

# Stakeholder Threat-Opportunity Conundrum in Small and Medium Enterprises' Sustainability in Rivers State, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** The paper explored the levels of threat and opportunity that different stakeholder groups present to Small and Medium Enterprises' (SMEs') sustainability in Rivers State, Nigeria while uncovering the groups that create the threat-opportunity conundrum. The design for the study was descriptive survey. A 19-item questionnaire with 17 key closed-response type items was administered to 185 SME managers selected via systematic random sampling. Questionnaire administration was done face-to-face as well as through WhatsApp, telephone conversations and Email from August 2019 to January, 2020. At the end, 78% retrieval rate was achieved from 144 respondents. Data analysis was done using mean and standard deviation. Using the Cronbach's Alpha method, a very high reliability score of 9.90 was attained for the questionnaire. The study found out among other things that: larger organisations and competitors present high threat level with less opportunity while government and regulators create low threat level with high opportunity for Rivers State SMEs' sustainability. Concerning the threat-opportunity conundrum in the SMEs' sustainability, employees, customers/clients, host community, financial institutions and suppliers were implicated as they offer both high threat and opportunity. They may, therefore, be more responsible (than other stakeholders) for the failure or death of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Stakeholders; Stakeholder Theory; Stakeholder threat-opportunity conundrum; Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs); Sustainability

## Introduction

Enterprises whether big, medium, small or micro, exist in a stakeholder environment. This is an environment where different groups of people connected either by ideology, geography, interest, experience, value, etc. exist and have long standing structures with which they wield different kinds of influences on firms. These groups of people include- community members (together with all the community councils), security agents, corporate bodies, associations, government agencies, activist groups, consumers, employees, etc. These groups have been empowered through social media and the Internet generally, radio, television, education, affluence, revolution of rising expectation, rights movement, mentality of entitlement and collective victimization (Carroll and Buchholtz 2009). They have and can control the flow of resources that firms need (Pajunen 2006; Wu 2012). With all these, they create tensions in the environment.

The capabilities of these groups to generate diverse and sometimes irreconcilable effects on enterprises' existence must be taken very seriously by SMEs especially. This is because SMEs are typically set up and run within specific communities (Turyakira 2017), suburbs and urban areas which are the domain of these different categories of people with long standing structures (e.g. community customs, rules and regulations, etc.). This is to say that SMEs have a local presence in the vicinity of varied groups. Stakeholders, thus, have closer or direct links with SMEs especially in terms of geography or proximity and frequency of contact. The implication is that SMEs can easily be accessed by these groups and are more likely to be particularly vulnerable to them. Another reason is the meaning attached to the term 'stakeholder'. There appears to be an ever increasing understanding of the meaning of the name stakeholder among the stakeholders themselves.

By the simple definition of stakeholders as people who hold certain stakes in a firm, a lot has been implied. First of all, stakeholders are mostly humans and humans are complicated. Ordinarily, that is, with no strings attached, it is difficult to know exactly what to expect from people. With a stake somewhere, people may act up in various ways on different occasions thereby becoming more complex and making issues more complicated for SMEs. This is because a stake is conceptualized as a share, right, claim, an interest (Carroll and Buchholtz 2009), allocation or allotment. These are serious terminologies that usually have legal and/or societal backing and could be pursued with varying intensity. The act of 'holding' on its own could entail possession or not letting go. This means that the holder of a stake cannot be perceived as a joker hence must be given due consideration by SMEs bearing in mind their closeness with stakeholders.

Again, certain defining features of SMEs such as; their independent and owner-centric nature, limited workforce and resources, etc. make them more dependent on some categories of stakeholders. All these put together increase the influence which stakeholders can have on the sustainability of SMEs. When positive, the influence that stakeholders exert can be called opportunities but when negative, they can better be described as threats. But there could also be situations where a group viewed as threatening can equally be seen as opportunity-laden. Such situations if not carefully observed and studied may present a puzzle which SMEs would need to solve time and time again. Manzanque-Lizano et al. (2019) stress that not much is known concerning the influence which stakeholders have on SMEs. Majority of the studies on stakeholder influence focus on multinationals or larger firms (Manzanque-Lizano et al. 2019) and on generic stakeholder categories rather than specific groups (Pajunen 2006). This paper attempts to contribute to knowledge expansion in this area by concentrating on SMEs. This is necessary considering the significant role which SMEs play in the human and economic development of any given country and the recurring closure of several SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria (Josiah et al. 2016).

## Statement of the problem

The business environment has continued to be tensed due to occurrences in which different categories of stakeholders can be implicated. This is especially true for SMEs which are characteristically sited and operated within particular areas that may be considered the strong hold of diverse but related stakeholder groups. Due to this and other critical features of SMEs like limited resources, manpower, etc., they may be more vulnerable to diverse groups than is possible with larger organisations. SMEs have been reported to be failing in different parts of the world including Rivers State irrespective of the numerous advantages that they offer both local and national economies. The tensions in the business world in which stakeholders may be implicated, cannot be divorced from the numerous incidence of failing, dying or failed SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria and around the globe. As a result, this paper inquires about the levels of threat or/and opportunity that different stakeholder groups present to SMEs' sustainability in Rivers State, Nigeria while uncovering the groups that create the threat-opportunity conundrum.

## Aim and objectives

The study aims at finding out the extent of threat or/and opportunity that different groups of stakeholders have on the sustainability of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria by:

1. determining the extent to which various stakeholder groups present threat to SMEs' sustainability in Rivers State, Nigeria.
2. ascertaining the extent to which various stakeholder groups present opportunity for SMEs' sustainability in Rivers State, Nigeria.
3. discovering the stakeholders that present the threat-opportunity conundrum in SMEs' sustainability in Rivers State, Nigeria.

## Literature review

## Stakeholder theory

The stakeholder theory firmly explicates the importance of stakeholders in the world of firms. Though the theory gained prominence after Prof. E. R. Freeman's 1984 publication (*Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*), ideas on which the theory is built dates back to the 1918 and 1932 articles of Mary Follet and Merrick Dodd respectively (Jones et al. 2001; Schilling 2014; Macintosh 1999; McGrath and Whitty 2017; Fontaine et al. 2009). There are three aspects to the theory namely; the descriptive, normative and instrumental (Donaldson and Preston 2007). The descriptive aspect attempts to reveal not just the nature of a firm but the nature of a firm's stakeholders (Susnienė and Sargūnas 2014). It presents an understanding of a business as a configuration of common and contrasting interests with normative (intrinsic) and instrumental (extrinsic) values (Carroll and Buchholtz 2009). The common and contrasting interests are held by different stakeholders among whom are the owners or investor of firms. The tensions in the business environment originate from presentations and management of these interests by varied stakeholders and firms respectively.

The normative aspect explains that businesses owe all their stakeholders some values. In other words, all stakeholders' interests must be taken into consideration by firms. Using the instrumental dimension, the stakeholder theory emphasized the importance of stakeholders to firms' sustainability (Fassin 2008; Carroll and Buchholtz, 2009). This inquiry takes mainly the descriptive and instrumental approaches as it attempts to ascertain the nature/influence of the stakeholders of Rivers State's SMEs. It does this by finding out the level of threat and opportunity that various groups present for the SMEs' sustainability. It also goes further to reveal the stakeholder threat-opportunity conundrum in Rivers State's SMEs sustainability by seeking out groups that present both high threat and high opportunity levels to the SMEs.

### **Understanding the stakeholder threat-opportunity conundrum**

The stakeholder notion, as popular as it has become, is not one with a straightforward meaning. Fassin (2008) noted that the concept is filled with ambivalence and ambiguity due to the differing perspectives that scholars take when defining the term. Some scholars like Fontaine et al. (2009), Morsing and Schultz (2006), Bruyant-Langer (2011), Oso and Semiu (2012) and Fikkert (2015), understand the word stakeholder to be a person, persons or groups that can affect a firm or be affected by a firm. These authors conceptualize stakeholder from the perspective of influence which signifies a broad view of the term. Based on this perspective, stakeholders include both people that firms have some weight on or anyone who can exert some measure of influence on a firm. This is irrespective of interests or claims that such persons may or may not have in the firm. A challenge may, however, arise when the same persons that the firm's activities affect are claimants and at the same time have attributes that enable them influence the firm. Fassin (2008) classifies this situation as the type that makes the stakeholder notion ambivalent and confusing.

On the other hand, authors like Rawlins (2006), Fassin (2008) and Fontaine et al. (2009) take a claimant and narrow standpoint as they consider a stakeholder to be anyone or group that has been recognised by a firm as a vital element for sustainability. This is because such a person or group has invested in the firm (Bourne, 2010). This conceptualization did not make room for situations where the claimant is not someone or a group that the firm considers to be crucial for its sustainability. A caveat here is that the narrow perspective cannot give firms a holistic stakeholder view. Thus, a broad mindset is necessary for a firm to truly tell groups that can influence its sustainability.

The stakeholder threat-opportunity conundrum arises from the twists observed in the different conceptualizations of the stakeholder terminology. Readings from the literature reveal that it can be difficult to separate the narrow from the broad view or the influence perspective from the claimant's when conceptualizing stakeholder. This signals the possibility of a challenge in attempts to highlight and separate threat-laden from opportunity-loaded stakeholders. The stakeholder threat-opportunity conundrum explains the complicated or back and forth thinking process that makes the placement of some stakeholders into the threatening or opportunity-laden category tedious. It gets to a tipping point when the person, usually the manager of a firm, who is involved in this thought process may realize that some stakeholder groups recognized as having the greatest capacity to offer opportunity also have the greatest threatening capacity. Crilly (2013) avers that stakeholders present threats as well as opportunities for firms. What was not made clear is the particular groups that present these threats and opportunities. Crilly was, however, able to explain how the threats and opportunities come about. The preponderance of several issues (e.g. rising unemployment, poverty, abuse of corporate power,

inadequate disposal of toxic waste, rising expectation, etc.) in the social environment has forced stakeholders to mount pressure on firms.

As Crilly (2013) explains, stakeholders expect firms including SMEs to respond to the above social issues in different ways. For example, observation has shown that in Rivers State, Nigeria, SMEs are required by different community and local government councils including community youths, to pay different kinds of levies. These levies may be for anything including electricity and security which most times are in very short supply. There is also the issue of double taxation from state agencies which some SMEs have condemned. A recent issue is the demand for group life insurance policies to be adopted by businesses. Demand for this policy was put forward by some interest groups in 2019 after a fire incidence that occurred in the Port Harcourt Shopping Mall left several persons injured. According to Crilly (2013), such demands and pressures coming from stakeholders can have either positive or negative effects on firms. A positive outcome may be realized when firms are moved by these pressures to make changes that will make them more sustainable. On the other hand, a negative effect may result when a firm is unable to balance the required or effected changes with the needed bottom line. Nevertheless, what is implied here is that in the midst of all the pressures that are contributing to SMEs failure, there are stakeholders that are opportunity-laden, those that are threat-ridden and those that present both attributes at the same time.

### **Solving the stakeholder threat-opportunity conundrum in SME sustainability**

Under the four-way stakeholder categorization of Carroll and Buchholtz's (2009), an attempt was made to exemplify stakeholders that have potential for cooperation, threat and mixed blessing. Stakeholders with high cooperative and low threatening ability included management, directors, service providers, suppliers, employees and customers that are loyal. These stakeholders composed the supportive category. Stakeholders like the competition, national, state and local governments, the media, unions and special interest groups were said to have high threat potential and low cooperative capacity. They were thus categorized as unsupportive. Rawlins (2014) added the marginal stakeholder category comprising groups with low capacity for both threat and opportunity. Examples of these stakeholders are unorganised workers' professional associations, interest groups composed of consumers and stockholder.

The next stakeholders exemplified by Carroll and Buchholtz (2009) are those that formed the mixed blessing class. These groups are said to be in short supply (Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP) 2009). Carroll and Buchholtz listed only customers and employees as mixed blessing stakeholders. These groups also formed part of the supportive stakeholder category signifying the puzzle which is the focus of this study. This paper conceptualizes this category as stakeholders that are responsible for the stakeholder threat-opportunity conundrum. SMEs need to understand these groups by attempting a dichotomous grouping of their stakeholders.

Carroll and Buchholtz's (2009) illustration was more like an inference from experiences in the environment of organisations. But the authors were able to state instances that heightened stakeholders' capacity to threaten or offer opportunities and to offer both sides of the coin to firms. For example, a group's threatening or opportunity capacity was said to increase when the group is or not in control of basic resources necessary for a firm to operate. When a group is likely to take action that is detrimental to the firm, there is high probability for threat and low probability for opportunity and vice versa. In the event that the group is not likely to take any kind of action, its capability for threat or opportunity decreases. Where a stakeholder is likely to become part of or form alliance with a firm, the chances for such a stakeholder to present opportunities is high while chance for threat is low. Carroll and Buchholtz's illustrations were centred on larger corporations/multinationals like Pepsi and Cocacola, Home Depot and Boise. Not much is known about this situation in small and medium firms. However, a few SME studies that were not necessarily focused on the issue at hand revealed some specific stakeholders that have something to do with SMEs sustainability.

Eniola and Entebang (2015) asserted that government through its policies, regulations, procedures and institutions can hinder and foster SMEs' sustainability. This is related to Shin et al. (2017) finding which revealed the benefit which government offer biotechnology SMEs in South Korea while some external stakeholders were found to have detrimental effects on the SMEs. Scholars like Lekhanya and Visser (2016) and Umidjon et al. (2014) made assertions that showed the importance of SME associations or Member Business Associations (MBOs) in tackling the problem of insufficient resources, product innovation and knowledge base needed for sustainability of SMEs.

Public-private partnership and other kind of partnerships which entail the involvement of government and other organisations (e.g. universities and research centre) are also seen as a necessity for a better performing SME sector (Natarajan and Wyrick 2011; Agwu and Emeti 2014; Umidjon et al. 2014). Buowari's (2015) qualitative study on factors required for small business sustainability in Nigeria revealed that employees, customers, family and friends, business associates, consultants and on some occasions banks played positive roles in the sustainability of the SMEs studied in the fashion industry.

In Manzaneque-Lizano et al. (2015) study (Stakeholders and financial distress in small and medium enterprises: An empirical examination), it was found out that customers, workers, suppliers and financial creditors were the most significant stakeholders that differentiated failed from active SMEs. Lekhanya and Visser's (2016) research found out particular stakeholders that were responsible for the growth and sustainability of SMEs in the rural part of southern KwaZulu (in Natal province in South Africa). The stakeholders included- customers, government (through tough regulation, high taxation, stringent policies and requirements for license), banks (through negligence, demand for high collateral and charges), business associations, consultants and local community (through lack of support and trust for the quality of the SMEs services and goods). These works did not focus fully on the stakeholder threat-opportunity conundrum in SMEs sustainability but their findings showed stakeholders that were implicated in the challenges faced by SMEs. The first step to surmounting pressures/risks and maximize opportunities in the business environment is the identification of the sources of risks and opportunities (Bekefi et al. 2008). This is the concern of this paper.

## Methodology

The study employs the descriptive survey design as it aims to discover the current situation in SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria regarding the stakeholder groups that threaten or/and offer opportunities for their sustainability. The universe of the study comprises 2,100 Rivers State SMEs that are indexed under different business categories in the database of Port Harcourt Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture (PHCCIMA). With Calculator.net set at 80% confidence level and 5% sampling error, a sample size of 153 was determined and a markup of 27 done, bringing the sample size to a total of 185. To select the 185 SMEs, systematic random technique was used to choose an SME at intervals of nine beginning from the first SME.

The instrument for collecting data is a 19-item questionnaire with 17 key closed-response items covering stakeholders that present different degrees of threat or/and opportunity and two open questions on the business type and location of SME. To ensure that the questionnaire had internal consistency, a reliability test was done using Cronbach's Alpha method and a very high reliability score of 9.90 was attained. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to the SMEs' managers/owners via the channels of face-to-face, WhatsApp and telephone conversations as well as Email from August 2019 to January, 2020. Mean and Standard Deviation were used as methods of data analysis. A mean threshold of 2.5 was set for each of the items which were measured on a four-point Likert scale of - Very High Extent = 4; High Extent = 3; Low Extent = 2; Very Low Extent = 1.

## Results

Out of the 185 SMEs selected, 41 could not participate in the study. Hence, results presented are based on 144 SMEs that took part in the study.

Table 1: Local Government Area of operation of participating SMEs

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Port Harcourt City LGA	40	27.7
	Obio-Akpor	94	65.3
	Ikwerre	6	4.2
	Etche	4	2.8
	Total	144	100.0

Source: Field work August 2019 – January, 2020

Table 2: Business type/sector of participating SMEs

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Hospitality	38	26.4
	ICT	16	11.1
	Oil & Gas	20	13.9
	Education	16	11.1
	Shipping & Logistics	2	1.4
	Manufacturing	10	6.9
	Import & Export	4	2.8
	Engineering/Construction	16	11.1
	Environment/Real Estate	2	1.4
	General Consultancy	10	6.9
	Agriculture	2	1.4
	Health	8	5.6
	Total	144	100.0

Source: Field work, August, 2019 – January, 2020

Table 3: Mean and SD of opportunity and threat levels presented by stakeholders

S/No	Stakeholder Groups	Level of Opportunity for Sustainability			Level of Threat to Sustainability		
		Mean	SD	Rank	Mean	SD	Rank
1	Employees	3.5000	.74796	2 <sup>nd</sup>	2.5944	1.11743	3 <sup>rd</sup>
2	Customers/clients	3.6528	.62935	1 <sup>st</sup>	2.5472	1.11141	6 <sup>th</sup>
3	Family/friends	2.0889	1.01120	14 <sup>th</sup>	2.0000	1.08389	11 <sup>th</sup>
4	Host Community	2.6667	.90066	7 <sup>th</sup>	2.5583	1.05695	5 <sup>th</sup>
5	Member Business Organisations (MBOs)	2.7083	1.11490	6 <sup>th</sup>	1.7639	.98226	13 <sup>th</sup>
6	Ministry/Department/Agencies	2.6250	.95255	8 <sup>th</sup>	2.0278	1.12159	10 <sup>th</sup>
7	Government	2.7778	.96400	5 <sup>th</sup>	2.2986	1.18310	8 <sup>th</sup>
8	Larger Organisations	1.7222	1.12470	16 <sup>th</sup>	2.8889	1.03850	1 <sup>st</sup>
9	International Organisations	2.3750	1.10229	13 <sup>th</sup>	1.5556	.86726	15 <sup>th</sup>
10	Security agencies (e.g. Police, Vigilante)	1.5139	1.08380	17 <sup>th</sup>	1.7778	1.03400	12 <sup>th</sup>
11	Financial institutions	2.5694	1.04214	9 <sup>th</sup>	2.5028	.66184	7 <sup>th</sup>
12	Regulators	3.0694	.97989	3 <sup>rd</sup>	2.0694	1.04883	9 <sup>th</sup>
13	Suppliers	2.7889	1.02494	4 <sup>th</sup>	2.8889	1.09104	1 <sup>st</sup>
14	Media	2.4583	1.16999	10 <sup>th</sup>	1.5556	.86726	15 <sup>th</sup>
15	Competitors	2.4306	.94353	11 <sup>th</sup>	2.6111	1.18918	4 <sup>th</sup>
16	Investors	2.4028	1.25892	12 <sup>th</sup>	1.6528	1.00571	14 <sup>th</sup>
17	Activist/interest groups	1.8611	1.03513	15 <sup>th</sup>	1.5139	.80197	17 <sup>th</sup>

Source: Field work, August, 2019 – January, 2020

Table 4: Mean and SD of stakeholders causing the threat-opportunity conundrum

S/No	Stakeholder Group	Opportunity for Sustainability		Threat to Sustainability	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Employees	3.5000	.74796	2.5944	1.11743
2	Customers/clients	3.6528	.62935	2.5472	1.11141
3	Host Community	2.6667	.90066	2.5583	1.05695
4	Financial institutions	2.5694	1.04214	2.5028	.66184
5	Suppliers	2.7889	1.02494	2.8889	1.09104

Source: Field work, August, 2019 – January, 2020

Table 1 shows that the highest number of participating SMEs are located in Obio Akpor and Port Harcourt LGAs in Rivers State while the least come from Etche followed by Ikwerre LGAs. Table 2 shows that the highest number of participating SMEs come from the hospitality and oil and gas sectors followed by ICT, education and engineering/construction sectors. Table 3 presents dual results- the levels of opportunity and threat that the stakeholders hold for the SMEs' sustainability. The first part shows that customers, employees and regulators offer the greatest level of opportunity followed by suppliers, government, member business organisations, host community, ministry/department/agencies (MDAs) and financial institutions. The lowest level of opportunity is offered by security agencies, larger organisations and interest groups/activists followed by family/friends, media, competitors, investors and international organisations.

The second part of table 3 shows that larger organisations and suppliers pose the highest level of threat to the SMEs' sustainability followed by competitors, employees, host community, customers and financial institutions. The second part also shows stakeholders that pose the lowest threat level as follows- activists/interest groups, international organisations, media, investors, member business organisations, security agencies, family/friends, ministry/department/agencies (MDAs), regulators and government. Table 4 reveals higher mean scores of above 2.5 for employees, customers/clients, host Community, financial institutions and suppliers as regards both opportunity and threat levels.

## Discussion

The paper examined the levels of threat or/and opportunity that different stakeholder groups present to SMEs' sustainability in Rivers State, Nigeria while uncovering the groups that present the threat-opportunity conundrum. The findings of the study confirm the underpinnings of the stakeholder theory as they reveal the nature (in terms of threat and opportunity levels) of the stakeholders of Rivers State's SMEs while showing their importance with regards to the firms' sustainability. From the results presented, it was found out that larger organisations and competitors present high threat level with less opportunity to the sustainability of the SMEs. Following Carroll and Buchholtz's (2009) four-way stakeholder categorization, these groups would be labeled unsupportive because they have low cooperative capacity but high threat potential. And just like it was found out in this study, Carroll and Buchholtz (2009) listed competitors amongst stakeholders in the unsupportive grouping. However, larger organisations were not found in their high threat stakeholder category like is obtainable in the current study. This may be due to the fact that their categorizations were hinged on the experiences of larger corporations like Pepsi, Cocacola, Home Depot and Boise.

On the other hand, the current study found out that Member Business Organisations (MBOs), Ministry/Department/Agencies (MDAs), government and regulators created more opportunity for the SMEs' sustainability with less threat. Umidjon et al. (2014) as well as Lekhanya and Visser (2016) made assertions that showed the importance of MBOs or SME associations in tackling the problem of insufficient resources, product innovation and knowledge base needed for sustainability of SMEs. Shin et al. (2017) also found out that government offered great benefits to biotechnology SMEs in South Korea. This also corroborates findings of scholars like Natarajan and Wyrick (2011) and; Agwu and Emeti (2014) which presented partnerships with government as a necessity for a better performing SME sector. In the same vein, Lekhanya and Visser (2016) found out that through tough regulation, high taxation, stringent policies and requirements for license, government (which in their case included, MDAs and regulators) was among stakeholders that were responsible for the growth and

sustainability of SMEs in KwaZulu, South Africa. According to Carroll and Buchholtz's (2009) four-way stakeholder categorization, these stakeholder groups are supportive because they have high cooperative but low threatening ability. Nevertheless, the stakeholders that formed Carroll and Buchholtz's (2009) supportive class are different from those found in this study.

Also in the present study, stakeholders such as- family/friends, international organisations, security agencies, media, investors and activists/interest groups were found to offer less opportunity as well as less threat to the sustainability of the SMEs. The implication of this finding is that SMEs may find themselves sidelining these stakeholder groups thus losing out on the opportunities that they may offer in the nearest future. Rawlins (2014) tagged these kinds of stakeholders 'marginal' as they had low capacity for both threat and opportunity. Rawlins' (2014) marginal category had stakeholders such as unorganised workers' professional associations, interest groups composed of consumers and stockholder. These are different from the low opportunity and low threat stakeholders found in the current paper.

The study discovered the stakeholders that presented the threat-opportunity conundrum in the sustainability of SMEs in Rivers State. The stakeholders included employees, customers/clients, host community, financial institutions and suppliers. These groups of stakeholders, at the same time, presented higher levels of opportunity and threat to the sustainability of the SMEs. As such, these groups may be implicated more in the numerous incidence of failing, dying or failed SMEs in Rivers State. According to Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP) (2009), these kinds of stakeholders are in short supply. Confirming this, Carroll and Buchholtz listed only customers and employees as groups that may have both high threat and opportunity levels and tagged them 'mixed blessing stakeholders'. Unlike the current finding, Eniola and Entebang (2015) asserted that government through its policies, regulations, procedures and institutions can hinder and foster SMEs' sustainability. This implies that government can form part of the groups creating the threat-opportunity conundrum. Also contrary to the current finding is Buowari's (2015) qualitative result which showed that employees, customers and on some occasions banks played only positive roles in the sustainability of SMEs in the fashion industry.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study ensues from knowledge of incidences of failing or dying SMEs in Rivers State and around the world and observations of the tensions in the business world in which stakeholders may be implicated. The paper, therefore inquired about the levels of threat or/and opportunity that different stakeholder groups presented to SMEs' sustainability in Rivers State, Nigeria while uncovering the particular groups that posed the threat-opportunity conundrum. Hinging on the descriptive and instrumental dimensions of the stakeholder theory, the paper revealed the nature and importance of diverse stakeholders with regards to the levels of threat and opportunity they offer. Larger organisations and competitors were found to present high threat level with less opportunity while MBOs, MDAs, government and regulators created more opportunity but less threat for the SMEs' sustainability. Family/friends, international organisations, security agencies, media, investors and activists/interest groups were found to offer low opportunity and threat. Concerning the threat-opportunity conundrum in the SMEs' sustainability, employees, customers/clients, host community, financial institutions and suppliers were implicated as they offer high opportunity and high threat. The implication, thus, is that these groups of stakeholders may be more responsible (than other stakeholders) for the failure or death of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria. The matrix below is a graphic representation of the findings made in the study.



		Threat Level for Sustainability	
		High	Low
Opportunity Level for Sustainability	High	Employees Customers/Clients Host Community Financial Institutions Suppliers	Member Business Organisations Ministry/Department/Agencies Government Regulators
	Low	Larger Organisations Competitors	Family/Friends International Organisations Security Agencies Media Investors Activists/Interest Groups

Figure 1: SMEs stakeholders' threat-opportunity matrix

Based on the findings, it is recommended that:

- Agencies and institutions like Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) and Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) should organise programmes/schemes that will promote healthy competition amongst SMEs. This would help cushion possible negative impacts from other and larger organisation on SMEs' sustainability. This may also turn competitors and larger firms into groups that offer more opportunity than threat.
- International organisations such as the United Nations (UN), World Bank, European Union (EU), etc. and national institutions such as Bank of Industry (BOI) and central banks should redesign and monitor SME-support programmes to enable the SMEs feel their positive impact.
- SMEs need to develop capacity and strategies to effectively manage groups such as employees, customers/clients, host community, financial institutions and suppliers in order to maximize the opportunities they offer and minimize their threatening capability.

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