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Sustainable Supply Chain Management in the Mekong Delta: A Case Study of Agricultural Processing Firms

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Abstract

This study examines the factors influencing sustainable supply chain management practices among agricultural processing firms in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The research used a survey method, distributing approximately 220 questionnaires to processing firms and receiving 170 responses. The analysis identified factors affecting sustainable supply chain management, including mandatory pressure, mimetic pressure, standardization pressure, strategic orientation toward sustainable development, and humanistic culture. Based on these findings, the authors provide recommendations for agricultural processing firms in the Mekong Delta to enhance and strengthen sustainable agricultural processing supply chains.

Keywords: Agricultural products, Mekong Delta, sustainable supply chain, sustainable management, environment.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the concept of sustainable development has gained significant traction across various sectors (Sarkis et al., 2010). Sustainable firm development requires alignment with three objectives: economic efficiency, environmental protection, and corporate social responsibility (Twenty-First Century Leadership, 2005).

Environmental sustainability has become essential for business success. ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) is now a necessity for survival, not an option. International standards like those from the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) require transparency and climate action, making sustainability an economic necessity. Incorporating sustainability into decision-making and ESG reporting is vital, along with strong efforts to reduce and offset carbon emissions.

Global standards are increasingly demanding transparency and sustainability in business practices. Reducing carbon emissions and offsetting greenhouse gases have become more important than ever. Vietnam's involvement in COP 26 and COP 28 shows its strong and consistent commitment to tackling climate change. This creates both opportunities and challenges for firms, especially in the agricultural processing industry.

The Mekong Delta is Vietnam's largest producer and exporter of food, seafood, and fruits. It continues to demonstrate remarkable growth and scale in its agricultural sector, consistently maintaining a leading position nationwide. In 2023, the value added of agriculture, forestry, and fisheries in the region reached approximately 152.5 trillion VND, contributing a

significant 13.5 percent to the national total. The GRDP growth rate of the agricultural sector in the Mekong Delta remains strong, reaching 3.9 percent in 2022 and 4.1 percent in 2023, surpassing the national average of around from 3 to 3.2 percent for the same period. The region accounts for about 50 percent of Vietnam's rice output and over 90 percent of its rice exports, while also producing around 4.5 million tons of aquatic products annually, which is 65 percent of Vietnam's total. Despite challenges posed by climate change, saltwater intrusion, and riverbank erosion, the region is actively promoting agricultural restructuring, green and circular farming practices, and sustainable value chains for export. Investments in logistics infrastructure and modern post-harvest processing are also being prioritized to enhance competitiveness and meet new market demands. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Mekong Delta boasts immense potential and has many advantages compared to other socio-economic regions. Despite this promising growth, the agricultural and agro-processing sectors in the Mekong Delta face a critical challenge: fostering stronger collaboration among supply chain stakeholders. This gap is especially evident between processing enterprises and their suppliers.

Given the identified gap and the region's significant agricultural potential, this research aims to investigate and propose solutions to improve sustainable supply chain linkages in the Mekong Delta's agricultural sector. By fostering effective collaboration across the supply chain, the study aims to support the sector's ongoing growth and long-term sustainability.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical background

The research is based on the following theoretical frameworks:

Institutional theory offers a way to understand how the rules, regulations, and norms within a specific environment influence the behavior of individuals and organizations. According to North (1990) and Scott (2013), institutions shape the actions of firms through coercive pressures, normative pressures, and mimetic pressures. Coercive pressures come from external authorities that impose sanctions or rewards for compliance or non-compliance. Normative pressures are driven by social norms and expectations that affect organizational behavior. Mimetic pressures lead firms to imitate the practices of successful organizations within their industry or field.

The resource-based view (RBV) of strategy concentrates on identifying and analyzing a company's internal resources and capabilities that can offer a competitive edge. Wernerfelt (1984) emphasizes that organizational resources can take many forms, including physical assets, human capital, intellectual property, and organizational routines. By effectively leveraging and managing these internal resources, firms can achieve a strategic advantage over rivals.

Strategy-structure-performance (SSP) theory highlights the importance of aligning a company's strategic orientation, organizational structure, and overall performance. Strategic orientation reflects the broad direction of a company, including its goals, vision, and mission, as established by top management in response to the external business environment (Venkatraman, 1989; Voss & Voss, 2000). Organizational structure describes the formal arrangements and relationships within a company that support achieving its strategic goals. SSP

theory indicates that a good fit between strategic orientation and organizational structure results in better performance outcomes.

Contingency theory states that there is no one-size-fits-all way to manage an organization, and the most effective method depends on the specific contingencies or circumstances the organization faces (Woodward, 1958, 1965). Factors such as technology, organizational size, and environmental uncertainty can shape the best organizational structure and management practices. The theory highlights the importance of adjusting organizational strategies and structures in response to changing environmental conditions.

2.2. Research overview

Although sustainable development and sustainable supply chain management have been extensively researched, crucial underlying factors remain understudied. These factors include external pressures and strategic orientation (DiMaggio & Power, 1983; Heugens & Lander, 2009). Additionally, within the field of supply chain management, there is limited empirical evidence examining the role of organizational culture in this context (Metters et al., 2010; Nguyen, 2018).

These gaps call for research aimed at strengthening sustainable supply chain linkages within the Mekong Delta's agricultural sector. This study seeks to identify key challenges and suggest solutions for developing a more resilient and sustainable agricultural supply chain network in the region. Its goals focus on exploring how agrifirms prioritize the social aspect of sustainability throughout their supply chains.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research hypothesis and model

3.1.1. Quantitative research

The quantitative research aims to synthesize theoretical frameworks, develop a system of hypotheses and expectations, and propose a theoretical model. It also builds upon previous studies and group discussions to create an original measurement scale. An exploratory research study then follows, using in-depth interviews with 10 agrifirms in the Mekong Delta to test the model and eliminate irrelevant variables for the region. Additionally, this qualitative approach helps evaluate, compare, and select measurement scales for the variables. Based on these findings, the author finalizes the formal model and presents the following hypotheses. Mandatory pressure comes from government rules or influential organizations such as major customers or parent firms (Liu et al., 2010). It is the most important factor that influences firms to adopt sustainable management practices or solutions (Nawrocka et al., 2009; Defee et al., 2009). If a company does not follow government regulations, regulatory agencies may enforce various measures, which can not only lead to costs for resolution but also harm the company's brand and reputation, potentially damaging customer relationships (Sarkis et al., 2010). Likewise, if a company fails to meet legal requirements or contractual obligations with customers and parent firms, it risks losing those relationships (Gelderman et al., 2008). Based on these points, the research hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H1: Mandatory pressure has a positive impact on sustainable supply chain management.

Mimetic pressure generally occurs when leading competitors successfully innovate (Liu et al., 2010). Emulating rivals helps firms lower risks because those sustainable initiatives or solutions have already been applied and tested in practice. Investing substantial capital in managing new activities or solutions for sustainable development without clearly defined benefits can create many risks for the business (Perez-Batres et al., 2011). Based on these points, the research hypothesis is proposed as follows: H2: Mimetic pressure has a positive impact on sustainable supply chain management.

Standardization pressure comes from the expectations of suppliers, trade associations, labor unions, and non-governmental organizations. These groups often require firms to adopt innovative activities or sustainable management practices beyond the coercive or mimetic pressures mentioned earlier. Normative pressures generally relate to environmental and social issues (Liu et al., 2010). Based on these points, the research hypothesis is proposed as follows: H3: Standardization pressure has a positive impact on sustainable supply chain management. The strategic orientation is a topic that has consistently attracted the attention of many researchers and firms across various fields and industries. The SSP theoretical framework is extensively used in strategic management. Chandler (1962) and William (1975) examined the relationship between strategy, organizational structure, implementation solutions, and business outcomes. Based on these points, the research hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H4: Sustainable development strategic orientation has a positive impact on sustainable supply chain management. There are different types of cultures, but some studies have shown that humanistic culture positively influences environmentally and socially responsible actions (Vuong, 2021; Wood, 1991). Humanistic culture highlights cooperation and solidarity, which boost employee loyalty, leading to higher labor productivity, better economic efficiency, and serving as a basis for sustainable development (Kalyar et al., 2012; Galbreath, 2010). Based on these points, the research hypothesis is proposed as follows:H5: Humanistic culture has a positive impact on sustainable supply chain management.

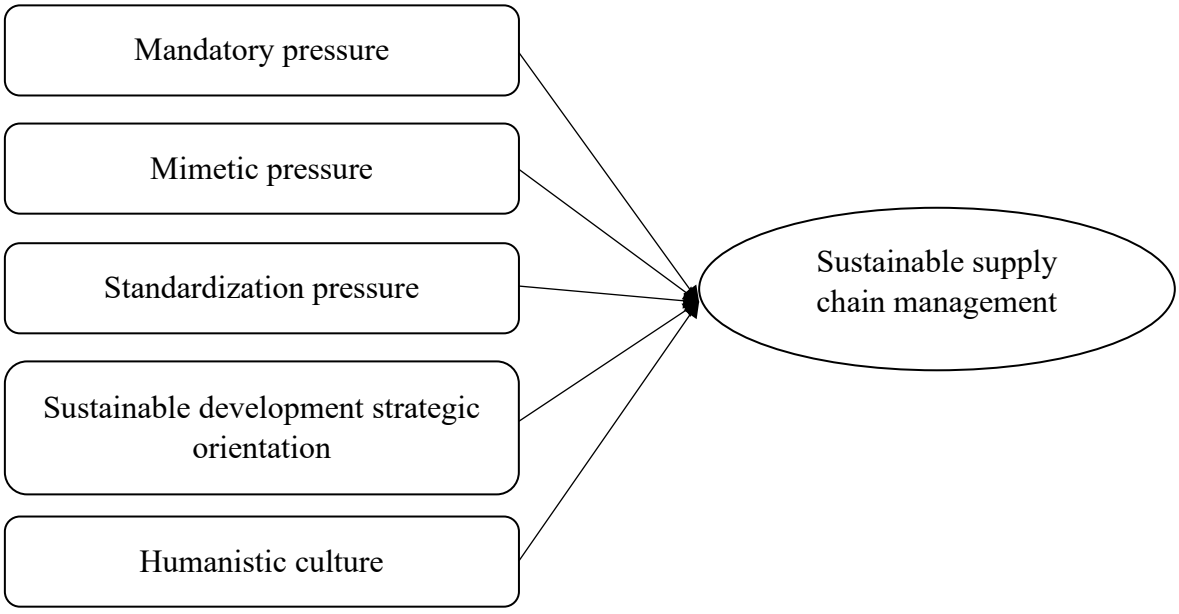

Figure 1. Research model

3.1.2. Qualitative research

Building on the insights from the qualitative phase, a quantitative research approach is used to carefully test the hypotheses and apply the findings to a larger group of agrifirms in the Mekong Delta region.

To gather quantitative data, in-depth interviews are conducted with a carefully selected sample of 10 agribusiness firms. These interviews explore the enterprises' SSCM practices, examining the impact of external pressures, strategic orientations, and organizational cultures on their sustainability efforts.

The collected data is carefully analyzed using suitable statistical methods, allowing for the testing of the hypothesized relationships between variables. The statistical analysis offers strong evidence to support or challenge the proposed hypotheses, highlighting the main factors influencing effective SSCM implementation in the agribusiness sector.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

3.2.1. Data collection

This study uses a survey method to collect primary data from agricultural processing enterprises in the Mekong Delta region. Specifically, questionnaires were given to the leaders and managers of these enterprises. The responses were checked and reviewed for completeness. Data was coded to remove any identifying or secondary information fields. Survey forms were created and distributed online through Google Forms, email, and direct delivery to the enterprises.

The survey focused on agricultural processing firms in the Mekong Delta. The sampling method was not explicitly detailed; however, it is likely that a convenience sampling technique was used, involving firms easily accessible to researchers. The survey was distributed through online platforms (Google Forms), email, and direct on-site visits. A total of 220 questionnaires were handed out, with 170 valid responses collected from employees and owners of agricultural processing firms in the Mekong Delta during May and September 2024.

3.2.2. Data analysis

The study uses SPSS 26 software to analyze the data, including the following analysis steps:

- Pilot survey: Conducted to test the reliability of the survey instrument.
- Data cleaning: Removed incomplete or invalid responses.
- Data coding: Assigned numerical values to categorical data.
- Reliability testing: Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient was used to measure the internal consistency of the scales.
- Exploratory factor analysis (EFA): Employed to identify underlying factors from the collected data.
- Multivariate regression analysis: Used to examine the relationships between independent variables (e.g., pressures, strategic orientation) and the dependent variable (e.g., sustainable supply chain management practices).

4. Findings

4.1. Reliability testing

The analysis results in Table 1 show that six scales meet the requirements for reliability and validity as suggested by Hair et al. (2010).

Table 1. Results of scale evaluation

Observed variables	Scale mean if Item Deleted	Scale variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item – Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Items deleted
Mandatory pressure: α = 0.893				
Man1	10.12	8.45	0.782	0.837
Man2	10.11	8.43	0.748	0.744
Man3	10.09	8.44	0.735	0.830
Man 4	10.13	8.40	0.738	0.828
Man5	10.15	8.42	0.742	0.826
Mimetic pressure: α = 0.814				
Mim1	7.83	1.93	0.647	0.800
Mim2	7.85	1.97	0.674	0.746
Mim3	7.86	1.99	0.728	0.738
Standardization pressure: α = 0.840				
Stan1	8.29	3.24	0.637	0.827
Stan2	8.31	3.20	0.700	0.831
Stan3	8.30	3.26	0.563	0.833
Sustainable development strategic orientation: α = 0.810				
Sus1	11.29	5.46	0.573	0.805
Sus2	11.30	5.45	0.648	0.802
Sus3	11.28	5.47	0.642	0.784
Sus4	11.27	5.48	0.528	0.764
Humanistic culture : α = 0.815				
HC1	12.83	4.56	0.728	0.814
HC2	12.80	4.60	0.674	0.803
HC3	12.82	4.59	0.600	0.755
HC4	12.81	4.57	0.513	0.783
Sustainable supply chain management: α = 0.854				
SSCM1	7.38	6.47	0.637	0.841
SSCM2	7.42	6.40	0.748	0.837
SSCM3	7.40	6.48	0.563	0.840
SSCM4	7.39	6.45	0.606	0.816

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

4.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

4.2.1. The results of the EFA for the independent variables

The analysis results (Table 2) indicate that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy is 0.836, meeting the criterion of KMO > 0.5 (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.836
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2482.388
	Df	482
	Sig.	0.000

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

Therefore, it can be concluded that factor analysis is suitable for the available data. Additionally, the Chi-Square statistic of Bartlett's test is 2482.388 with a significance level of Sig. = 0.000 < 0.05, indicating that the observed variables are correlated with each other and meet the conditions for factor analysis using EFA (Hair et al., 2010).

The results of the EFA analysis in Table 3 indicate that the independent variables in the rotated component matrix exhibit factor loading coefficients for the observed variables that meet the criteria for factor analysis, with coefficients of 0.5 or greater (Hair et al., 2010). Five factors are extracted, which satisfy the requirements for linear regression analysis.

Table 3. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Man5	0.894				
Man2	0.888				
Man3	0.849				
Man1	0.834				
Man4	0.822				
Sus2		0.839			
Sus3		0.817			
Sus4		0.790			
Sus1		0.783			
HC4			0.855		
HC1			0.837		
HC3			0.820		
HC2			0.815		
Stan1				0.898	
Stan2				0.877	
Stan3				0.857	
Mim3					0.866
Mim2					0.755
Mim1					0.750

	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.					
a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.					

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

4.2.2. The results of the EFA for the dependent variable

Table 4. KMO and Bartlett's test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.820
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	342.483
	Df	4
	Sig.	0.000

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

According to the test results in Table 4, the KMO and Bartlett's test shows that the KMO coefficient is 0.820 (0.5 < KMO < 1) and Sig. = 0.000 < 0.05, meeting the conditions (Hair et al., 2010). This indicates that the observed variables are highly correlated with each other.

Table 5. Total Variance Explained

Component	**Initial Eigenvalues**			**Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings**		
	Total	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative %**	**Total**	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative %**
1	1.937	75.384	75.384	1.937	75.384	75.384
2	0.738	10.452	85.836			
3	0.684	8.403	94,239			
4	0.562	5.761	100,000			

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

The analysis results indicate that one factor is extracted with an Eigenvalue of 1.937, which is greater than 1. This factor explains 75.384 percent of the variance in the data of the four observed variables participating in the EFA (Hair et al., 2010).

4.3. Correlation analysis

From the Pearson correlation results in Table 6, it is evident that the independent variables exhibit a positive correlation with the dependent variable, as the correlation coefficients (Pearson Correlation) of the independent variables and the dependent variable are all positive. The Sig. coefficients of the independent variables are all < 0.05, indicating statistical significance (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 6. Correlation test of the model

	SSCM	Man	Mim	Stan	Sus	HC
SSCM	1	0.536**	0.647**	0.473**	0.210*	0.618**
Man	0.536**	1	0.600**	0.263*	0.176*	0.475**
Mim	0.647**	0.600**	1	0.400*	0.362*	0.530**
Stan	0.473**	0.263*	0.400*	1	0.425**	0.364**
Sus	0.210*	0.176*	0.362*	0.425**	1	0.253*
HC	0.618**	0.475**	0.530**	0.364**	0.216*	1
*Notes: **significant at p < 0.01, *significant at p < 0.05*						

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

4.4. Regression analysis and hypothesis testing

The results of the ANOVA analysis in Table 7 show that, at a 95 percent confidence level (Sig. = 0.000 < 0.05), the theoretical model fits the actual research data. The independent variables in the model are correlated with the dependent variable (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 7. ANOVA Test

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	78.379	4	19.679	127.990	0.000
Residual	27.492	165	0.145		
Total	102.871	169			

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

Based on the analysis results in Table 8, most of the factors are statistically significant according to the regression analysis conducted in the model above, all impacting sustainable supply chain management. Specifically, the factor “Mimetic pressure” has the strongest influence on sustainable supply chain management (β = 0.503) with a significance level of Sig. < 0.01, followed by factors “Humanistic culture” (β = 0.400) and “Mandatory pressure” (β = 0.366), which positively affect sustainable supply chain management. The factor of standardization pressure also influences sustainable supply chain management (β = 0.116). Additionally, the factor "sustainable development strategic orientation" with Sig. > 0.05 has no effect and should be excluded.

Table 8. Multivariate regression results

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Torelance	VIF
1	(Constant)	0.647	0.490		4.583	0.021		
	Man	0.354	0.075	0.366	2.492	0.001	0.677	1.783
	Mim	0.482	0.074	0.503	2.484	0.024	0.733	1.849
	Stan	0.253	0.067	0.116	2.093	0.002	0.739	1.934
	Sus	-0.172	0.078	-0.188	-1.382	0.526	0.726	1.743

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Torelance	VIF
	HC	0.378	0.080	0.400	2.127	0.002	0.718	1.840
Dependent variables: SSCM								

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

Furthermore, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for the variables in the model range from 1.783 to 1.934, all below 2. This shows that the regression model does not violate the multicollinearity assumption, making the model statistically valid, and therefore, the factors in the model are acceptable. The standardized linear regression model is as follows:

SSCM = 0.503*Mim + 0.400*HC + 0.366*Man + 0.116*Sus + 0.647

According to the standardized regression equation, the factor of mimetic pressure has the strongest impact on sustainable supply chain management, followed by humanistic culture, mandatory pressure, and then standardization pressure. The factor of sustainable development strategic orientation does not have an impact on the equation.

5. Discussion and implications

Theoretically, the expected outcomes of this study are to make significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge in the field of SSCM, especially in the context of agricultural processing enterprises. Firstly, this study provides a deeper understanding of the determinants of SSCM. It offers a comprehensive and nuanced view of the factors influencing SSCM practices in agricultural processing enterprises. It extends beyond the traditional focus on coercive and mimetic pressures by incorporating the roles of normative pressures, strategic orientation towards sustainable development, and human culture. Secondly, the study offers valuable insights into implementing SSCM within the unique context of the Mekong Delta, highlighting the specific socio-economic and environmental factors that influence agricultural business practices.

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for agricultural processing enterprises seeking to enhance their sustainability. The study offers practical recommendations for:

Agricultural processing enterprises should proactively collaborate with relevant stakeholders (government agencies, industry associations, NGOs, etc.) to understand and manage various pressures related to sustainability effectively. Emphasis should be on understanding how mimetic pressure, identified as the strongest influence, can be utilized alongside mandatory pressures.

Although strategic orientation itself didn’t have a direct impact on the model, sustainability should still become a key strategic element. It ensures that long-term decision-making aligns with sustainable practices, even if external forces initially drive those practices.

Building a culture that emphasizes collaboration, ethical behavior, and social responsibility lays a foundation for the long-term adoption of sustainable initiatives. Since

"Humanistic culture" was the second strongest factor, this highlights the importance of focusing on internal values and motivations.

Although standardization pressure didn't have a significant impact on the regression model, enterprises should remain aware of shifting industry norms and consumer expectations. It ensures long-term resilience and adaptability in the face of evolving sustainability standards.

6. Conclusion

This study explores the complex factors driving sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) in agricultural processing firms in the Mekong Delta. Using a mixed research approach, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the elements that affect SSCM practices, providing valuable insights for both theory and practice to improve sustainability in the agricultural sector.

The study examines the relationship between mimetic pressure, humanistic culture, standardization pressure, and mandatory pressure on sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) in agricultural processing firms in the Mekong Delta region, Vietnam. The results indicate a positive correlation among all four factors and SSCM practices. Based on these findings, the author offers several recommendations to strengthen and develop sustainable agricultural processing supply chains in the Mekong Delta.

For agricultural processing firms:

- Update Information: Processing firms must actively seek out and keep their information on government regulations related to environmental conservation, social fairness, and customer environmental standards up to date. They can be gathered through various communication channels.

- Knowledge sharing platform: Develop a platform that enables firms to exchange experiences and learn from one another. Promote the sharing of ideas and innovation with competitors and other relevant parties. It can help firms overcome challenges more affordably and with less risk (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

- Humanistic culture: Harnessing a humanistic culture to boost employee loyalty, reduce conflicts, enhance job satisfaction, and increase labor productivity, thereby supporting business growth (Kalyar et al., 2012; Galbreath, 2010). Humanistic culture encourages firms to engage in environmental protection activities, share export benefits fairly among stakeholders, and aim to help close the rich-poor gap, which in turn impresses partners and consumers and improves reputation in the international market.

For the Government:

- Development of strategy: Formulating a plan for the growth of the processing industry and agricultural mechanization through 2045. This plan should provide a legal foundation to enhance and implement policy measures, revise and add to existing decrees, and participate in relevant conferences. The government should establish a national science and technology program to advance processing and preservation technologies for agricultural products, tackle challenges related to mechanisms and policies, define the best processing investment models for each sector, and develop dual supply chain models (horizontal and vertical) among

processing levels, product stages, and key players like enterprises, small firms, farmers, and cooperatives.

- Science and Technology Program: Develop a national science and technology initiative to enhance processing and preservation technologies for agricultural products. Tackle obstacles related to mechanisms and policies; define the best processing investment models for each sector; establish dual supply chain models (horizontal and vertical) among processing levels, product stages, and stakeholders (leading enterprises, small firms, farmers, cooperatives, etc.).

- Guidance and support: Offering guidance, support, and supervision to help develop dual supply chains between firms and farmers. Ensuring harmony and efficiency among pre-processing, processing, post-processing, preservation, and fresh consumption activities, and so on.

Although this study offers valuable insights into SSCM in agricultural processing firms in the Mekong Delta, some limitations need to be addressed in future research. First, the sample size is relatively small, which limits the broad applicability of the findings. Second, the study only examines agricultural processing firms, so the results may not apply to other industries.

Therefore, future studies should conduct research with a larger and more diverse sample of enterprises to improve generalizability. Similarly, explore the factors influencing SSCM in industries beyond agricultural processing, and assess the impact of SSCM on the financial and environmental performance of enterprises. By addressing these limitations and exploring future research directions, researchers can further enhance the understanding of SSCM and encourage the adoption of sustainable practices across firms and industries.

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