Strategic Approach and Organization of Agricultural Small and Medium Enterprises Distribution Channels in Lubumbashi: An Empirical Research

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Abstract: In the present competitive market universe, enterprises develop or adopt many strategies to set up a competitive advantage to overcome their rivalry by improving and making their offers unique. According to the targeted performance, those strategies can be crafted at different levels of the firm's operations, such as the organization level, functional level, product level, marketing level, supply chain level (supply, manufacturing, and distribution), etc. By stating so, it appears that the distribution channel stands as an appealing option to enterprises, especially small and medium enterprises (SME) dealing in the agricultural industry. These enterprises are coping with many market issues, like a lack of infrastructure, better competition deployment, high product perishability, etc. This reality highlights the special fact that the enterprise's choices and actions oriented toward objectives and goal achievement should be methodically applied through a strategic approach. Therefore, this study empirically investigates the impact of implementing the strategic approach on the distribution channel organization of SME. To this end, two specific objectives were pursued: (1) to analyze the impact of implementing the strategic approach on the organization of the distribution channel, and (2) to verify both the application of the strategic approach and its significance in boosting manager satisfaction. The findings of the research hypotheses are validated using primary data collection through a survey questionnaire applied to a sample of 36 SME pulled by performing a simple random sampling. Afterwards, an econometric study through linear modeling and composite index analysis was conducted to this same end. The feedback on the survey questionnaire completion reveals that only 31 SME, i.e., 86.11% of respondents, completed this task. Consequently, statistical and econometric analysis was conducted on the collected data. Using linear modeling, it has been demonstrated that the implementation of the strategic approach positively affects the organization of the agricultural SME distribution channel. Moreover, this use of strategic approach, added to its importance, reveals a statistically significant effect on manager satisfaction.

Keywords: Strategic Approach, Distribution Channel Organization, Small and Medium Enterprises (Sme), Composite Index, Linear Modeling

1. Introduction

Small and medium enterprises (SME) serve an essential role in the economic growth of nations. Several authors have demonstrated this reality, such as [7, 10, 17, 30], etc. Even though all these authors agree about the role and importance of SME in world economic development, it appears that, through the literature review, there is no consensus on the definition of SME. In fact, some researchers adopt the quantitative approach, while others prefer the qualitative approach, and still others prefer a more complex perspective (global). As per the focus of the present research, which emphasizes more on the administration of SME, the definition based on the qualitative approach seems to be the most applicable in this

situation [17]. Following this statement and according to [32], "the SME is a production or distribution unit, a direction and management unit, under the authority of a manager who is entirely accountable for the company, of which he is the owner, and who is directly linked to the company's life" [9]. In an article, [20] presented the distribution of SME through five types of activities, which are industrial production, agriculture, construction, trade, and services.

The agricultural sector is among the sectors with the greatest development potential at the national level. Agriculture is a vital component of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's economy [3]. In this context, it is in the best interests of agricultural SME to organize their distribution channels. It is the path a product takes from the manufacturer to the end consumer. This route can be direct or indirect, depending on whether the distribution is made directly to consumers or through intermediaries [11]. In fact, a well-organized distribution channel enables a more efficient flow of products and indeed helps in maximizing profits. This goal can be achieved through a strategic approach, as stated by [26]. In their research, they mentioned the fact that the strategic approach is viewed as a method for determining the medium- to long-term course of action that will contribute to the creation of sustainable value. Despite the difficulty of getting a strict and direct measurement of this above-mentioned approach, its application considers both internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats) company analyses and consists of six successive and complementary phases, including strategic planning, strategic diagnosis, strategy formulation or strategic choices, strategic implementation, strategical control, and strategic evaluation [29].

Several articles have been written about the significance of the strategic approach [21, 29]. The majority of researchers examine its overall effect on company performance. The relationship between the deployment of a strategic approach and the organization of a distribution channel has never been empirically studied. In this regard, our research not only complements the existing literature but, more importantly, addresses this void.

It should be noted that, to our knowledge, this is the first study to examine this topic in relation to agricultural SME. Regarding those who are deployed in the Lubumbashi region, the investigations are conducted by straightforward random selection with managers.

The study attempts empirically to answer the following questions: (1) Is the distribution channel's organization the result of a strategic approach? (2) If yes, did the implementation of the strategic approach and its significance in the organization of the supply channel meet the managers' expectations?

The text's continuation is structured as follows: section 2 focuses on the literature review; section 3 discusses the research methodology; sections 4 and 5 present the results and discussions of the findings, respectively; and section 6 concludes this work and suggests recommendations for future studies.

2. Literature Review: Theoretical Foundations and Hypothesis Development

To analyze the relationship between strategic approach and distribution channel organization, we employ resource theory. This is the study's theoretical foundation. The resource theory, which was first formalized by [25], explains a company's ability to create value and maintain a competitive advantage based on the characteristics of its resources [12]. The latter have been highlighted by some knowledge, such as the ability to design, distribute, or communicate [13]. To these, it can be added the labor organization capacity. Agricultural SME's can employ a strategic approach in order to coordinate their distribution channels effectively. This helps managers achieve their objectives. They can rely on one SME to another. In this context, resource theory translates a SME's capacity to construct and realize its goals. Therefore, it can study how agricultural SME distribution channels are organized. Thus, research hypotheses are developed based on empirical work.

A number of empirical researchers are interested in the subject of strategic approach. They focus primarily on its impact on business performance [5, 16, 23]. Following this issue, they demonstrate that the strategic approach positively affects the subsequent issue. They also conclude that its implementation is necessary for the success and longevity of businesses. Other studies, however, examine the strategic approach from the standpoint of its constructive actions. In fact, [14] discovered a positive correlation between strategic formulation and a company's attained results. This positive effect is a direct consequence of the strategic approach. In the same launch, [18] add that successful strategic implementation is a determining factor for success and competitiveness. Therefore, it remains evident that the implementation of a sound strategic approach is crucial for a business that wishes to flourish and endure. We therefore hypothesize that the implementation of the strategic approach has a positive effect on the organization of the agricultural SME distribution channel.

H1: The implementation of the strategic approach positively influences the structure of the agricultural SME distribution channel.

The decision to incorporate a strategic approach into the distribution channel's organization must be evaluated. The evaluation will determine the effectiveness of the strategies adopted by the company. However, due to the technical nature of this action, it is primarily the responsibility of managers. [28] assert that consumers lack the ability to evaluate the quality of services when they are rendered. In this regard, [19] analyzed the satisfaction of managers and discovered a correlation between it and management control. In light of the fact that management control occupies a prominent position in strategic formulation [15], it is conceivable that the strategic approach may also influence the satisfaction of managers. Thus, we assume that the implementation of the strategic approach and its significance in the organization of the

distribution channel of agricultural SME's will have a positive influence on manager satisfaction.

H2: The implementation of the strategic approach and its significance in the organization of the distribution channel of

agricultural SME's have a positive impact on manager satisfaction.

Figure 1 below presents the conceptual framework of this study, which is based on the previous hypotheses.
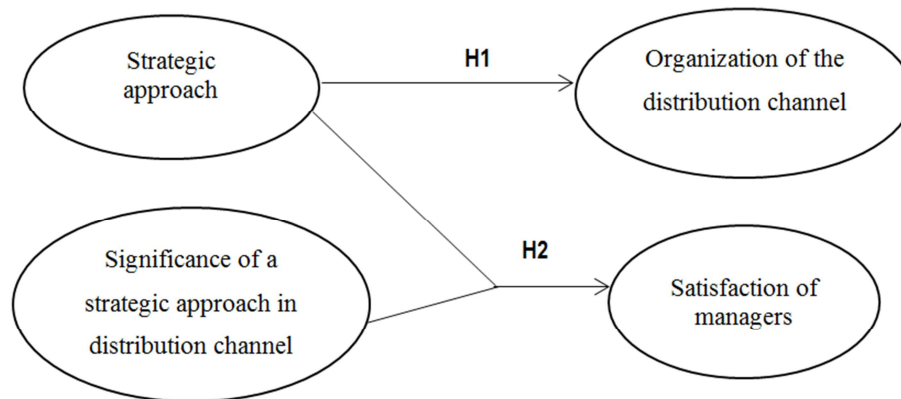
Source: authors

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

The primary data was collected from agricultural small and medium enterprises (SME) administrators in Lubumbashi. A questionnaire created specifically has been used for the data collection. To this end, it is structured on four modules: the first pertains to the respondent identification variables; the second to information about the SME; the third to the distribution channel measurement indicators; and the fourth to those of the strategic approach. The number of questions increased to 18 in total. The sample has a size of 36. It is derived from (1) and (2), as shown below [22]:

$$n_o = \frac{z^2 * pq}{e^2} \qquad (1)$$

$$n = \frac{n_o}{1 + \frac{(n_o - 1)}{N}} \qquad (2)$$

With: n, the size of the final sample; n_o, the classical sample size; Z^2, the fixed value of the reduced centered normal law; p, the proportion or frequency observed in the sample, or 0.5; q is 1-p; e, the desired accuracy of the study, or 5%.

According to the survey, six of the seven communes of Lubumbashi are home to agricultural SME: Lubumbashi, Annexe, Kamalondo, Kampemba, Katuba, and Kenya. The sampling method employed is simple random selection (without replacement). The sample was produced in accordance with the following procedure:

The number of small and medium-sized enterprises is 40;

Sample size = 36;

None of the above = N/n = 40/36 = 1.1 ≈ 1;

The number of the first SME to be investigated must be one or less.

It is the leading SME.

The value of the second is 1+1, and so on.

A total of 31 respondents completed the questionnaire. Thus, the sample non-response rate was 13.89%.

3.2. Econometric Specifications

On the basis of the analysis used by [4], we developed a linear regression model. This author analyzed the relationship between the variables of specific strategies and the performance of Kenyan businesses. Following the specifications of this study, the performance of Kenyan firms is replaced by our main variables, which are distribution channel organization and management satisfaction. The first attempt was therefore to examine the relationship between strategic approach and the organization of distribution channels.

Furthermore, as per the literature review, which indicates that the logistic service positively affects the distribution channel [1, 27, 31] and is one of the strategies associated with product distribution, logistic can be considered a control variable in this regard. Considering the availability of data, the logistic service is analyzed from the perspective of delivery. Therefore, the first econometric model to be estimated is as follows:

$$DCO_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SA_i + \beta_2 DS_i + \varepsilon_i \qquad (3)$$

Where: i represents a specific SME; DCO is the distribution channel organization; SA is the strategic approach; and DS is the service delivery; ε is the term error.

Based on equation (3), the interest is applied to coefficient β_1. The latter's expected indicator is positive. Implementing the strategic approach can have a positive effect on the distribution channel's organization. Numerous studies have demonstrated that effective strategic implementation is crucial to an organization's success.

The second attempt is to analyze the effect of the strategic approach and its significance in the organization of the

distribution channel on manager satisfaction. Service delivery is also included as a control variable in this analysis. Consequently, the second model to be estimated is shown in equation (4):

$$SATIS_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SA_i + \beta_2 DS_i + \beta_3 SSAODC + \varepsilon_i \quad (4)$$

Where: i is a given SME, SATIS is the satisfaction of managers, and SSAODC is the significance of the strategic approach in the organization of the distribution channel; ε is the term error. The other variables in the equation retain their original meanings. (3).

The coefficients of β_2 and β_3 may be positive. They communicate their effect on the satisfaction of managers. The larger the organization, the greater the significance of managerial performance. [19]

3.2.1. Variables Measurement

As shown in table 1, all model variables are measured on scales, with the exception of the strategic approach and the strategic approach's significance in the organization of the distribution channel. Their respective composite index are used to quantify these two variables. The process that is used for their construction is outlined in Section 3.2.2.

Table 1. *Measurement of variables.*

Type of variable	Measures
Dependent variables	
Organization of the distribution channel	Variable measured on a multiple-choice question: (1): SME sell their products directly to their customers (production site to customers) (2): SME deploys their own point of sale channel (3): SME uses the channel of intermediaries (retailers, wholesalers, resellers, etc.) (4): SME organizes the distribution channel through the competitive partner channel (strategic alliance)
Satisfaction	Variable measured on a Likert scale of 5 points: (0): Not at all satisfying (1): Not very satisfying (2): Very satisfying (3): Satisfying (4): Very satisfying
Independent variables	
Strategic approach (Main variable)	Variable measured on the construction of the composite index of the strategic approach
The importance of strategic approach in the organization of the distribution channel (Main variable)	Variable measured on the construction of the composite index of the importance of the strategic approach in the organization of the distribution channel
Services delivery (Control variable)	Variable measured on a multiple-choice question: (1): SME does not offer delivery services (2): SME offer home delivery services (3): SME provides delivery services to a specific location, and the customer takes care of the rest (4): SME offers delivery services to the place desired by the customer (5): SME offers delivery services only to partners

Source: authors

3.2.2. Composite Index of the Strategic Approach and Its Significance in the Organization of the Distribution Channel

To create the composite index of the strategic approach and that of the significance of the strategic approach in the organization of the distribution channel, we employed a multivariate methodology. This methodology makes feasible a global analysis of the latent variables. By doing so, the principal component analysis (PCA) has been applied in accordance with [6, 8][1]. It has the benefit of taking into consideration the relative loadings of each element in the composite index composition.

In applying the PCA, both the strategic approach and the strategic approach's significance in the organization of the distribution channel were estimated as linear functions of the respective steps. Following is a presentation of the system of

equations:

$$CI_i = w_1 Y_i^1 + w_2 Y_i^2 + w_3 Y_i^3 + w_4 Y_i^4 + w_5 Y_i^5 + w_6 Y_i^6 + \varepsilon_i \quad (5)$$

Where: i represents a given SME; CI represents the composite index; (k = 1,...,6) represents the respective dimensions; and w_j (j = 1,...,6) represents the relative loadings for each dimension.

The relative loadings (w_j) of each dimension in the composite index are determined as follows:

$$w_j = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^{6} \lambda_k \theta_{kj}}{\sum_{k=1}^{6} \lambda_k} \quad (6)$$

Where: λ_k represents the weighting of the principal component; θ, the own vectors of the respective correlation matrices.

In the tables below, it is first presented the dimensions of the strategic approach and the strategic approach's significance in the organization of the distribution channel (table 2); then, their loading within the composite[1] index composition (table 3). On the first factor (F1), the components are adequately

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1 Their researches are founded on the construction of the composite index of financial inclusion using its respective dimensions: access, usage and availability. The strategic approach replaces the financial inclusion in this study.

represented. Those assessing the significance of the strategic approach in the organization of the distribution channel (88.27%) have significantly greater explanatory power than those representing the strategic approach (77.60%). However, their Cronbach's alpha values, 0.683, are comparable (table 3). The internal consistency of the two constructed indices is, therefore, validated. They can function as measuring devices.

Table 2. *Description of the strategic approach.*

Variables	Steps	Measures
Strategic approach (SA)	1. Strategic planning 2. Strategic diagnosis 3. Strategy formulation or strategic choice 4. Strategic implementation 5. Strategic monitoring and control 6. Strategic evaluation	All 6 variables are measured on a Likert scale graduated in 5 points: (0): Never (1): Rarely (2): Too often (3): Often (4): Very often
Importance of strategic approach in the organization of the distribution channel	1. Importance of strategic planning 2. Importance of strategic diagnosis 3. Importance of strategy formulation or strategic choice 4. Importance of strategic implementation 5. Importance of strategic monitoring and control 6. Importance of strategic evaluation	All 6 variables are measured on a Likert scale graduated in 5 points: (0): Not important at all (1): Not very important (2): Very important (3): Important (4): Very important

Source: authors

Table 3. *Loading of attributes on the factor axis and validity tests.*

Attributes	Components (F_1)
Strategic approach	
Strategic planning	,921
Strategic diagnosis	,624
Strategy formulation and strategic choice	,805
Strategic implementation	,694
Strategic monitoring and control	-,156
% variance explained	77,60
Cronbach's alpha	0,683
The importance of strategic approach in the organization of the distribution channel	
Strategic planning	,748
Strategic diagnosis	,680
Strategy formulation or strategic choice	,506
Strategic implementation	,199
Strategic monitoring and control	,849
Strategic evaluation	,617
% variance explained	88,27
Cronbach's alpha	0,683

Source: authors

4. Results

According to a summary of descriptive statistics (table 4), more women (61.3%) than men (38%) manage the majority of small and medium-sized enterprises. The median age of managers is 40 to 49 years old. The distribution by educational level demonstrates that people with university backgrounds represent the majority (67.7%). As far as their main activities are concerned, 54.8% of SME engage in traditional livestock husbandry and farming. Other activities include seed and seed production (19.4%), processing and packaging (12.9%), and agro-processing (12.9%). A tiny percentage of sales are increasing at a 32.2% rate of speed. Only 16.1% of organizations lack a well-defined structure, compared to 83.9% of organizations. Nevertheless, the strategic dimension of SME is not ignored. 100% of them are responsible for defining their product distribution strategies. The actors in the definition of these strategies are mainly the executives (72%). In addition, their distribution channel selection is entirely (100%) based on a well-defined strategic approach.

Also, Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which managers are satisfied with the significance they give to the strategic approach's dimensions. Strategic evaluation and implementation are, as it turns out, the strengths for which the strategic approach receives positive ratings on significant criteria. In a similar fashion, the formulation or strategic option is also thoroughly evaluated, although it is of little importance to managers, who misunderstand, on the other hand, strategic planning and diagnosis. In contrast, strategic monitoring and control are not well regarded, but they are not of negligible significance.

***Table 4.** Summary of descriptive statistics.*

Statistically	Attributes	Frequency	Percentage	Median
Sexuality	Masculine	12	38,7	-
	Female	19	61,3	-
Age				40 - 49
	Secondary	2	6,5	-
Level of study	Training after State Diploma	4	12,9	-
	University	21	67,7	-
	Post-university	4	12,9	-
	Breeding and traditional culture	17	54,8	-
The main activities	Production of seeds and seeds	6	19,4	-
	Transformation and Conditioning	4	12,9	-
	Agriculture transformation	4	12,9	-
	Started	6	19,3	-
	Growth	5	16,1	
Phase of Development	Slow growth	6	19,3	-
	Rapid growth	10	32,2	-
	Maturity	4	12,9	
Organization	No	5	16,1	-
	Yes	26	83,9	-
Strategy of Distribution	No	0	0,0	-
	Yes	31	100,0	-
Developing strategies in the enterprise	Framework of Management	18	72,0	-
	Framework of command	7	28,0	-
Choosing the distribution channel	Non-implementation of the strategic approach	0	0,0	-
	Implementation of the strategic approach	25	100,0	-

Source: authors
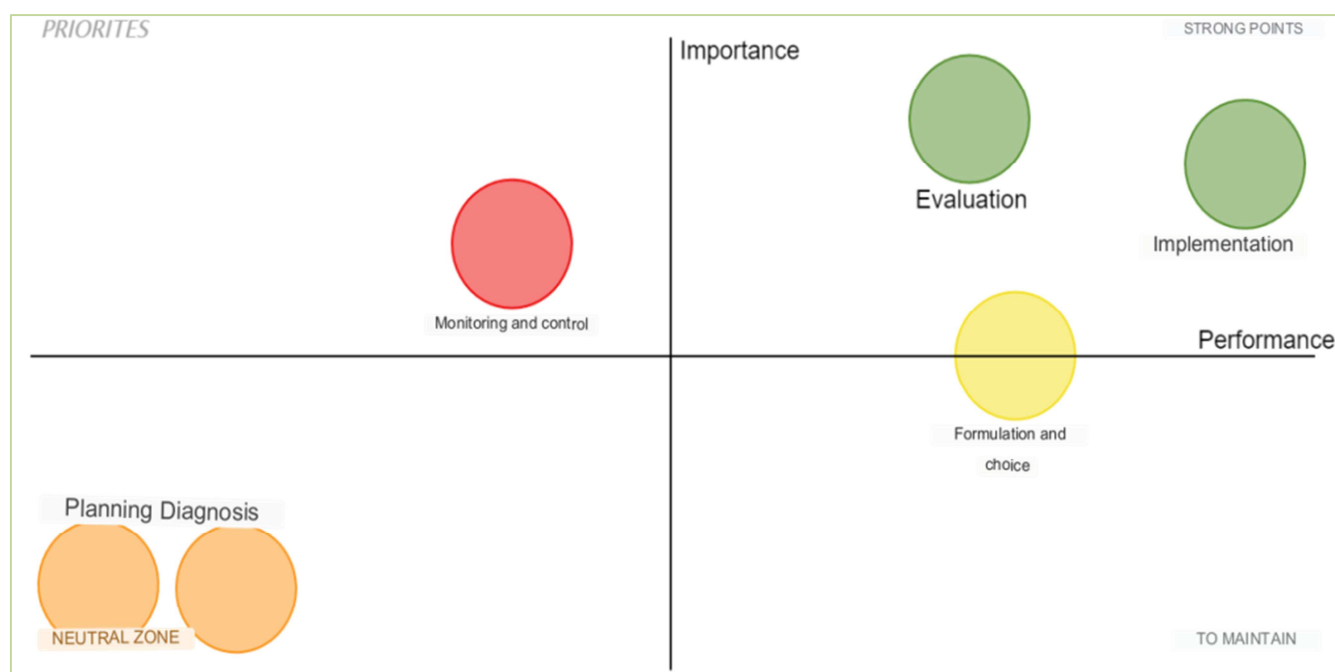
Source: authors

***Figure 2.** Importance and Performance Matrix.*

Table 5 displays the outcomes of the two econometric models described in the preceding section. In fact, using the method of the Ordinary Least Square (OLS) to estimate model 1, a heteroscedacity of residues problem was found. Using the procedure proposed by [24], this was corrected. This is the method for robust least squares with M-estimators. With regard to this reality, the results are presented based on the above-mentioned method. The absence of multicollinearity in the explanatory variables is confirmed by the collinearity test on the variance inflation factor (VIF). None of the VIF values exceed 10. In addition, 58.81% of the model's variance is explained according to the determination coefficient (R^2). The control variable (delivery service) is significant from a statistical perspective. The strategic approach has a substantial positive effect on the organization of the distribution channel, which is organized more efficiently the more strategically the

approach is applied. The second model analyzes the strategic approach's application and its significance in the organization of the distribution channel. This is determined using the OLS method. Each test yielded conclusive results. The residues are non-autocorrelated (Durbin Watson value approaching 2), homoscedastic (Breush Pagan test P-value > 0.05), and conform to the normal law (Jarque Bera test P-value > 0.05). In the model, the explanatory variables are not multicollinear (VIF values<10). For a Fisher value of 10.19052, the regression quality is excellent (p-value = 0.000). Furthermore, the model's explanatory power is 53.10 percent. Also, the control variable (delivery service) is statistically significant. The two main variables, strategic approach and the significance of strategic approach in the organization of the distribution channel, have a significant positive effect on management satisfaction. This demonstrates that the distribution channel's implementation of the strategic approach meets the managers' expectations.

Table 5. Results of the Econometric Model Assessment.

Models		Coefficients	t	P-value	Collinearity Test VIF
1	Independent variables				
	(Constante)	0.024	0.133	0.894	-
	Strategic approach (SA)	1.100	14.567	0.000***	1.263
	Delivery services	0.805	7.601	0.000***	1.263
	Summary of the model[i]				
	R^2	0.5884	-	-	-
	R^2 adjusted	0.5590	-	-	-
2	Independent variables				
	(Constante)	0.447659	1.051	0.3028	-
	Delivery services	0.540713	4.158	0.0003***	1.325
	Strategic approach (SA)	1.03268	2.738	0.0108**	1.622
	The importance of the SA in the organization of the distribution channel	1.14726	2.634	0.0138**	1.559
	Summary of the model[ii]				
	R^2	0.531019	-	-	-
	Fisher (3, 27)	10.19052	-	0.000116***	-
. Significant at the threshold of 0.05; *. Significant at the threshold of 0.01					

Source: authors
[i] Dependent variable: organization of the distribution channel; [ii] Dependent variable: manager satisfaction.

Table 6. Regression validity test by OLS.

Model 2	Tests	Coefficients	P-value
	Heteroscedasticity: Breush Pagan $P(Chi\text{-}square (3) > 1.968355)$	-	0.579001
	Normality: Jarque Bera	3.347	0.188
	Autocorrelation: Durbin-Watson	2.25	-

Source: authors

5. Discussions

This study had two objectives: first, to analyze the impact of implementing the strategic approach on the organization of the distribution channel of agricultural SME's, and second, to verify both the application of the strategic approach and its impact on manager satisfaction. Two hypotheses were developed in this regard: (H1) The implementation of the strategic approach influences the organization of the agricultural SME distribution channel in a positive manner.

Model 1 evaluates this hypothesis. In fact, the results demonstrate that there is a causal connection between the strategic approach and the organization of the distribution channel. This is a healthy relationship. This meet and verify the statement of [2]. According to the writer, "the structure follows the strategy". This logically leads to the conclusion that a company's strategy alone determines its structure. The initial premise is valid in light of this conclusion.

Simultaneously, Model 2 tests the second hypothesis: (H2) The application of the strategic approach and its significance in the organization of the distribution channel of agricultural SME have a positive impact on manager satisfaction. The findings revealed that the strategic approach and its significance in the organization of the distribution channel have a positive effect on management satisfaction. These analyses follow the same logical progression as [29]. They contend that any strategic approach adopted by a small to medium enterprise must be in line with the objectives established by its managers. Accordingly, these assertions support our second hypothesis. Likewise, this is confirmed.

In light of the mentioned findings, it is clear that agricultural SME in the Lubumbashi region are incorporating a strategic dimension into their distribution channel organization. Thus, the strategic approach is viewed as a means for accomplishing the distribution objectives of these SME.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The role of small and medium enterprises as well as the agricultural sector in the growth of a country economy is anymore to explain as many authors through diverse literature spilled ink on it.

However, the path to achieve this goal of growing the economy is the one that has drawn attention in this research, as many authors, such as [26], presented the strategic approach as a method that has a level effect on the creation of sustainable values, especially on the global performance of companies.

This appears in the same instance as a limitation of studies and a stimulus to deepen knowledge on the utilization of the strategic approach in the creation of performance by focusing on a specific level of companies 'operations, i.e., the distribution channel of SMEs operating in the agriculture business. This perceived scope of the research highlighted its first challenge, which was to prove the utilization of strategic approach by small and medium enterprises, while the second challenge was articulated in the application of empirical analysis to demonstrate the impact of the strategic approach on the distribution channel of agricultural SME and, at the same time, on the managers satisfaction.

Hence, two assumptions framed the research and were enunciated as follows:

The implementation of the strategic approach should positively influence the structuring of the agricultural SMEs' distribution channels;

The implementation of the strategic approach and its significance in the organization of the SMEs' channels of distribution should have a positive impact on the managers' satisfaction.

To cope with the challenges and assumptions, it has been useful to review the literature and methodically develop the topic of this research. To this end, the study has been divided into five main parts, which are the literature review focusing on theoretical foundations and hypothesis development, the methodology putting under spotlight the sampling and data collection approach, the econometric specifications, the results presentation, and the discussion of the founding.

Based on the results, it appears that the hypotheses are verified with a positive relationship between the strategic approach implementation, primarily with the organization of the distribution channel throughout the service delivery that is employed in the model as a control variable, and secondly, with the satisfaction of the managers as it meets their expectations. These results were found based on the measurement of the variables, which became possible because of the composite index method used to quantify the strategic approach and its significance.

In a new considered perspective, this study can be projected on a different area that can cover the distribution strategy, which can consider market coverage, customer relationship management, communication oriented to partners or customers, company merchandising, etc.

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1 During the process of constructing the strategic approach index, the "evaluation" variable was not adequately represented. Its value was 0.285, or less than 0.5. It was eliminated from the study. After extracting this variable, the presented results have been obtained.