

Incubation and local economic development interventions in rural spaces

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Abstract: The majority of startups fail in their early stage of existence; therefore, incubation is a method for assisting both local economic development and start-up business survival prospects for the rural spaces. While many conceptualizations focus on the physical facilities of the incubation, others emphasize the local economic development process or inputs. The incubation process is envisioned as a nurturing environment for the establishment of self-help groups (SHGs). The purpose of this study is to explore the interventions that were made in rural spaces for local economic development. The study was conducted in uMlalazi Local Municipality, within the province of KwaZulu-Natal, Eshowe. The high unemployment rate forced women to develop the agriculture, block-making, and poultry farming initiatives. In such communities, women pull forces and work together to make a living for their households through different initiatives and programmes. For this study, the self-help saving groups are led by the KwaZulu-Natal Regional Council of Churches (KRCC) coordinators and community facilitators that are funded by the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF). The SHGs are centred around the concept of ukonga "savings" which is an informal and village mobilisation savings approach which is aimed at providing financial access for the poor for the betterment of household livelihoods. For the intent of gathering data for this qualitative study, distinctive face-to-face interviews were carried out with specified individuals. The sample size for this study was 15 participants selected from various stakeholders within the local municipality. The interviews focused mainly on the organisational frameworks, activities, and roles that these self-help groups provide in each of the domains they serve. Utilizing content analysis, the data were examined. There are programs being implemented in rural areas to advance women in this local municipality. The study employs the stakeholder's theory and local economic development (LED) theory. The study's findings imply that rural areas face obstacles to local economic development and incubation. The findings revealed that there are activities that take place in these rural spaces as interventions for uplifting the standard of living.

Keywords: rural spaces; local economic development; self-help groups; local development

Introduction

Poverty, inequality, and unemployment are the triple challenges, that have plagued South Africa due to unfavourable economic challenges. The legitimacy, transparency, and effectiveness of the South African economy and governance have become questionable in the event of initiatives such as the 2005 Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA) whose purpose was to grow the economy [35]. The local economic development (LED) programmes placed in local municipalities are strategic initiatives that aim to support emerging entrepreneurs in proximity through business incubation programmes. Globally, business incubators have become a common machinery through which entrepreneurial support is disseminated [23, 26]. The concept of business incubation started around 1958 in the United States of America (USA) and has grown exponentially [15, 30]. This is evident based on what [23], asserted that business incubators became popular in the 1960s wherein government support to drive economic development, especially the scourge of unemployment. [29], further noted that business incubators became more popular, in developing countries, including South Africa in the late 1990s as various SME sector stakeholders required an alternate mechanism to support them through funding and technical advice to succeed. The government and various other stakeholders trust the incubation concept as the start-up machinery that yields positive results in curbing SME failures in emerging economies [30, 36].

The self-help groups (SHGs) which consist only of women in the rural KwaZulu-Natal in Eshowe, have organised themselves through the primary support of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) and the KwaZulu-Natal Religion Council of Churches (KRCC). The uMlalazi local municipality and the Department of Agriculture are the secondary support structures for the self-help groups in the region. All the support structures, i.e., The NMCF, KRCC, the Local Economic Development (LED unit of uMlalazi municipality, and the Department of Agriculture are responsible for the incubation functionality of the SHGs. The unstable economy causes a negative impact on businesses, and it is the stakeholder's theory that provides some support amid economic challenges. Start-ups face multiple challenges in their early stages, and some of the challenges are caused by the volatile economy, however, the local economic development theory encourages the deployment of resources to breathe longevity into emerging businesses.

Problem statement

The majority of startups fail in their early stage of existence hence the rural areas often face unique challenges, such as limited access to resources, markets, and skilled labour. The South African rural landscape specifically in the uMlalazi area lacks many economic activities that become the enabling factors in enhancing support and growing the economy. The uMlalazi local municipality's income is not adequate to provide strong support to the local start-up businesses but depends more on the provincial government for an economic boost. In the context of rural spaces, incubation programmes can play a crucial role in stimulating economic growth and creating employment opportunities. Business incubators offer an ideal environment for women entrepreneurs to overcome gender-related barriers [40]. While many conceptualizations focus on the physical facilities of the incubation, others emphasize the local economic development process or inputs.

Literature Review and theoretical framework

The difficulties that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa confront are discussed in this section. It focuses mostly on the adverse outcomes of the nation's regulatory structure, the lack of technical expertise among SMEs owners, lack of access to markets, insufficient finance support, and information asymmetry. These are the initiatives with an overview of the government's various initiatives such as ASGISA. One of the key components of socioeconomic development in many nations continues to be the expansion of small businesses. Medium-sized and small-sized enterprises have a crucial role in participating in socio-economic development, and this sector is acknowledged as the "engine of the economy" not merely in South Africa but also globally [10, 25, 44]. Inevitably, despite their importance, SMEs in South Africa continue to perform poorly [8, 43]. Existing research demonstrates that SME underperformance can be triggered by an array of variables [13, 14, 16]. Previous research has revealed that the regulatory environment in South Africa is impeding the operations of SMEs [6, 14, 34].

Numerous studies additionally found that a lack of markets exacerbates the country's SMEs' perennial inadequate performance [4, 14, 27]. According to [20], one of the primary explanations for inadequate SME performance includes a lack of market access. In response to the market opportunity issues for SMEs, the government implemented a number of programs, the most notable of which consisted of preferential procurement or set asides programmes [9, 42]. SMEs continue to struggle despite the introduction of such favourable measures. [6, 7], verified this, stating that SMEs, particularly those in rural areas, have found the application process to be difficult and have consequently stopped seeking finance from traditional banking institutions.

More incubators are required in the country to support and ensure that the SME sector achieves its full potential in terms of job generation and socioeconomic growth. This remark gives the idea that incubated SMEs outperform non-incubated enterprises in terms of performance and survival. However, no empirical study has been carried out in the South African setting to investigate this notion. In the following part, we discussed the significance of incubators in tackling South Africa's present condition of high failure rates for small businesses. According to [29], the adoption of the business incubation concept has acquired significance and is currently spreading throughout the world. The concept has been widely employed in developing nations over the last two decades to help SMEs and upscale survivalist operations into sustainable businesses [5, 30, 33]. According to [10], the incubation concept has changed over time and is now focused on networks or linkages created through facilitation, mediation, and brokerage that support beneficiaries in gaining legitimacy, access to new resources, and access to applicable information. Traditionally, incubators were considered as a building that harboured start-up or emerging enterprises; now, many incubators have gone 'virtual,' with some incubators now providing support to small businesses that are located off-site [37]. According to [30], business incubation is an umbrella term that encompasses all forms of incubators. They vary from product or sector specific to general incubators, but their common goal is to encourage and support entrepreneurs in their most vulnerable stages and ultimately achieve sustainable growth [33].

SMEs can obtain business management skills, access to funding, flexible and low-cost infrastructure, access to information, and other administrative support services through business incubation [2, 5, 37]. SMEs are provided with meaningful value-added support through business incubation to facilitate their success and therefore avert possible failure [39]. Previous studies stated that business incubators in impoverished nations are not as effective as they ought to be, particularly in terms of embedding innovation and creativity in SMEs [15, 18]. According to [23], the prevailing failure rate among SMEs is inconsistent with claims of high success rates among incubated SMEs in South Africa. Previous research has found that regardless of the duration spent in the program, business incubation is not significantly linked to enhanced sales and employment growth for recipients [5, 33]. According to [38], this could be because government support programs such as incubators are not effectively linked to the actual needs of the entrepreneurs. This study employed the stakeholders and LED theories.

Theoretical framework

Two theories viz., the stakeholders' theory and the local economic development (LED) theory have been identified to align significantly with the incubation and local economic development in the rural spaces. The difficulties faced by start-up businesses with minimal and no economic support pose a threat to business sustenance, hence the two theories embrace the trajectory of business support and development.

Stakeholders Theory

The unstable economy causes a negative impact on businesses, and it is the stakeholder's theory that provides some support amid economic challenges. SMEs have a responsibility to all stakeholders whom they directly or indirectly work with. The theory argues that a company's long-term success is closely tied. The stakeholders include the employees, suppliers, clients, communities, and the environment. Some needs of the communities depend not only on the government, but SMEs have multiple responsibilities viz engaging in environmentally sustainable practices and health of the communities. Promoting ethical business practices, social impact, and stakeholder engagement can enhance SMEs' reputation, establish a competitive advantage, and improve long-term financial performance by building long-term relationships with loyal customers and reducing risks and costs associated with potential legal and ethical violations. This theory provides a solid foundation for SMEs to embrace incubation programmes by focusing on creating value for all stakeholders while demonstrating their commitment to socio-economic development, having a responsibility to stimulate economic growth, and creating employment opportunities. The provision of information should not only include financial or regulated information of a company but also non-financial or unregulated information [12] because, in line with the stakeholder theory. The community has a "right-to-know" about certain aspects of business operations and some startups fail in their early stage of existence hence rural areas often face unique challenges, such as limited access to resources, markets, and skilled labour.

Local economic Development Theory

Local Economic Development (LED) initiatives, except for South Africa's urban centres, where market-based approaches are more prevalent [32, 24, 31]. Given the apartheid legacy of inequality and racially organized economic exclusion [41], the pursuit of more inclusive development routes is becoming increasingly important in LED policy and practice. Over the last nearly two decades, most South African local governments made efforts to implement LED and embrace marketing as one strategic action, with variable degrees of success, and devoted [24]. However, in additional situations, local governments delegate the LED implementation duty to local development agencies. The research looked at the possible roles of agribusiness incubators in supporting entrepreneurship for local economic development in rural areas of the uMlalazi local municipality. In addition, the study gave empirical recommendations on the significance of business incubators in fostering entrepreneurship for local economic development. The facts about incubation are critical in developing policies and strategies for rural development and entrepreneurship support systems.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative method approach. This approach was employed as it allows for in-person interviews [28], collection and analysis of statistical data, and narratives from the participants. To gather accurate information from the participants, face-to-face interviews were conducted. Ethical considerations were observed during this study. As part of the University requirements, the project had an ethical clearance certificate. During this study the participants were interviewed on their own free will and informed consent [18] was sought, hence participation was not forced. A qualitative methodology is the preferred technique used since it allows for detailed and accurate

information from the participants, face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted on-site, (i) in the garden project, (ii) in households where the women stayed, (iii) in KRCC offices where administration and workshops were conducted, (iv) in agriculture offices in uMlalazi, (v) in municipal LED offices and (vi) the tribal authority offices. This was done to gain in-depth understanding of how the savings group functioning, perceived benefits [1], and to gain insights on interventions and support initiatives aimed at prospering the self-help savings groups.

Purposive sampling technique was used to select participants based on the knowledge they possess and can share regarding the different roles, activities, and involvement in the self-help groups [21]. Participants were also selected based on their geographical proximity within the community as well as willingness to participate in the study. A sample size of 30 participants was selected for this study and made up of different stakeholders such as the Self-Help Saving group active members, community facilitators, LED officers, Department of Agriculture Advisors, KRCC coordinators, and traditional leadership “*Izinduna*”. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in different spaces such as the project garden site, SHG households, KRCC offices, at the creche, Agriculture offices, LED offices, and Tribal Authority offices. This was done to gain in-depth understanding of how the savings group function, perceived benefits [1], and insights on interventions and support initiatives aimed at prospering the self-help savings groups.

An interview guide with a list of questions in line with the topics to be covered was prepared and translated in isiZulu by the research team [22] since not all participants were able to comprehend and/or be conversant in English. Prior to the interview sessions telephonic arrangements and email correspondence were made to establish dates, times, and venues. The research team travelled to the participants to conduct interviews. Discussions with the Self-Help Groups uncovered social dynamics that exist and led to deeper insights on the functionality and results of the groups. On the other hand, interview sessions with LED officers and Agriculture Advisors revealed gaps that exist in the provision of programmes and interventions aimed at supporting the self-help groups within the selected communities. During the Interview sessions, handwritten notes were taken, and a playback tape recorder was used. This was done to ensure that all the information shared was recorded verbatim, accurately, and stored correctly. Collected data was stored in two different formats, hard copies and digital. Hard copies are stored in a lockable cabinet while digital records are kept on a universal serial bus (USB) and external hard drive as a backup [17]. The digital records are password-protected. Collected data were analyzed using content analysis broken down into themes. From the content analysis, researchers were able to identify content and issues based on the open-ended responses of the participants as discussed in the findings. The study findings were aligned with the study's objectives.

Results and discussion

In the process of interviewing the SHGs, it is evident that women have experienced several hardships in acquiring resources for their start-ups. The SHGs have engaged in different types of businesses that have the saving mobilisation project. The women's initiative was realised by the traditional leadership who endorsed the work done by the women. The support included the allocation of pockets of land, granting them permission to plant their vegetables, small-scale poultry farming, and construction. [7], verified this, stating that SMEs, particularly those in rural areas, have found the application process to be difficult and have consequently stopped seeking finance from traditional banking institutions.

The KwaZulu-Natal Regional Council of Churches (KRCC) coordinators, community facilitators funded by the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF), the uMlalazi local municipality through its LED office, and the Department of Agriculture provided business incubation support to the SHGs. The incubation programme included the impartation of (i) technical skills in building concrete water tanks, block-making, home building, and maintenance, (ii) the accounting skill of bookkeeping to ensure the SHGs recorded every business transaction. Evidence of the incubation and LED function is recorded in the minutes of meetings and the quarterly reports are archived.

The challenges found were mostly on the inadequate support for SHGs and this is evident in the uMlalazi LED Strategy Review 2018- 2023. Difficulty in soliciting funds to execute LED projects and the lack of coordination between the private and public sectors is a problem. The municipality is currently understaffed with skilled officials to facilitate the LED programmes therefore causing low levels of skills development and training in LED and the wider community.

The shortcoming of the Department of Agriculture lack of communication, which impeded a broader spread of support to SHGs from other wards. Youth participation is very limited and the concern about the age of most women actively involved and lead players in the self-help groups are between the ages of 45 and above. The youth was not well represented, therefore causing a concern about the longevity of the self-help groups.

SMEs can obtain business management skills, access to funding, flexible and low-cost infrastructure, access to information, and other administrative support services through business incubation [2, 5, 37]. SMEs are provided with meaningful value-added support through business incubation to facilitate their success and therefore avert possible failure [39]. Previous studies stated that business incubators in impoverished nations are not as effective as they ought to be, particularly in terms of embedding innovation and creativity in SMEs [15, 17]. According to [23], the prevailing failure rate among SMEs is inconsistent with claims of high success rates among incubated SMEs in South Africa. Previous research has found that regardless of the duration spent in the program, business incubation is not significantly linked to enhanced sales and employment growth for recipients [5, 33]. According to [38], this could be because government support programs such as incubators are not effectively linked to the actual needs of the entrepreneurs. This study employed the stakeholders and LED theories.

Conclusion

In conclusion this study explored the impact of the self-help groups within the various rural communities that managed to rise above several social and economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, access to funding possibilities, lack of technical expertise among SMEs owners, lack of access to markets, just to name a few. Through all the adversities these SHG's have shown resilience and the ability to sustain their households. With the interventions of different stakeholders such as uMlalazi Local Municipality - Local Economic Development (LED) office, KwaZulu-Natal Regional Council of Churches (KRCC) coordinators, community facilitators funded by the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF), the Department of Agriculture and Tribal Authorities. The SHGs have received support to grow the projects despite the many challenges facing these stakeholders themselves. Working together on various projects the SHGs have developed ties that positively influenced their social lifestyles as indicated from the findings.

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