, customer orientation achieved the first rank among all other identified factors as the most important factor towards SE within SMEs of food sector. Accordingly, many studies confirm the importance of this determinant in SE, especially for SMEs. In this regard, Jenkins 2006 [54]; Niehm et al. 2007 [55]; and Perrini et al. 2007 [56] emphasize that without larger financial supports and funding in order to absorb possible customers, SMEs may often rely on their network of personal relationships and reputation as a reliable tool within their market and community. Furthermore, SMEs, especially older enterprises and family businesses, may significantly benefit from social capital [25]. Putnam (1993) [57] shows communities that have a higher level of social capital have lower transaction costs and can, thus, experience a higher degree of democracy. Lower costs may help the businesses build a greater sense of community among stakeholders, leading to fewer requirements for developing and adopting costly implementation mechanisms. Therefore, these lower costs can positively affect customers through lower prices [25]. The respondents in our study believed that having sustainable products provided them with new opportunities to attract customers, partners and investors. These results indicate that the entrepreneur’s most important reason to move toward sustainability is to attract customer confidence as well as lower costs and durable advertisement for their business.

According to the results of this study, human resources ranked second in regard to SE. Jenkins (2004) [58]; Branco and Rodrigues 2006 [59] and Battacharya et al. (2008) [60] confirm this finding and have pointed out that “having high potential for hiring and satisfying best employees” as one of the best arguments for sustainable development in SMEs. Many studies have also confirmed that recruiting a work force that understands and respects the values and ethical behavior of an enterprise is beneficial [61]. For instance, in their studies, Albinger and Freeman (2000) [62], Battacharya et al. (2008) [60] and Branco and Rodrigues (2006) [59] have emphasized that firms with a high level of corporate social responsibility (CSR) or those that perform in a sustainable manner, often have the power to attract, hire and maintain the right staff with more of the desired qualities.

In this regard, according to the entrepreneurs' opinion, considering the employees' subsistence situation, providing financial support through loans, job security and home-to-work transportation, are important for the SE of SMEs in food industry.

From the entrepreneurs' point of view, recycling is the third influencing factor of the SE of SMEs in food industry. This result confirms the study of Korsgaard and Anderson (2010) [63], who identified factors such as water treatment, recycling and reusing as clear examples of the SE of enterprises. Similarly, Cohen et al. (2008) [64], in order to identify the sustainability indices considered, those enterprises, as sustainable firms, practiced recycling. Furthermore, Nikolaou et al. (2011) [65], Berle (1991) [66] and Blue (1990) [67] all mentioned recycling as one of the main components of green entrepreneurship.

The results of this study has shown that though considering the future of the earth and environment is ranked second in the qualitative research and fourth according to the quantitative results, in total, this determinant of SE in SMEs of food industry has been given fourth place. Similarly, the Carbon Trust Institute in England showed that a 10–20 percent reduction in energy consumption leads to a five percent increase in sales of enterprises [26]. Although these simple steps are not anything like more useful sustainability strategies, they reduce costs by saving energy [68]. Considering the recent forecasts regarding worldwide energy prices and the fact that fossil fuels will soon run out, strategies that reduce energy consumption are very likely to contribute to the enterprise's financial, as well as environmental, performance [25]. Accordingly, entrepreneurs have expressed the importance of the future of our environment, with components such as concern about the polar ice melting and the effects of global warming for future generations, and have attempted to produce less greenhouse gases and to observe environmental principles.

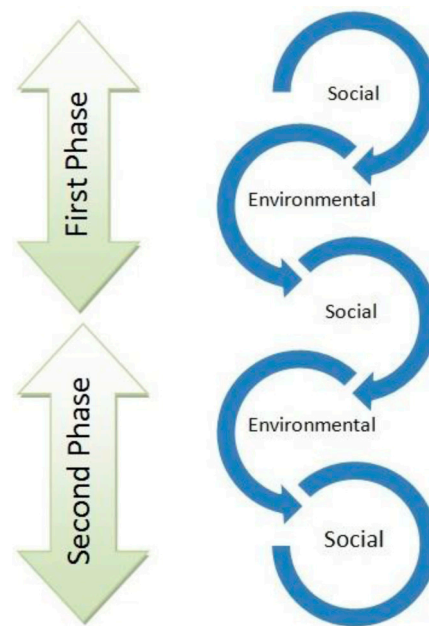
While staff training is considered as the seventh important factor in qualitative research and the fifth in quantitative study, the final rank of this determinant is the fifth among all the other considered factors. This is confirmed by Thassanabanjong et al. (2009) [69] who concluded that training is crucial for productivity and quality and that it also influences the effectiveness, efficiency and motivation of the employees. Indeed, entrepreneurial knowledge can have beneficial effects on the entity's growth and profitability [70]. Accordingly, King and McGrath (2002) [71] suggest in their study that those with more education and training are more likely to be successful in the SME sector. Interestingly, Stubblefield Locks et al. (2010) [25] argued that knowledge, values, skills and the experience of staff have significant effects on the sustainable performance of SMEs, particularly with regard to social and environmental dimensions.

Moreover, like the study carried out by Crals and Vereeck (2005) [72], who explained that SE includes three type of standards; i.e., social, environmental and managerial, the importance of the standards towards SE have been confirmed in our study, having ranked sixth among the other influencing factors. According to Nowduri (2012) [73], SMEs within industrial communities have a better chance of achieving sustainability if they can meet their needs for certain standards and ethics in accordance with their culture.

With regard to the importance of social support in SEs, Korsgaard and Anderson (2010) [63], and Steyaert and Katz (2004) [74], believe that while the economic benefit is of secondary importance, society, individuals and groups are of first importance in SE. Similarly, our study identified social supports as the seventh important factor for achieving the SE of SMEs in the food industry. Furthermore, in relation to the physical standards of the workplace, which ranks last in our study, Cohen et al. (2008) [64] also considered the staff's satisfaction with their work environment as one of the important factors of SE.

Therefore, if we extract the pillars' order according to the prioritization of influencing factors, as shown in Figure 5, it can be concluded that in both phases, the entrepreneurs first choose the social path, followed by the environmental dimension in order to achieve SE in SMEs of food industry. As a result, the social dimension of sustainability is prior to the environmental aspect, from the entrepreneurs' point of view, if the SE of SMEs is the goal.





**Figure 5.** Phasing factors and dimensions towards sustainable entrepreneurship.

The results of this study have important implications for the practice and the planning of sustainable entrepreneurship. The study tried to investigate the factors that influence the performance of SMEs in order to develop an understanding of the dynamics of SMEs towards sustainability and found out that customer orientation, human resources, recycling, future of the earth and environment, staff training, social supports, standards and physical standards of workplace are the most significant determinants of SMEs' SE in the food industry. Moreover, the level of education and work experience of the entrepreneurs had a strong positive correlation with the SE of SMEs. Such information is crucial when evaluating appropriate policies for promoting SMEs' sustainable development and poverty reduction and their overall development. It seems that such general entrepreneurship practices have a greater effect when identifying sustainable opportunities than (only) addressing environmental and social concerns. Still, we would advise against neglecting training in environmental and social issues, as this might impact the action-orientation of entrepreneurs and impact whether they actually follow-up on the opportunities identified. In Iran, SMEs constituted 75% of enterprises in 2012 [4] and more than 85% of businesses in 2016 [75]. According to the Iran's Statistics Center [76], there are no significant changes in the sector over the past four years (during 2012–2016). According to the Center (2016), there are still fewer than 10,000 SMEs in Iran (which is not a significant change compared to 2012). Given that there is no significant change in the sector over the past four years, the data collected in 2012 are still valid.

A limitation of our study was that we only studied the factors that influence sustainable entrepreneurship in small and medium-sized enterprises and future studies could focus on big enterprises. Furthermore, our proposition that entrepreneurs can change their initial position from regular to sustainable practices by passing social or environmental under specific conditions and that the economic dimension of sustainable entrepreneurship is constant in this study. Future studies can explore factors that influence sustainable entrepreneurship by focusing on the three dimensions of the conceptual framework of the study (environmental, social, and economic). Moreover, one of the main sources of the error in this study could be the higher margin of the error in Cochran's formula. Thus, the future investigations should minimize this error and come up with its desirable level.

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## Appendix A

Excerpts from the questionnaire used in this study.

### (a) Personal attributes

1. Are you: ☐ male ☐ female
2. What is your date of birth? . . . . .
3. Working experience: . . . . . Years
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?  
☐ primary school ☐ secondary school ☐ higher education ☐ university
5. Background regarding enterprises establishments: . . . . . Enterprise(s)

### (b) The initial viewpoints of entrepreneurs about sustainability

1. Definition of sustainable entrepreneurship
2. Definition of social entrepreneurship
3. Definition of green entrepreneurship
4. Considering the standards of workplace

### (c) Evaluate and rate the main components of SE in SMEs in food industry

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Environmental pollution is hurting me emotionally.					
2	I always consider the well-being of employees and their families.					
3	I always consider the waste recycling.					
4	Trees and flowers are growing indoor and outdoor of my enterprise.					
5	The employees can meet me if they need.					
6	I always agree with the demand of employees for loan.					
7	I would like to financial support of a local organization (Music bands, sports teams, etc.).					
8	I always help to charitable organizations.					
9	The beauty of the environment makes the employees fresh.					
10	When I pay the salaries late work efficiency comes down.					
11	The salary is more important than work efficiency for employees.					

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
12	I should provide home-to-work transportation.					
13	It is not possible to produce without environmental pollution.					
14	My enterprise has a proper sewage disposal system.					
15	I am not happy with communication with environmental supervisors.					
16	Training courses of environmental protection strategies are useful for me.					
17	Training courses of social issue are useful for me.					
18	I am always care about preventing the potential loss of resources in my enterprise.					
19	I am thinking of using alternative sources that damage the environment less.					
20	I always consider the physical standards of workplace.					
21	I always wish to use less energy sources in production systems.					
22	Considering the environment I design the new production.					
23	Considering the future of earth and environment is very important to me.					
24	My enterprise is developing to produce sustainable products based on recycling and renewable energy sources.					
25	My enterprise produce durable products.					
26	Production that damage the environment less are a new opportunities to attract investors and customers.					
27	My enterprise use new innovations.					
28	My enterprise use new technology and mechanism.					
29	My enterprise provide home-to-work transportation for both employees and customers.					
30	In my enterprise paper information has been replaced by digital information.					

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