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COMMUNITY SERVICE | REPORT

Empowering Communities through SME Development: A Qualitative Study on Management Approaches

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates community integration in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) management strategies and its implications for sustainable development. The research aims to explore the management approaches employed by SMEs to engage with local communities, uncovering patterns and insights into their practices. A systematic literature review approach is adopted to gather relevant studies from scholarly databases, journals, and reports. Thematic analysis is utilized to identify recurrent themes and concepts across the literature, focusing on strategies, challenges, and implications of community integration in SMEs. The findings reveal that SMEs employ various mechanisms, including partnerships, stakeholder consultations, and inclusive decision-making processes, to engage with local communities. These initiatives aim to foster trust, collaboration, and mutual benefit, enhancing social capital and collective well-being. However, challenges such as balancing community interests with business objectives and resource constraints hinder SMEs' ability to invest in community integration efforts. Policy implications include the importance of recognizing SMEs as integral actors in community development processes and the need for creating an enabling environment to support their engagement with local communities. From a managerial perspective, SMEs should prioritize community engagement, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability to enhance their competitiveness and long-term viability. This study contributes to the understanding of community integration in SME management and highlights its significance for organizational behavior, stakeholder theory, and sustainability.

Keywords: Community Integration, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Management Strategies, Sustainable Development, Qualitative Research.

JEL Code: M21, O31, Q01

1. INTRODUCTION

The drive for community empowerment has garnered significant attention in recent decades, spurred by the recognition of its pivotal role in fostering sustainable development and economic growth. Within this context, the advancement of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) emerges as a critical avenue for empowering communities, particularly in the realm of economic self-sufficiency and social upliftment. This qualitative study embarks on a journey to delve into the management approaches employed in empowering communities through SME development, aiming to uncover nuanced insights and discern patterns that can inform and enrich existing knowledge in this domain. SMEs constitute a fundamental cornerstone of economies worldwide, serving as engines of innovation, employment generation, and wealth creation. Their significance transcends mere economic metrics, as they often serve as conduits for social transformation and community development. Unlike large corporations, SMEs are deeply intertwined with the fabric of local communities, leveraging indigenous knowledge, resources, and social networks to drive sustainable change at the grassroots level. Thus, understanding the dynamics of SME management in the context of community empowerment necessitates a holistic examination that integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

The focal point of this research lies in unraveling the diverse array of management approaches adopted by SMEs to empower communities. Such approaches encompass a spectrum of strategies, ranging from capacity building initiatives and skill development programs to fostering inclusive business models and promoting stakeholder engagement. By zooming in on specific case studies and qualitative data, this study aims to elucidate the underlying mechanisms through which these management approaches translate into tangible outcomes for community empowerment. Moreover, it seeks to identify contextual factors and socio-economic dynamics that shape the effectiveness and sustainability of these approaches across different settings.

The phenomenon under investigation encapsulates the symbiotic relationship between SME development and community empowerment, wherein the former serves as a catalyst for the latter while drawing strength and support from the community itself. This symbiosis manifests in various forms, including the creation of employment opportunities, the enhancement of local supply chains, and the cultivation of entrepreneurial ecosystems that nurture grassroots innovation and enterprise. Moreover, it encompasses broader socio-cultural dimensions, such as the preservation of traditional crafts, cultural heritage, and social cohesion within communities undergoing rapid economic transformations. Building upon the foundations laid by previous research, this study seeks to contribute to the burgeoning literature on SME development and community empowerment from a qualitative standpoint. While existing studies have predominantly focused on quantitative assessments of SME performance and economic impact, there remains a dearth of in-depth qualitative inquiries that delve into the intricacies of management practices and their implications for community well-being. By bridging this gap, this research endeavors to enrich our understanding of the nuanced interplay between business management, community dynamics, and socio-economic development. A range of studies have explored the challenges and strategies for community integration in SME management. Msomi (2020) identified factors such as lack of education and training, enterprise age, and government support as barriers to the integration of management accounting practices. Themistocleous (2004) highlighted the high costs and technology requirements as significant problems for SMEs in integrating their information systems. Bhinekawati (2018) presented a model of a large company's CSR and transformational community engagement strategy for SME development, emphasizing the role of knowledge sharing, finance, and market access. Chandra (2022) discussed the role of sociopreneurship-based communities in overcoming barriers to technology use in SMEs, particularly in the context of digital technology. These studies collectively underscore the importance of addressing education and training, technology costs, and community engagement in SME management strategies.

In pursuit of objectivity, this study adheres to rigorous methodological frameworks and ethical considerations to ensure the validity and reliability of its findings. By employing qualitative research methods, including interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations, it endeavors to capture the multifaceted perspectives of stakeholders involved in SME development and community empowerment. Moreover, it adopts a reflexive stance, acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity while striving to maintain analytical rigor and transparency throughout the research process. Ultimately, the objective lens through which this study examines the phenomenon of empowering communities through SME development aims to foster informed decision-making and catalyze positive social change. This introduction lays the groundwork for a qualitative inquiry into the management approaches employed in empowering communities through SME development. By elucidating the intricacies of this phenomenon, the research endeavors to contribute valuable insights to both academic scholarship and practical endeavors aimed at fostering sustainable development and inclusive growth at the grassroots level.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on community empowerment through Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) development is rich and diverse, reflecting the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of relevant studies, definitions, and specific explanations pertinent to the subject matter. By synthesizing existing scholarship, this review seeks to contextualize the current research within the broader theoretical and empirical landscape, shedding

light on key concepts, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings that inform our understanding of SME-led community empowerment initiatives.

2.1. Definitions of Key Concepts

Central to the discourse on community empowerment and SME development, there is an ongoing evolution shaped by contemporary research findings that further enrich our understanding of these key concepts. Community empowerment, as elucidated by Zimmerman (2000), remains foundational, denoting the process through which communities gain control over their destinies, resources, and decision-making processes. Recent research has emphasized the multidimensional nature of community empowerment, highlighting its intersectionality with issues of social justice, environmental sustainability, and cultural resilience (Campbell, 2019). Moreover, participatory approaches and grassroots mobilization have emerged as pivotal strategies in contemporary community empowerment initiatives. For instance, studies by Walker et al. (2021) underscore the importance of co-creation processes that involve community members as equal partners in identifying needs, setting priorities, and implementing solutions. This participatory ethos not only fosters ownership and accountability but also enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of empowerment interventions by leveraging local knowledge and social capital.

Inclusive governance structures have likewise gained prominence as catalysts for community empowerment, enabling marginalized groups to have a seat at the decision-making table and influence policies that directly affect their lives. Research by Smith et al. (2020) highlights the role of community-based organizations and social movements in advocating for inclusive governance reforms that prioritize equity, transparency, and social justice. By democratizing decision-making processes and redistributing power, inclusive governance frameworks empower communities to challenge systemic inequalities and assert their rights. Turning to SMEs, recent scholarship has underscored their evolving role as agents of community empowerment, transcending traditional notions of economic development to embrace broader notions of social responsibility and ethical entrepreneurship (Lepoutre & Heene, 2020). While SMEs continue to drive local economic growth and job creation, their impact extends beyond mere profit generation to encompass social value creation, environmental stewardship, and inclusive prosperity (Hockerts & Wüstenhagen, 2010).

In this context, innovative business models and sustainable practices have emerged as key drivers of SME-led community empowerment initiatives. Research by Jenkins et al. (2022) highlights the transformative potential of social enterprises and impact-driven startups, which prioritize social and environmental objectives alongside financial returns. By harnessing market forces for social good and integrating marginalized communities into value chains, these enterprises contribute to inclusive growth and poverty alleviation while fostering resilience and sustainability at the local level. Furthermore, digital technologies and inclusive innovation have opened new horizons for SMEs to empower communities, particularly in underserved and remote areas. Studies by UNCTAD (2021) illustrate how digital platforms and mobile technologies enable SMEs to overcome geographical barriers, access global markets, and engage with diverse stakeholders in novel ways. By democratizing access to information, finance, and markets, digital innovations empower grassroots entrepreneurs to leapfrog traditional constraints and unlock new opportunities for socio-economic development. The discourse on community empowerment and SME development continues to evolve in response to emerging challenges and opportunities, as evidenced by recent research findings. By embracing participatory approaches, inclusive governance structures, innovative business models, and digital technologies, stakeholders can harness the transformative potential of SMEs to empower communities, foster sustainable development, and advance social justice in an increasingly interconnected and dynamic world.

2.2. Specific Explanations and Frameworks

Numerous contemporary studies have continued to delve into the multifaceted ways in which Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) contribute to community empowerment, drawing upon a plethora of theoretical frameworks and empirical findings. Building upon Elkington's (1997) Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach, recent research has expanded the discourse on SMEs as agents of sustainable development, emphasizing the imperative of balancing economic prosperity with social responsibility and environmental stewardship. This approach underscores the interconnectedness of business success with broader societal and environmental well-being (Hassini et al., 2019). Moreover, emerging research has elucidated specific mechanisms through which SMEs empower communities, shedding light on innovative strategies and inclusive practices that foster economic resilience and social cohesion. Capacity building initiatives, such as entrepreneurship training programs and vocational skill development workshops, have gained traction as effective tools for enhancing the entrepreneurial capabilities of community members (Jansen et al., 2020). By equipping individuals with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources, these initiatives not only facilitate economic empowerment but also contribute to social mobility and human development (Maritz et al., 2021).

Inclusive business models have likewise emerged as a promising avenue for SMEs to create shared value and promote social inclusion. By integrating marginalized groups, such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities, into value chains as suppliers, distributors, or producers, SMEs can unlock untapped potential and drive inclusive growth (Rosati et al., 2020). Recent research underscores the importance of inclusive procurement practices and supplier diversity initiatives in expanding economic opportunities and reducing disparities within communities (Winkler et al., 2021). Furthermore, digital technologies have catalyzed new forms of community empowerment, enabling SMEs to leverage digital platforms and online marketplaces to reach broader audiences and engage with diverse stakeholders (García-Morales et al., 2019). E-commerce platforms, social media marketing, and mobile applications have democratized access to markets and financial services, empowering grassroots entrepreneurs to overcome traditional barriers to entry and scale their businesses (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). Contemporary research on SME-led community empowerment continues to evolve, driven by ongoing innovations and transformative changes in the business landscape. By synthesizing theoretical insights and empirical evidence, scholars and practitioners can glean valuable lessons and best practices for fostering sustainable development, social inclusion, and economic resilience at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, stakeholder engagement emerges as a critical factor in SME-led community empowerment initiatives, emphasizing the importance of fostering collaborative partnerships between businesses, government agencies, civil society organizations, and local communities (Freeman, 1984). By involving stakeholders in decision-making processes and co-creating value, SMEs can leverage collective intelligence and resources to address complex socio-economic challenges and promote sustainable development (Grayson & Hodges, 2004). The literature on community empowerment through SME development provides a rich tapestry of theoretical insights, empirical evidence, and practical implications. By elucidating key concepts, definitions, and frameworks, this literature review sets the stage for the empirical investigation of management approaches in empowering communities through SME development, as outlined in the research proposal.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In this section, the research methodology for conducting a qualitative study based on the existing literature will be outlined. The qualitative approach is chosen due to its suitability for exploring complex phenomena, such as community empowerment through SME development, in-depth, and gaining rich insights into the underlying mechanisms and dynamics. This section will cover aspects such as research design, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations.

3.1. Research Design



The research design for this qualitative study will be primarily exploratory and descriptive, aiming to uncover patterns, themes, and insights from the existing literature on community empowerment and SME development. A systematic literature review approach will be employed to gather relevant studies, theories, and empirical findings from scholarly databases, journals, books, and reports. The review will follow a structured process, including defining search criteria, screening and selecting relevant literature, and synthesizing key findings.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

The primary data collection method for this qualitative study will involve extensive literature search and review. A comprehensive search strategy will be developed to identify relevant literature using keywords, Boolean operators, and inclusion/exclusion criteria. Multiple electronic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus will be searched to ensure breadth and depth of coverage. Additionally, hand-searching of reference lists and citation chaining will be conducted to identify additional relevant studies.

3.3. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis in this qualitative study will involve a thematic analysis approach, focusing on identifying recurrent patterns, themes, and concepts across the literature. The analysis will be iterative and inductive, allowing for flexibility and openness to emergent themes. Initially, data will be coded systematically using descriptive codes, followed by the development of higher-order themes through a process of constant comparison and refinement. Triangulation of data sources and researcher reflexivity will be employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount in conducting research, even when utilizing existing literature. In this study, ethical guidelines such as ensuring confidentiality, obtaining permissions for the use of copyrighted materials, and accurately attributing sources will be adhered to. Additionally, efforts will be made to minimize bias and ensure transparency in the selection and interpretation of literature. Authors' affiliations, potential conflicts of interest, and funding sources will be critically appraised to assess the credibility and reliability of the literature.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion of a qualitative exploration of community integration in SME management strategies. The study aimed to uncover insights into how SMEs incorporate community perspectives, needs, and resources into their management practices. Through thematic analysis of the literature, several key findings emerged, shedding light on the strategies, challenges, and implications of community integration in SMEs.

4.1. Key Findings

The analysis of community integration in SME management strategies unveils several critical themes that underscore the intricate relationship between SMEs and the communities they operate in. Firstly, SMEs employ a myriad of mechanisms to engage with local communities, ranging from partnerships to stakeholder consultations and community outreach programs. These initiatives are aimed at fostering trust, collaboration, and mutual benefit between SMEs and communities (Smith et al., 2018). For instance, partnerships with local community organizations or NGOs can provide SMEs with valuable insights into community needs and preferences, as well as access to local resources and networks. Similarly, stakeholder consultations enable SMEs to gather feedback and input from a diverse range of community stakeholders, ensuring that their business practices align with community interests

and values. Moreover, community integration is deeply intertwined with SMEs' value creation processes, exerting influence on various aspects of their operations such as product development, marketing strategies, and customer relations (Humphreys & Schmitz, 2020). By embedding community values, preferences, and feedback into their business operations, SMEs can enhance their competitive advantage and market relevance while simultaneously contributing to local socio-economic development. For instance, SMEs may tailor their products or services to meet specific community needs or preferences, thereby gaining a competitive edge in the local market. Additionally, incorporating community feedback into marketing strategies can help SMEs build stronger relationships with local customers and enhance brand loyalty.

Furthermore, community integration necessitates a shift towards more inclusive and participatory decision-making processes within SMEs (Westermann-Behaylo et al., 2019). This involves involving employees, customers, and other stakeholders in strategic planning, resource allocation, and performance evaluation. By democratizing decision-making, SMEs can enhance organizational resilience and innovation, as well as strengthen social cohesion and organizational legitimacy (Bradach & Grindle, 2014). For example, involving employees in decision-making processes can foster a sense of ownership and commitment, leading to higher levels of motivation and productivity. Similarly, engaging customers in co-creation processes can lead to the development of innovative products or services that better meet their needs and preferences. Community integration in SME management strategies is a multifaceted process that requires proactive engagement, value alignment, and inclusive decision-making. By leveraging partnerships, embedding community values into their operations, and involving stakeholders in decision-making, SMEs can enhance their competitiveness, resilience, and social impact. Moving forward, further research is needed to explore the nuances of community integration in different contexts and industries, as well as its implications for organizational performance and societal well-being.

4.2. Challenges and Implications

Community integration in SME management, while offering numerous potential benefits, presents significant challenges that must be addressed to ensure its successful implementation. One of the most prominent challenges lies in the delicate balance between community interests and business objectives. As noted by Long and Fahey (2021), SMEs often find themselves navigating competing demands and priorities from various stakeholders, including community members, customers, investors, and employees. Balancing social responsibility with profitability requires careful navigation and proactive stakeholder engagement to build consensus and manage expectations effectively. The challenge of balancing community interests with business objectives can be particularly pronounced in industries where there is tension between economic development and environmental or social concerns. For example, SMEs operating in extractive industries or manufacturing sectors may face heightened scrutiny and pressure to address environmental impacts and community grievances (Gibson et al., 2020). In such contexts, community integration efforts must go beyond tokenistic gestures and demonstrate genuine commitment to sustainability and responsible business practices.

Moreover, resource constraints and capacity limitations pose significant barriers to SMEs' ability to invest in community integration efforts, especially for startups and micro-enterprises operating in resource-constrained environments (Bloom et al., 2019). Limited access to financing, technical assistance, and institutional support can impede SMEs' ability to implement sustainable community integration strategies and overcome barriers to entry. This underscores the importance of creating an enabling environment that provides SMEs with the necessary resources and support to engage meaningfully with local communities. Addressing the challenge of resource constraints requires a multi-faceted approach that involves collaboration between governments, development agencies, financial institutions, and civil society organizations. Governments can play a critical role in providing incentives and support mechanisms for SMEs to invest in community integration efforts, such as tax incentives, grants, and subsidized loans (Wong et al., 2017). Development agencies and NGOs can offer technical assistance, capacity building programs, and networking opportunities to help SMEs build their capabilities and establish partnerships with local communities.

Furthermore, fostering an ecosystem of support for SMEs requires addressing structural barriers and systemic inequalities that hinder their access to resources and opportunities. This may involve policy reforms to improve access to finance, streamline regulatory processes, and promote inclusive business practices (Munro et al., 2020). Additionally, initiatives to strengthen local supply chains, promote entrepreneurship education, and build social capital can empower SMEs to play a more active role in community development and integration. While community integration in SME management offers significant potential benefits, it is not without challenges. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from various stakeholders to create an enabling environment that supports SMEs in balancing community interests with business objectives. By addressing resource constraints, promoting inclusive business practices, and fostering collaboration between SMEs and local communities, policymakers, development agencies, and civil society organizations can unlock the transformative potential of SMEs as engines of inclusive and sustainable development.

4.3. Discussion and Future Directions

The findings of this study carry significant implications for theory, practice, and policy regarding the role of SMEs in community development and the importance of community integration in SME management. Firstly, the study underscores the vital role of SMEs as integral actors in community development processes, deserving of support and recognition from policymakers, donors, and development agencies (Mair & Martí, 2006). SMEs have the potential to drive inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and social innovation when provided with an enabling environment that allows them to thrive. Policymakers play a crucial role in fostering such an environment by implementing supportive policies, providing access to resources and financing, and creating platforms for collaboration between SMEs and other stakeholders. Secondly, the findings highlight the necessity for SMEs to adopt a holistic and inclusive approach to management that prioritizes community engagement, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability (Sachs, 2015). By integrating community perspectives into their decision-making processes, SMEs can enhance their resilience, reputation, and social license to operate. This not only mitigates risks but also enhances long-term competitiveness and contributes to the overall well-being of society. Practices such as stakeholder engagement, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and sustainable business practices are essential components of this approach and should be integrated into SMEs' strategic planning and operations.

Moving forward, future research should delve deeper into the dynamics of community integration in SMEs across different contexts, industries, and organizational settings. Longitudinal studies could track the evolution of community integration practices over time and assess their impact on various outcomes, including organizational performance, social outcomes, and environmental sustainability. Additionally, comparative studies could explore variations in community integration strategies among SMEs of different sizes, sectors, and geographical locations, shedding light on best practices and lessons learned (Bloom et al., 2019). By adopting a multi-dimensional approach, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing community integration in SMEs and identify strategies for enhancing its effectiveness and impact. The findings of this study highlight the critical role of SMEs in community development and the importance of community integration in SME management. By recognizing SMEs as key actors in driving inclusive growth and social innovation, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can work together to create an enabling environment that supports SMEs in fulfilling their potential as engines of sustainable development and positive social change.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the examination of community integration in SME management strategies sheds light on the complex interplay between SMEs, local communities, and broader societal contexts. The findings underscore the pivotal role of SMEs as integral actors in community development processes, deserving of support and recognition from policymakers, donors, and development agencies. By fostering an enabling environment that allows SMEs to thrive, policymakers can unlock their potential

to drive inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and social innovation. This necessitates the implementation of supportive policies, provision of access to resources and financing, and creation of platforms for collaboration between SMEs and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of SMEs adopting a holistic and inclusive approach to management that prioritizes community engagement, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability. By integrating community perspectives into their decision-making processes, SMEs can enhance their resilience, reputation, and social license to operate. This not only mitigates risks but also enhances long-term competitiveness and contributes to the overall well-being of society. Practices such as stakeholder engagement, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and sustainable business practices are essential components of this approach and should be integrated into SMEs' strategic planning and operations. From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study contribute to the understanding of community integration in SME management and its implications for organizational behavior, stakeholder theory, and sustainability. By highlighting the importance of SMEs as agents of social change and emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and community-oriented approach to management, the study extends existing theoretical frameworks and provides new insights into the dynamics of SME-community relations.

From a managerial perspective, the implications of this study are profound. SMEs need to recognize the strategic importance of community integration and invest in building strong relationships with local communities. This involves engaging stakeholders, aligning business practices with community needs and values, and demonstrating a commitment to social responsibility and environmental stewardship. By doing so, SMEs can enhance their competitiveness, resilience, and long-term sustainability while contributing to the well-being of the communities in which they operate. In conclusion, community integration in SME management is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity in today's interconnected and socially conscious business environment. By recognizing the importance of community engagement, prioritizing social responsibility, and adopting sustainable business practices, SMEs can position themselves as responsible corporate citizens and drivers of positive social change. Moving forward, continued research and collaboration are needed to further explore the dynamics of community integration in SMEs and identify best practices for enhancing its effectiveness and impact.

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