


Article

Sustainable Development of Small Business in Kazakhstan

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Abstract: The small business sector in Kazakhstan demonstrates dynamic growth, but its sustainable development in modern conditions requires activation from government agencies, society and entrepreneurs themselves. The purpose of the article was to study the development of small entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan and develop a mechanism for sustainable development based on network interaction “business entities–society–state” with the identification of priority areas of development based on a rating approach. The methods of bibliographic analysis of scientific literature, statistical, correlation analysis, survey, comparative analysis and ranking based on data normalization were used. The results revealed the need to formalize indicators of sustainable development of the small business sector in strategic development programs; create conditions, support, explain the importance and prospects of investing in sustainable innovations by small businesses and form a balanced strategy for achieving carbon neutrality based on network interaction “business entities–society–state” with the identification of priority areas of development based on a rating approach to ensure transparency and publicity of decisions made. Conclusions were made about the need to popularize sustainable development among business entities, stimulate investment activity through government participation, enact legislative regulation of public presentation of non-financial reporting, and assist society in the formation of an ESG culture.

Keywords: small business; Kazakhstan; sustainable development; ESG; responsible investment; network interaction “business entities–society–state”



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1. Introduction

The growing relevance of sustainable development is caused by the ongoing climate transformation in the world—extreme meteorological, climatic, and hydrological events caused or provoked by anthropogenic factors. This necessitates economic restructuring to achieve carbon neutrality. The small business sector is a driving force in any country with a market economy.

In the development of the ESG agenda, Kazakhstan demonstrates trends typical for most countries. As of 2023, the country ranked 66th out of 163 in the SDG ranking. It was found that an average of 81 percent of state budget funds was allocated to achieve the SDGs, but only 58.6 percent of targets received funding. This indicates a potential mismatch between budget allocation and goal prioritization ([SDG Platform for Central Asia n.d.](#)). And, while the large Kazakhstani entrepreneurship sector demonstrates successful experience in implementing the principles of sustainable development, responsible investment, and public presentation of financial statements, this initiative is not mandatory for the small

business sector. At the same time, it cannot be said that insufficient attention is paid to the development of small business in Kazakhstan. The republic has adopted the “Concept for the Development of Small and Medium-Sized Entrepreneurship until 2030”. The small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector plays a key role in the innovative development of Kazakhstan. Statistical results for the period from 2015 to 2022 indicate stable GDP growth due to the SME sector (Adilet 2022). The share of SMEs in the structure of Kazakhstan’s GDP in 2022 was 33.5% (Adilet 2022) and 24.9% in 2015 (Buribaeva et al. 2021); thus, the increase over the period was 8.6%.

Sustainable development of Kazakhstan’s small business should be carried out with close cooperation between the state, business entities, and society. Despite the growth of Kazakhstan’s indicators in the field of small business development, qualitative changes that take into account social, economic, and environmental processes are required to ensure a further positive impact on economic diversification, the realization of export potential, and the sustainability of long-term economic growth of the country. The main parameters of the strategic development of Kazakhstan’s SMEs are associated with an increase in the number of people employed, an increase in the share of GDP, and an increase in labor productivity and investment. At the same time, building up entrepreneurial potential does not focus on achieving a climate-neutral, resource-efficient and flexible digital economy. Further sustainable development should be carried out on the basis of active network interaction of stakeholders “business entities–society–state”.

State support for small businesses should stimulate the implementation of initiatives that contribute to the sustainable development of sectors of the national economy. The limited budget funds and the need to improve the efficiency of their use require support for entrepreneurial initiatives that contribute to sustainable development.

EU countries demonstrate active involvement in the promotion of sustainable development. In the context of sustainable development, the European Union has adopted a number of strategic documents aimed at supporting and developing small and medium-sized businesses. The main principles of SME development in Europe focus on capacity building and supporting the transition to sustainable development and digitalization, reducing the regulatory burden and improving access to finance. The dynamics of the dominant influence of the SME sector are typical for all developed Western countries. Twenty-four million European SMEs represent 99% of all EU enterprises (SMEs in Europe 2024). In the structure of European GDP, the share of small and medium-sized businesses varies around 60% (EPP Group 2024). The purpose of the article is to study the development of small entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan and to develop a mechanism for sustainable development based on the network interaction of “business entities–society–state” with the identification of priority areas for development based on the rating approach.

Maintaining the trajectory of sustainable growth of small entrepreneurship through the development and establishment of partnerships is aimed at solving the business problem of increasing the efficiency of public investment. Understanding the need to support the sustainable development of SMEs requires the active assistance of all stakeholders. Integration of social, environmental, and financial goals in the activities of business entities requires a change in approaches to its management. Socially responsible business becomes a philosophy that forms the architecture of interaction between all stakeholders, with the active participation of society in order to create civil control.

Approaches to conducting business require rethinking the use of state support and promotion measures for the sustainable economic development of small entrepreneurship in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The structure of the article includes an analysis of regulatory documents on the strategic development of small entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan, identifying key indicators for building entrepreneurial potential within the framework of its sustainable development and including the presence of formalized indicators. In order to identify development trends in the small business sector since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, a chronological assessment of the dynamics of key indicators of small business development in Kazakhstan

for 2015–2023 was conducted based on statistical data, including an assessment of costs (investments) in environmental protection. To understand the attitude of small businesses in relation to the ideas of sustainable development, a survey was conducted among individual entrepreneurs, heads of limited liability partnerships, and peasant farms. Achieving the effectiveness of sustainable development is possible with a clear understanding of development priorities by all stakeholders and the presence of feedback between them. In order to identify significant areas of sustainable development, stakeholders (representatives of business, government, society) were asked within the survey to assess the significance of “forms/directions” of sustainable development that allow for increased efficiency of small businesses. Determining priorities allows for an assessment of the significant areas of each stakeholder; understanding, the presence of disagreements, consistency of views on promoting the concept of sustainable development; implementing (adjusting) the budget of public funds for investing in the sustainable development of small businesses, taking into account network interaction.

2. Literature Review

The concept of sustainable development is a relevant area of modern scientific thought. A current trend in business development is the ESG policy, which involves the implementation and adherence to ESG principles (Divaeva 2022). The United Nations has formulated 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which serve as a guideline for the strategic development of territories. The ESG concept reflects the ideas of sustainable development for building the future of individual countries and the world as a whole.

Compliance with social and environmental SDGs affects compliance with economic SDGs, which supports the efforts that the country makes to comply with them (Del-Aguila-Arcentales et al. 2022). Compliance with economic SDGs affects the competitiveness of the country. In environmental terms, entrepreneurship helps reduce carbon emissions and promotes sustainable business practices (Elmonshid and Sayed 2024).

To support SMEs, the European Union has developed an SME Strategy for a Sustainable and Digital Europe (Mrochkovskiy 2022). The key principles of this strategy are removing regulatory and practical barriers to conducting business; improving access to finance; supporting the transition to sustainable development and digitalization.

According to Eurostat, up to 90% of enterprises trading in Europe are small and medium-sized businesses, 70% of which are microenterprises with up to nine employees. SMEs employ 67% of the employed population in Europe, and the added value they create per year is estimated at 3.9 trillion euros. It is small businesses that create a field for healthy competition, provide jobs, and pay taxes (OSDP 2024).

Some authors note the particular importance of pursuing ESG goals for financial firms, since their business is critically dependent on customer loyalty, which is positively dependent on reputation (Ovechkin 2021). A study (Gomes and Pinho 2023) on the commitment of European SMEs to SDG 12 found that SME implementation of resource efficiency actions at the micro level had a positive impact on the adoption of macro-level decarbonization measures. Well-planned strategies of small businesses can address environmental and social issues, and integrating the development of planned and new strategies can enable small firms to align core business goals with sustainable development goals (Luederitz et al. 2021; Ayyagari et al. 2007). Lack of government and organizational support is identified as the main barrier to sustainability practices in SMEs (Kumar et al. 2022). The environmental management system in Kazakhstan is regulated at three levels—international, national, and organizational (Zarubina et al. 2022).

Small and medium-sized enterprises can be a decisive force in the fight against climate change and the promotion of green thinking and sustainable development (Korneeva et al. 2021). Today, ESG is a factor in investment decisions, which contributes to the active participation of the large business sector in promoting the concept of sustainable development.

Government support during the COVID-19 crisis for SMEs and the use of government feedback through the mitigation measures applied provides more support in the form of

direct subsidies (Janáková Sujová and Kupčák 2024). Such support helps SMEs overcome financial problems due to reduced sales and liquidity.

The study by (Wang et al. 2022) notes that when firms benefiting from tax incentives receive large cash subsidies, these subsidies hinder the expected green innovation activities, thereby creating a “crowding out” effect of tax incentives. Tax incentives promote corporate green innovation while subsidies have little impact on green innovation.

Research (Das et al. 2019) notes that corporate sustainability is a widely practiced area in large organizations, but social and environmental practices are seriously ignored in small and medium-sized enterprises, especially in emerging markets. Large corporations often have more resources to implement sustainability initiatives. They may have dedicated departments and a significant R&D budget to implement advanced technologies for their sustainability practices. In contrast, such resources are a constraint for SMEs, but they are more flexible in adapting to new changes due to simpler processes (Basit et al. 2024).

ESG Data Analysis with Machine Learning and Deep Learning Algorithms (Lee et al. 2022) examines the possibility of applying AI algorithms to ESG data sets in a comprehensive approach. Taking into account sustainability factors of business entities should occur at the early stages of product development, which involves the use of tools and methods for developing sustainable products in business decision-making processes (Gomes and Pinho 2023). The authors of the analysis studied the impact of investment, financial, administrative, and regulatory requirements on the implementation of methods to improve the efficiency of resource use in small and medium-sized enterprises. Dellaportas et al. (2012, p. 238) conclude that there is a “relationship between ESG rating and profitability”. Successful companies implement social and environmental policies on a larger scale compared to financially unsuccessful enterprises. The concept of sustainable development and green economy implies the need to justify the use of new financial instruments (Litvinova et al. 2023). Achieving ESG goals affects improving reputation, improving the quality of management, and attracting qualified personnel, which is reflected in increasing business profitability (Forcadell and Aracil 2017).

Research (Steyn 2014; Ghoul et al. 2017; Buallay 2019; Becker et al. 2022; Kumar and Firoz 2022; Atan et al. 2018) has primarily focused on examining the relationship between ESG disclosure and performance of large and publicly listed companies.

Companies should adopt transparent communication practices, providing stakeholders with clear and accurate information about their ESG performance, targets, and progress. Regular reporting and disclosure of ESG performance can help build trust and facilitate constructive dialogue (McKinsey and Company 2019).

A review of sustainability measurement practices for businesses (Serzante and Khudozhnyk 2023) found a significant trend towards comprehensive and integrated approaches to sustainability measurement, emphasizing the importance of considering economic, social, and environmental factors in an integrated manner. The researchers note that Asia and Europe have been the most studied regions, with a focus on the secondary sector of enterprises. The network interaction of innovation development of the economy within the framework of the Triple Helix “university–industry–government” is complemented by the Triple Helix “university–state–government” for sustainable development (Zhou and Etkowitz 2021). Zhou and Etkowitz proposed a Triple Helix twin framework for innovation and sustainable development. The roles of government, industry, civil society, and academia in knowledge sharing processes are considered in the Quadruple Helix model. The Quadruple Helix (Carayannis and Campbell 2012) is combined with a public perspective based on media and culture. The Quintuple Helix model of innovation and the SDGs is expanded to consist of political, educational, economic, environmental, and social systems. The work of Barcellos-Paula et al. (2021) presents a Quintuple Helix model and the Sustainable Development Goals for Latin America. The lack of publicity in the activities of small business entities in Kazakhstan, the low correlation between investments in innovation and the share of innovative products in the GDP structure, and limited resources lead to the need to transform the interaction of key stakeholders of “business

entities–society–state” with the identification of priority areas of development using a rating approach. Over the past fifteen years, Kazakhstan has adopted a number of legislative documents aimed at the sustainable development of the country. These are the [Ecological Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan \(2021\)](#), the [Corporate Governance Code \(2018\)](#), the [Social Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan \(2023\)](#), the [Adilet \(2023\)](#), and the [Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan \(2021\)](#) (on approval of the classification (taxonomy) of “green” projects). All these laws are aimed at the sustainable development of Kazakhstan.

An analysis of a systematic review of the literature on the sustainable development of small and medium-sized businesses ([Martins et al. 2022](#)) allowed us to draw conclusions about the insufficient number of studies devoted to reporting in the field of sustainable development of SMEs. Environmental aspects of business have the strongest positive impact on the long-term sustainability of SMEs ([Zvarikova et al. 2024](#)). The results of the study indicate that human resource management, finance, and the degree of digitalization of SMEs significantly affect the viability of the business.

The use of domestic developments reduces the costs of companies for the acquisition and maintenance of foreign digital software ([Zarubina et al. 2021](#)).

According to a study by Jusan Analytics, the survival rate of small and medium businesses in Kazakhstan is 18%. Among the problems affecting such a low level of sustainability, industry experts highlight low productivity, inflation, monopolized markets, and the lack of effective public policy instruments ([Shukirbaeva 2023](#)). Achieving ESG goals can bring certain benefits that a company can convert into financial results. The level of a company’s reputation increases if such a company demonstrates increased concern for the environment. Conversely, the level of a company’s reputation decreases if such a company is involved in scandals related to a negative impact on environmental safety.

The existing literature mentions that a joint mode of operation, government policy, and assistance, as well as a supportive organizational culture can positively affect the sustainability indicators of SMEs and therefore improve their financial performance.

Sustainable development is a modern trend, which is confirmed by a significant number of scientific studies around the world. Public and accessible information on the large business sector makes it possible to conduct research in the field of ESG. For the small business sector, conducting research on sustainable development is currently problematic due to the lack of public reporting, including ESG reporting. The presence of gaps in information access and the importance of the small business sector for the innovative development of the country led us to the need to conduct research on the mechanism for promoting sustainable development for the small business sector. The following research questions were posed within the framework of this study and require consideration:

- Do the parameters of strategic development of Kazakhstani small business reflect its sustainable development?
- What is the understanding of sustainable development by Kazakhstani small business entities?
- What are the significant “forms/directions” of sustainable development that allow for increasing the efficiency of small business entities in Kazakhstan?
- Balanced sustainable development based on network interaction “business entities–society–state” ensures focus.

3. Methodology

The study of the mechanism for promoting sustainable development for the Kazakhstan small business sector was conducted in several stages. Figure 1 shows a block diagram of the study stages. At the first stage, an analysis of the state strategic program for the development of small and medium entrepreneurship (“Concept for the Development of Small and Medium Entrepreneurship until 2030”) was performed. In addition, an analysis of the parameters of strategic development aimed at investigating the sustainable development of the SME sector and included the share of SMEs in GDP, the share of medium-sized

companies in GDP, the share of the non-observed economy in GDP, the score of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the index of economic freedoms in the Business Freedom sphere, the score of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the index of economic freedoms in the Monetary Freedom sphere, the score of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the index of economic freedoms in the Trade Freedom sphere, the score of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the index of economic freedoms in the Investment Freedom sphere, the growth of average real labor productivity in medium-sized enterprises (per 1 enterprise), employment (million people) in medium-sized enterprises and the share of investments in fixed capital of medium-sized enterprises in the total volume of investments in fixed capital of all business entities.

The analysis of the dynamics of small business development and the relationship between the key indicators of small business development and investments/expenditures in environmental protection was performed. For this purpose, we used statistical data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan ([Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2024](#)). The statistical forms “Statistics of enterprises. Small and medium entrepreneurship”, “Report on environmental protection costs”, “Report on investment activities” were studied. The analysis used data for the period from 2015, when the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, to 2023. Based on the data obtained, a correlation analysis of the relationship between the indicators of small business development and investments and expenses in environmental protection was performed.

Also, an analysis was conducted of the dynamics of legal entities of small businesses, individual entrepreneurs, the output of legal entities of small businesses, the output of legal entities of individual entrepreneurs, the share of innovative products in GDP, and the share of domestic R and D costs in GDP. The next step in the study was a survey among small business entities. The questionnaire developed by the authors included 6 closed questions with answer options, which allowed us to quickly conduct a survey of Kazakhstani entrepreneurs.

To conduct the survey, we calculated the sample.

The sample size was determined by the formula ([Scanmarket 2024](#)), when the sample size is comparable to the size of the general population.

$$n = \frac{Z^2 * p * q}{\Delta^2} \quad (1)$$

where Z is a coefficient depending on the confidence level chosen by the researcher, $Z = 1.96$.

p —the proportion of respondents with the feature being studied;

$q = 1 - p$ —the proportion of respondents who do not have the feature being studied;

Δ —the maximum sampling error, 10%;

n —the sample size.

The survey involved individual entrepreneurs, heads of limited liability partnerships, and farms. A total of 99 people took part in the survey.

As part of the survey, we were interested in the attitude of entrepreneurs towards investing the income received in entrepreneurial activity and in sustainable business development as well as towards the public presentation of non-financial reporting on the results of the organization’s activities (environmental protection, social and corporate responsibility) and the image of the organization being formed. We were interested in the issue of using loans in professional activities. The state actively supports the development of small businesses by providing grants and loans with a low interest rate. The mechanism of financial support can be applied to the entities that actively support the implementation of ESG principles.

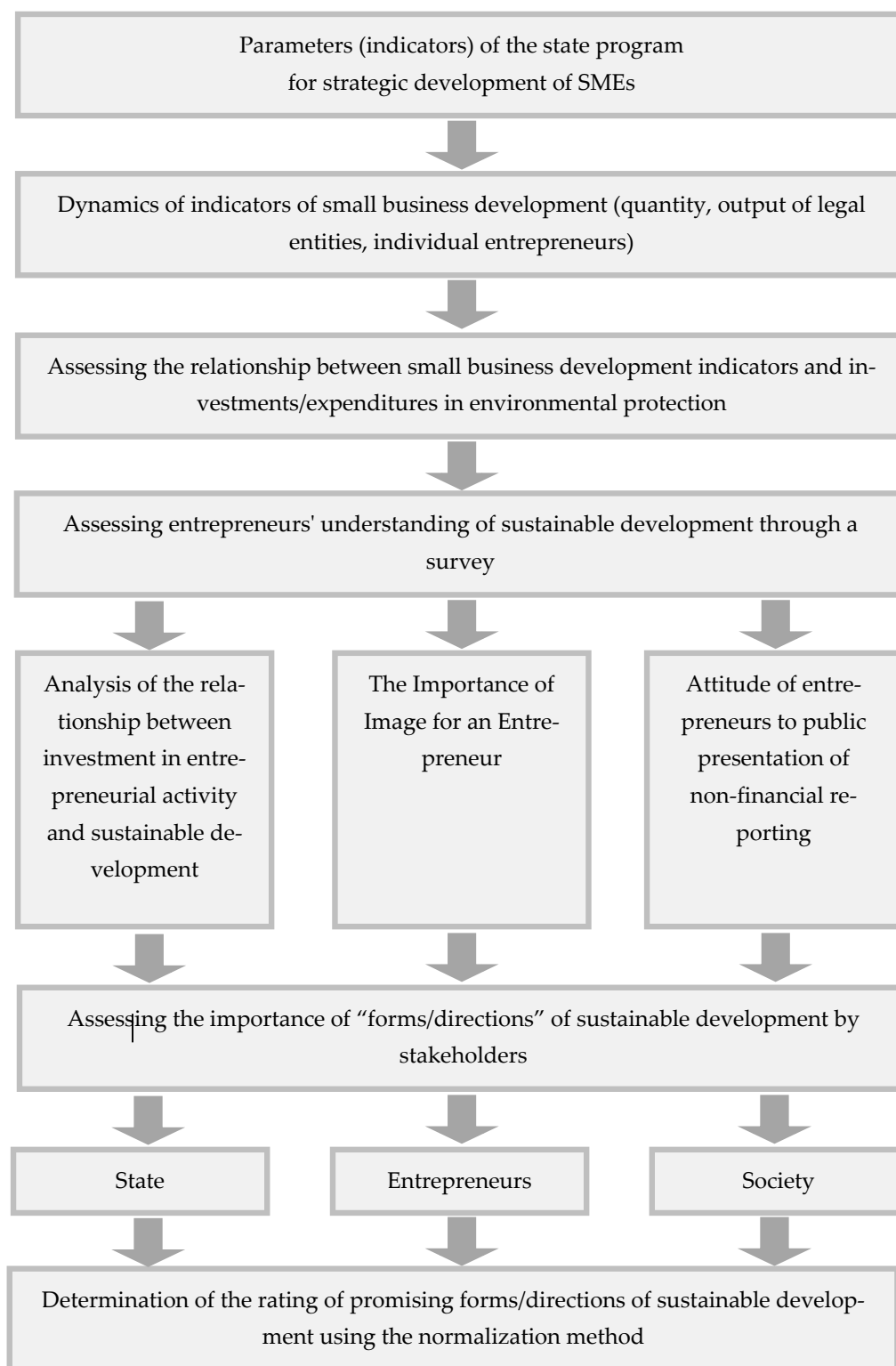


Figure 1. Flow chart of the study results.

At the third stage, an assessment of the forms/directions of stakeholder assistance in the development of the concept of sustainable development (state, society, entrepreneurs) was carried out, and a rating of the importance of the identified aspects was determined using the normalization method. The significance of the answers to the proposed forms/directions is ranked in the range from 1 to 3, (1—min, 3—max).

Based on the responses received from the survey, conclusions were made on the need to develop a balanced strategy for achieving carbon neutrality based on network interaction between “business entities–society–state” with the identification of priority areas of development based on a rating approach to ensure transparency and publicity of decisions taken as well as creation of economic conditions for the implementation of sustainable development principles in the practical activities of business entities.

4. Results

In the innovative development of Kazakhstan, the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector plays a key role. To ensure the continuous development of entrepreneurship at the state level, a program document is adopted. Monitoring the indicators of small entrepreneurship development for 2015–2023 allows us to draw conclusions about the positive dynamics of its development.

However, the conducted analysis of the main parameters of the strategic development of Kazakhstan’s SMEs is associated with an increase in the number of employees, an increase in the share of GDP, an increase in labor productivity and investment. At the same time, in the strategic document (“Concept for the Development of Small and Medium Entrepreneurship until 2030”), building up entrepreneurial potential does not focus on achieving a climate-neutral, resource-efficient and flexible digital economy. The dominant stakeholder—the “state”, within the framework of the strategic document aimed at the development of SMEs, does not formalize the indicators of sustainable development of the SME sector.

The key indicators of the concept are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Key indicators of the Concept for the Development of SMEs in Kazakhstan until 2030.

Indicator	Meaning
Share of SMEs in GDP	40%
Share of medium-sized companies in GDP	20%
Employment (million people) in medium-sized enterprises	5
Growth of average real labor productivity in medium-sized enterprises (per enterprise)	50%
The share of investments in fixed capital of medium-sized enterprises in the total volume of investments in fixed capital of all business entities	15%

Source: On approval of the Concept for the development of small and medium entrepreneurship in the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030 Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 27 April 2022 No. 250. Available online: <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2200000250> (accessed on 12 July 2024).

The indicators of small business development in Kazakhstan for 2015–2023 demonstrate dynamic development (Table 2). Both the number of entrepreneurs and the volume of production are growing. For legal entities, the volume of production of small businesses increased more than four times, for individual entrepreneurs it increased almost 3 times.

The costs and investments in environmental protection for 2015–2023 were also analyzed (Table 3). In the republic, the growth rate of costs for environmental protection was 2.369. The growth of investments significantly outpaces the growth rate of costs: it was 3.224.

Table 2. Indicators of small business development in Kazakhstan for 2015–2023.

Index	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Growth Rate 2023/2015
Legal entities of small business, units	175,679	189,637	208,742	231,325	258,365	280,200	299,737	416,080	438,403	2.495
Individual entrepreneurs, units	882,849	736,121	747,107	809,115	855,920	857,910	907,722	1,044,252	1,336,490	1.514
Small business legal entities, thousand people	11,852	12,493	13,018	13,519	14,082	14,624	14,888	31,251	17,288	1.458
Individual entrepreneurs, thousand people	13,603	12,882	12,409	13,152	13,789	13,538	13,671	136,714	16,785	1.234
Output of products by legal entities of small businesses, thousand tenge	10,200,061	13,568,530	16,488,047	18,272,335	22,947,233	23,401,108	28,446,662	29,452,215	42,069,312	4.12
Output of products by individual entrepreneurs, thousand tenge	1,518,237	1,511,733	1,554,704	1,764,985	1,902,754	1,729,842	3 401,450	3,404,453	4,468,161	2.94
Share of innovative products in GDP, %	0.92	0.95	1.55	1.72	1.60	2.43	1.71	1.81	1.99	2.16
Share of domestic RandD expenditure in GDP, %	0.17	0.14	0.13	0.12	0.12	0.13	0.13	0.12	0.25	1.47

Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <https://stat.gov.kz/ru> (accessed on 12 July 2024).

Table 3. Costs and investments in environmental protection for 2015–2023.

Indicator	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Growth Rate 2023/2015
Total costs for environmental protection, million tenge	257,533	196,143	262,407	302,177	420,392	384,016	416,956	444,514	610,285	2.369
Investments aimed at environmental protection, million tenge	82,883	43,937	86,962	111,161	198,722	173,619	171,165	159,661	267,261	3.224

Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <https://stat.gov.kz/ru> (accessed on 12 July 2024).

We assessed the correlation between the output of small businesses and the costs and investments in environmental protection (Table 4). The correlation was calculated using the Pearson function in Excel. The pair wise correlation between the output of small business legal entities and the investments directed toward environmental protection was high—0.854. The pair wise correlation between the output of small business individual entrepreneurs and the investments directed toward environmental protection was average—0.532.

Table 4. Correlation between the output of small businesses and costs, investments in environmental protection in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Indicators	Output of Products by Legal Entities of Small Businesses	Output of Products by Individual Entrepreneurs	Total Costs of Environmental Protection	Investments Aimed at Environmental Protection
Production of goods by legal entities of small businesses	1	0.782	0.895	0.854
Production of goods by legal entities of small businesses	0.782	1	0.645	0.532
Total costs of environmental protection	0.895	0.645	1	0.99
Investments aimed at environmental protection	0.864	0.532	0.99	1

To assess entrepreneurs' understanding of sustainable development and the need to popularize and implement sustainable development principles in the practical activities of business entities, a survey was conducted among small business entities.

The survey results showed that 39.4% of entrepreneurs use loans in their professional activities and 60.6% of current entrepreneurs use their own funds in the formation and development.

The next question was related to determining the percentage of income invested by a business entity in entrepreneurial activity (an activity aimed at systematically obtaining profit from owning property, selling goods, performing work or providing services), as well as the willingness to invest in sustainable business development.

The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Survey results.

Question	Percent									I Do Not Invest
	Less than 10	10–20	20–30	30–40	40–50	50–60	60–70	70–80	All Income Received	
The percentage of income invested by a business entity in entrepreneurial activity	2	8.1	18.2	20.2	14.1	12.1	10.1	3	11.1	2
The percentage of income that a business entity is willing to invest in sustainable business development	32.3	31.3	12.1	3	5.1	1	0	1	1	13.1
Correlation	−0.225									

As the survey results showed, small businesses actively invest their income in entrepreneurial activities. At the same time, they are ready to invest only a small part of their income in sustainable development. The correlation between investing in business and

investing in sustainable development is negative—0.225. This indicates that these business entities are not ready to invest in sustainable development.

According to a survey conducted by the United Nations Global Compact among companies from 160 countries, the majority of small and medium-sized businesses associate ESG programs with unnecessary expenses and do not see their advantages. Less than half of companies with a turnover of up to USD 25 million reported the implementation of sustainable development practices. For comparison, among large companies with a turnover of more than USD 1 billion, the share of those who have relevant practices is 94% (Safronova 2023).

The study was also interested in the attitude of small businesses to the image. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of image on a five-point scale: five—maximum, zero—no importance.

As the survey results showed (Figure 2), image is important for 88.9% of small businesses. Image is formed through active interaction of elements of the internal and external environment. An active stakeholder of the external environment is society. Public opinion analysis allows us to identify consumer preferences and new opportunities for the development of a business entity. Environmental image in modern conditions is a system of stable ideas that have developed in society about how a company's activities affect the environment, how environmentally friendly its products are, and how seriously it treats compliance with environmental legislation. Thus, the formation of the image of a business entity occurs through active network interaction of "business entity–society".

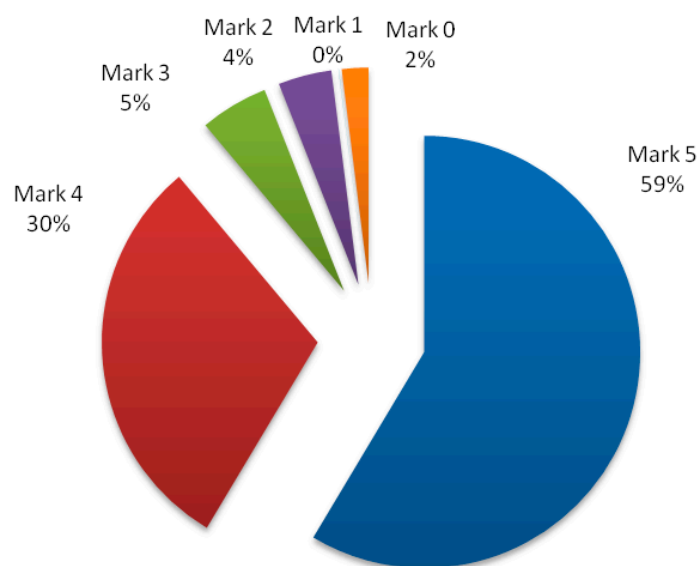


Figure 2. Results of responses to the question "What is the importance of the organization's image for you?"

The availability of statistical, financial, tax reporting on individual small business entities in various industries and areas of activity in the Republic of Kazakhstan is not public. The parameters of the efficiency of economic activity can be obtained using the data of management accounting, primary accounting documentation. The lack of public financial and non-financial information on small business entities does not allow monitoring the efficiency of their activities.

Also, the respondents-entrepreneurs were asked a question regarding their attitude to the public presentation of non-financial reporting on the results of the organization's activities (environmental protection, social and corporate responsibility). The results of the received answers are presented in Figure 3.

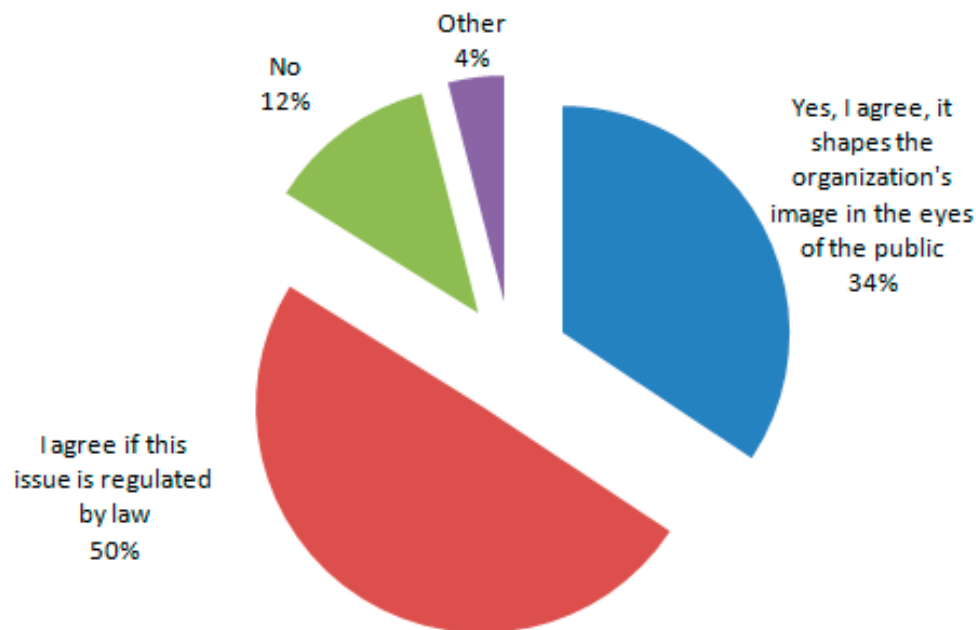


Figure 3. What is your attitude towards public presentation of non-financial reporting on the organization’s performance (environmental protection, social and corporate responsibility)?

The results obtained indicate that only a third of the respondents agreed to the public presentation of non-financial reporting. Almost half of the small business entities surveyed, namely 49.5%, agrees to the public presentation of non-financial reporting only in the case of legislative regulation.

Thus, the survey showed that entrepreneurs try to use their own funds in their activities, ensuring financial independence. Entrepreneurs are not ready to actively invest funds in the sustainable development of their business. At the same time, a positive aspect is concern for the image, as well as active investment in the functioning of the business entity.

Since the main goal of any commercial enterprise is to maximize profits, an increase in investment should lead to an increase in the economic effect. The use of tax incentives can serve as a tool for tax breaks for those business entities that invest in sustainable development. A comparative analysis of tax regimes for Kazakhstani small businesses is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Comparative analysis of the general and simplified taxation regimes in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Criterion	Taxation Regimes	
	Generally Established	Simplified
Taxable object	Profit	Actual income
Limits on numbers	100	30
Cash register machine	Mandatory application	Mandatory application
Turnover restrictions	Absent	24,038 minimum calculation indicator
Restrictions on types of activities	In accordance with Article 683 of the Tax Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan	Limited list
Tax rate	20% of profit for LLC, 10% for individual entrepreneurs	3% of income

Source: Tax Code of Kazakhstan (2024), https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=36148637 (accessed on 12 July 2024).

Small businesses can choose either the general tax regime or the simplified one. The object of taxation when applying the general regime is profit; the profit tax rate is 20% for limited liability partnerships and 10% for individual entrepreneurs. When applying the simplified system, there are income restrictions: the tax rate is 3% of income.

Tax incentives promote corporate “green” innovation while subsidies have little effect on “green” innovation (Wang et al. 2022).

The use of deductions related to investments in sustainable business development reduces the taxable base for business entities and stimulates responsible investment under the simplified and general tax regime. For individual entrepreneurs operating under the simplified system, whose object of taxation is income, the incentive mechanism may be associated with the use of a reduced tax rate or a zero tax rate. State support for sustainable development of small businesses can be regulatory and incentive. The state can adopt laws and regulations aimed at regulating the activities of companies in accordance with ESG principles. This may include requirements for compliance with environmental standards, social responsibility and corporate governance. The state can support or create standards and certification systems that assess company compliance with ESG principles. This can help investors and consumers make more informed decisions when choosing companies to invest in or cooperate with.

The state can also provide incentives for companies that actively implement ESG practices: tax breaks, subsidies, and other incentives for organizations operating in accordance with ESG principles.

The formation of a set of measures for the sustainable development of small businesses should occur with the feedback of all stakeholders.

Active network interaction of “business entities–society–state” ensures the integration of sustainable development into the activities of business entities.

We asked stakeholders to assess the significance of “forms/directions” of sustainable development that allow for increased efficiency of small businesses.

Each stakeholder was offered evaluation criteria, the significance of which had to be assessed in the range from one to three.

As representatives of government agencies, heads of akimats, tax authorities, and statistics authorities were interviewed.

The assessment of the degree of significance of forms/directions of sustainable development for each of the parties is presented in Table 7. Using the normalization method, a rating of promising forms/directions of sustainable development for each of the stakeholders was determined.

In the context of sustainable innovative development of industries and sectors of the national economy, focusing on priority areas allows government agencies to concentrate their efforts and budget funds on significant forms of support for small businesses.

Civil society as an element of state and business control in the context of publicity and the formation of a social partnership system determines the priorities of areas for further sustainable development. Increasing the role of civil society in the sustainable development of small businesses is aimed at taking into account its interests as key stakeholders who are consumers of products and services. Small business entities in the implementation of their business strategies in modern conditions also determine priority areas of sustainable development. The priority of areas of sustainable development of small businesses allows identifying key growth points. Transparency and publicity of the selected forms/areas increases the responsibility of stakeholders as well as balanced sustainable development.

The importance rating of various forms/areas of sustainable development is presented in Table 8.

Table 7. Criteria for forms/directions of sustainable development.

Stakeholders	Forms/ Directions	Significance (1–3) 1-min, 3-max	Min	Max	(Xi–Xmin)/ (Xmax–Xmin)
State	Investment opportunities: grants	2.74	1.77	2.74	1.00
	Investment opportunities: loans	1.95	1.77	2.74	0.18
	Investment opportunities: subsidies	2.59	1.77	2.74	0.84
	Tax preferences	2.26	1.77	2.74	0.50
	Legislative regulation of public presentation of financial statements	1.77	1.77	2.74	0.00
	Legislative regulation of public presentation of non-financial reports	1.79	1.77	2.74	0.03
	Standards and certification systems	2.36	1.79	2.74	0.59
Society	Recycling of resources	2.63	2.35	2.65	0.94
	Environmental activism	2.65	2.35	2.65	1.00
	Use of “green” technologies	2.63	2.35	2.65	0.94
	Use of “green” technologies	2.35	2.35	2.65	0.00
Entrepreneurs	Lean	2.38	1.94	2.75	0.55
	Recycling of used resources	2.61	1.94	2.75	0.83
	Implementation of sustainable development principles in personnel management	2.74	1.94	2.75	0.99
	Integration of sustainable development principles into business processes and operational activities	2.18	1.94	2.75	0.30
	Access to sustainable finance	2.75	1.94	2.75	1.00
	Formation of non-financial reporting for sustainable development of a business entity	1.94	1.94	2.75	0.00

Table 8. Rating of priority forms/directions in achieving sustainable development of stakeholders.

Rank	State	Society	Entrepreneurs
1	Investment opportunities: grants	Environmental activism	Access to sustainable finance
2	Investment opportunities: subsidies	Recycling of resources	Implementation of sustainable development principles in personnel management
3	Standards and certification systems	Use of “green” technologies	Recycling of used resources
4	Tax preferences	Innovation and digital technologies	Lean
5	Investment opportunities: loans	-	Integration of sustainable development principles into business processes and operational activities
6	Legislative regulation of public presentation of non-financial, financial reporting	-	Formation of non-financial reporting for sustainable development of a business entity

The greatest potential for small businesses is in such forms of investment as grants and subsidies for business development. Representatives of the public consider it necessary to be active in the field of environmental protection, recycling of resources, and the use of “green technologies” to ensure sustainable development. Small businesses focus on access to sustainable financing, the introduction of sustainable development principles into personnel management, and the recycling of resources used. Balanced sustainable development based on network interaction “business entities–society–state” ensures focus on priority areas for stakeholders, transparency, publicity of decisions made and the possibility of taking corrective actions taking into account the opinions of all stakeholders.

The presence of a correlation between priority forms/directions in achieving sustainable development indicates that all stakeholders understand and share promising directions of sustainable development at the macro and micro levels. In the absence of a correlation between the opinions of stakeholders, the key role of the coordinator (the state) is to form a sustainable development vector, identify the causes of disagreements and, if necessary, make corrective actions, discuss and provide investment support for promising projects.

5. Discussion

The conducted research allowed us to identify a number of problems. First of all, it is necessary to define parameters and indicators aimed at developing small businesses in the context of sustainable development and the active use of green, resource-efficient technologies at the level of state strategic programs and documents.

The growth of small business competitiveness should primarily occur through the production of sustainable innovative products and services using digital and green technologies for the state to be able to provide incentives for companies that actively implement ESG practices: grants, subsidies, tax breaks, and other incentives for organizations operating in accordance with ESG principles.

In addition, it is needed for the state to be able to adopt laws and regulations aimed at regulating the activities of companies in accordance with ESG principles.

Currently, Kazakhstani small businesses are not ready to actively invest in sustainable development. This indicates the need to create conditions, support and explanation of the importance and prospects of investing in sustainable innovation. Investing in sustainable innovation requires legislative support in the form of grant funding, project subsidies, and preferences.

Active network interaction between the state and entrepreneurs can be carried out taking into account the rating of priority areas in achieving sustainable development. This approach will ensure the definition of significant elements in the implementation of the carbon neutrality strategy. In conditions of limited resources, the budget of allocated public funds can focus on the most promising areas. And the choice of such priority areas should be carried out with the direct participation of society.

The presence of feedback between entrepreneurs and the public ensures publicity and transparency of activities.

The study identified the following issues that require further resolution. Firstly, in order to create favorable social conditions and protect the environment of small businesses, it is necessary to develop ESG standards. Secondly, non-financial reporting, including indicators of environmental protection and social and corporate responsibility, requires legislative regulation. Thirdly, it is necessary to carry out further work to determine private and integrated indicators of non-financial reporting that allow determining the degree of compliance of the business entity with sustainable development.

Such steps will allow public monitoring of the environmental, social, and management profile of the entrepreneur.

6. Conclusions

Sustainable development of Kazakhstan’s small business should be carried out with close cooperation between the state, business entities, and society. Strategic indicators

of small business development provided for in the state program should correlate with sustainable development and the active use of green, resource-efficient technologies, which currently requires adjustment. The dominant stakeholder, the “state”, within the framework of a strategic document aimed at the development of SMEs, does not formalize the indicators of sustainable development of the SME sector.

The network interaction of “business entities–society–state” allows introducing the concept of sustainable development to business entities with the support of government agencies and the active participation of society.

In the context of sustainable innovative development of industries and spheres of the national economy, focusing on priority areas allows government agencies to concentrate efforts and budget funds on significant forms of support for small businesses.

At the moment, Kazakhstan’s small business entities are not ready to actively invest in sustainable development. This indicates the need to create conditions, support and explanation of the importance and prospects of investing in sustainable innovations.

Active network interaction between the state and entrepreneurs can be carried out taking into account the rating of priority areas in achieving sustainable development. In conditions of limited resources, the budget of allocated public funds can focus on the most promising areas. Civil society as an element of control of the state and business in the conditions of publicity and the formation of a system of social partnership determines the priorities of areas for further sustainable development. Increasing the role of civil society in the sustainable development of small entrepreneurship is aimed at taking into account its interests as key stakeholders who are consumers of products and services. This approach will ensure the definition of significant elements in the implementation of a balanced strategy for achieving carbon neutrality, transparency, and publicity of decisions made.

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