



Factors Affecting the Development of Small Medium Enterprises in the Niger Republic: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

The Republic of Niger has recently witnessed growth in young entrepreneurs in a wide range of sectors. However, many obstacles could impede the development of these entrepreneurs. This study examines the factors affecting the development of small-medium enterprises in the Niger Republic. Factor analysis was conducted using primary data provided by entrepreneurs. The results of the study showed that the most important factors for the development of small and medium enterprises in the Niger Republic was the "internal structure of the enterprise", followed by the "characteristics of the entrepreneurs", and finally the "external environment of the enterprise". The study concludes with some recommendations for policymakers and educational institutions to promote small and medium enterprise productivity and stimulate entrepreneurial enthusiasm among the youth.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, exploratory factor analysis, policymakers, small-medium enterprises, Niger Republic

1. Introduction

Africa is one of the regions of the world with a remarkable population structure. The United Nations (2002) reports that nearly 35% of Africa's population is between the ages of 15 and 24, while approximately 27% is between the ages of 25 and 35. The African Economic Outlook Report further states that 60-70% of the African population is between 18 and 35 years old, making the youth in Africa the largest segment of the population (OECD, UN and UNDP, 2017). While African youth is one of the continent's



most valuable assets, about 70 percent of young people live in rural areas and face numerous challenges such as food insecurity, poverty, and unemployment (Omoju and Abraham, 2014; and FAO, 2017). These harsh conditions have resulted in young people facing a critical crisis that has reduced their ability to provide for themselves basic needs and envision a future (Allen et al., 2016). However, the policymakers are aware that entrepreneurship could help to alleviate poverty in developing nations (Acs and Varga, 2005; Brixiová, 2010; Balamoune-Lutz, 2011). Therefore, Amin (2010), Balamoune-Lutz (2011), and Brixiová et al. (2015) indicate that entrepreneurship is of particular interest in African countries because it is an important source of employment, mainly for young people and women.

The Republic of Niger is a West African country, which covers about 1, 267, 000 km² and accounts for a population of 21,942,944 inhabitants in 2019. It is estimated that nearly 56.62% of the country's population is under 18 years and 47, 54% of this population has between 15-64 years (INS, 2021). This population could reach approximately 30 million inhabitants by 2030 (Luc and Vinayaya (2020) whereas the country is one of the poorest countries in the globe (Tchole et al., 2020). Agriculture and livestock make for 38.8 percent of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Niger Republic, while the secondary sector, including extractive industries, accounts for over 17 percent and the tertiary sector accounts for nearly 44.2 percent. Such conditions reduce the competitiveness of the economy of the country at regional and international levels (PDES, 2021).

The Niger Republic's employment policy attempts to alleviate poverty and improve living conditions through job creation. This ambition is represented in the African Union's NEPAD constitutive program act and the UN framework between the Niger Republic and various partners. Since 2008, the country has implemented a new plan to foster youth entrepreneurship through collaboration between the government and numerous partners under the national youth policy and strategy for youth entrepreneurship. From a policy perspective, the economy of the Niger Republic is dominantly informal, but the country presents numerous opportunities such as a large number of young people, historical and cultural potentials, and other key natural resources that can be used for the development of entrepreneurship (Niger Ministry of Youth Entrepreneurship, 2019). Nevertheless, many young entrepreneurs face a variety of challenges, including high illiteracy, a lack of entrepreneurial culture, access to financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and some socio-cultural constraints (Nagler and Naudé, 2017; Niger Ministry of Youth Entrepreneurship, 2019).

Most studies on entrepreneurship have been conducted in the bordering countries of the Niger Republic. For example, in Burkina Faso Porgo et al. (2020)

examined credit constraints in non-farm entrepreneurship decisions in rural areas, Sawadogo (2020) explored the occupational choices in the labor market and students' entrepreneurial intentions, and Song-Naba (2020) examined the strategies of women immigrants in the restaurant industry. In addition, in Nigeria Odumosu et al. (2020) studied social innovation and graduate entrepreneurship, van der Westhuizen and Adalakun (2021) examined the role of religion in inspiring rural entrepreneurs, and Omeje et al. (2020) studied the role of empowering youths in promoting entrepreneurship and economic diversification in Nigeria. Then, Douyon (2020) studied cultural and creative entrepreneurship in Mali.

However, just a few scholars in the Niger Republic have focused on entrepreneurship. For instance, Boukari (2019) studied the entrepreneurial strategies of the immigrant entrepreneurs, Dedehouanou and Araar (2020) examined the implication of household entrepreneurship on food security and Harouna (2020) investigate the determinant of the intention of the students for entrepreneurship. Yet, the factors of entrepreneurial development in the Niger Republic have not been well investigated. As far as the entrepreneurs face several challenges, their motivation and enthusiasm for entrepreneurship may dwindle. Hence, exploring such issues is critical since it gives significant understanding that can help policy and decision-makers to reexamine the current entrepreneurship policy and initiatives of the country. This could increase the youth's interest in entrepreneurship, which is a key element in alleviating poverty and youth unemployment, and therefore the development of the country.

The current exploratory study aims to examine the factors affecting the development of small-medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Niger Republic. Young entrepreneurs all natives of the Niger Republic were asked to indicate the extent to which some selected items grouped into three main factors; "*entrepreneur characteristics*", "*enterprise internal structure*", and "*external environmental of the enterprise*" affect the development of their activities. There was no thought given to the size or sector activity of the enterprises and the survey exclusively included Nigerien young entrepreneurs who own and operate legally registered enterprises in the Niger Republic.

The main questions associated with the objective of this study are (1) where are located most SMEs in the Niger Republic?, (2) what are the sectors' activities of these SMEs?, and (3) what is the size of these SMEs? , (4) then which factors affect significantly the development of small-medium enterprises in the Niger Republic?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Sampling technique and data collection

Data for the study were gathered from small and medium-sized Nigerian entrepreneurs. The study collected quantitative and qualitative data from online questionnaires distributed through several social media groups such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram by using convenience sampling. This enables data collection in various regions of the Niger Republic and from December 2, 2021, to February 5, 2022, 80 questionnaires were received. The survey questionnaire includes the characteristics of entrepreneurs (age, gender, education level), and the feature of the SMEs (location of the enterprise, sector of activities, number of employees). In addition, the survey questionnaire comprises 23 statements detailing the characteristics of the entrepreneur, the internal structure of the enterprise, and the external environment of the enterprise. The factor “*characteristics of the entrepreneurs*” includes the entrepreneurial culture and the academic background of the entrepreneur, the family support to the entrepreneur, other professional training followed by the entrepreneur, and the social relations of the entrepreneurs. The factor “*internal structure of the enterprise*” includes the initial funding, the number of employees of the enterprise, the professional skills of the employees, the infrastructure of the enterprise, the level of innovation of the enterprise, the business strategy of the enterprise, the social network of the enterprise with others enterprises, and the type of products/services of the enterprise. Then, the factor “*external environment factors of the enterprise*” include access of the entrepreneurs to the bank loan, availability of the inputs of the enterprise in the local markets, and the competition level of the products/services of the enterprise in the local markets. Also, these factors include the entrepreneurial policies and regulations in the Niger republic, infrastructure of the areas of the enterprises, non-financial support of public authorities such as promoting the entrepreneurs' products through exhibitions and different events to the enterprises, the access of the entrepreneurs to public institutions, the support of NGOs to the enterprise and, the governmental financial supports such as subsidies, bank credits or granted loans to the enterprises.

2.2. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to describe the characteristics of the entrepreneurs and SMEs. A 5- Likert scale consisting of (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agreed, and then (5) strongly agree was used. Accordingly, the mean and standard deviation were used to carry out the importance of each statement of the items related to SMEs whilst factor analysis was

conducted to explore the factors affecting the development of SMEs in the Niger Republic. Only the factors with an Eigenvalue greater or equal to one (1) were considered as significant (Luo and Deng, 2008).

3. RESULTS

3.1. Characteristics of the respondents and enterprises

Table 1 presents the characteristic of entrepreneurs and SMEs. It showed that most entrepreneurs were men (81.25%), most of them were aged between 18-30 years (53.75%) and graduated from University (80.00%). In addition, most SMEs (86.25%) were located in urban areas and were small-sized enterprises (95.00%).

Table 1. Characteristics of the entrepreneurs and enterprises

Variables		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Man	65	81.25
	Woman	15	18.75
Age	18-30	43	53.75
	31-40	26	32.50
	41-65	11	13.75
Education level	Secondary school	3	3.75
	High school	13	16.25
	University	64	80.00
Located area of the enterprises	Rural	8	10.00
	Semi-urban	3	3.75
	Urban	69	86.25
Size of the enterprises	Small enterprise	76	95.00
	Medium	3	3.75
	Large	1	1.25

3.2. Factors of the entrepreneurship

A list of 23 statements related to entrepreneurship was provided to respondents to indicate the importance of each one from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The mean and average of each one of the 23 statements (Table 2). The five top-ranked

statements according to the mean values are the availability of and inputs used by the enterprise on the local markets (Mean =4.010; S.D=1.164), the social network of the entrepreneur (Mean=4.080; S.D=1.220), the easy access to the public institutions related to entrepreneurship (Mean= 3.900; S.D=1.026), the initial fund of the entrepreneur (Mean=3.760; S.D=0.931), and the promotion of the products and services of the enterprise by public institutions through various events such as fairs and exhibitions (Mean=3.480; S.D=1.079).

Table 2. Factors of the entrepreneurship

Statements	Mean	S. D
The entrepreneurial culture of the entrepreneur	3.00	1.35
The academic background of the entrepreneur	3.05	1.221
The family support to the entrepreneurs	3.05	1.386
Other professional training followed by the entrepreneur	3.00	1.414
The entrepreneurial culture of the entrepreneur	2.95	1.2
The social network of the entrepreneur	4.08	1.22
The access of the entrepreneur to the bank loan	3.3	1.184
The availability of the inputs used by the enterprise in the local markets	4.01	1.164
The level of competition toward the products/services of the enterprise	3.23	1.043
The national policies, regulations, and measures on the entrepreneurship in the Niger Republic	3.31	1.109
The infrastructure of the located area of the enterprise	3.33	1.31
The promotion of the products and services of the enterprise by public institutions through various events such as fairs and exhibitions	3.48	1.079
The easy access of the entrepreneur to the public institutions	3.9	1.026
The support of NGOs to the enterprises in the Niger Republic	3.2	1.306
The support of the government such as subsidized grants, bank credits, or loans granted to the enterprise	3.13	1.296
The initial fund of the entrepreneur	3.76	0.931
The number of employees of the enterprise	3.08	1.053
The professional skills of the employees of the enterprise	3.13	1.363
The infrastructure of the enterprise	3.16	1.267

The level of innovation of the enterprise	3.21	1.26
The marketing strategies of the enterprise	3.14	1.28
The social network of the enterprise with other enterprises	3.14	1.188
The type of products and services promoted by the enterprise	3.23	1.273

S.D states for Standard Deviation

3.3. Exploratory factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the 23 statements related to entrepreneur development to reveal the patterns of the responses. Bartlett's Test of Specificity was conducted to examine the overall significance of the correlation matrix and measure the statistical probability that the correlation matrix has significant correlations amongst some of its components. With Approx. Chi-Square = 838.928, df= 78.000 and $p < 0.0000$ and Kaiser Meyer-Oklin (KMO) value of 83.6810, the data of the study are suitable for exploratory factor analysis. The factor analysis showed three main factor solutions; internal structure of the enterprise, entrepreneur characteristics, and external environment of the enterprise with each of them an Eigenvalue greater or equal to one (1) (Luo and Deng, 2008). With a total variance of 71.50%, factor 1 "internal structure of the enterprise" had a variance value of 40.744% and therefore is the most significant factor affecting the development of entrepreneurship. This factor included six items the infrastructure, the level of innovation, the marketing strategy, the type of products and services, the initial fund, and the social network of the enterprise with other enterprises. The second factor "entrepreneur characteristics" is explained by 21.92% of the total variance and includes 4-items the academic background, the social network, the entrepreneurial culture of the entrepreneur, and the family support to the entrepreneurs. Then, the "external environment of the enterprises" is the third factor and accounted for 8.835% of the total variance. It included 3-items the availability of and inputs used by the enterprises on the local markets, the promotion of the products and services of the enterprise by public institutions through some national events such as fairs and exhibitions, and the infrastructure of the area of the location of the enterprises.

Table 3. Factors affecting the development of SMEs

Factors	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Com
Factor 1: Internal structure of the enterprise				
The infrastructure of the enterprise	0.968			0.861
The level of innovation of the	0.952			0.889

enterprise				
The marketing strategy of the enterprise	0.913			0.836
The type of products and services of the enterprise	0.884			0.802
The social network of the enterprise with other enterprises	0.812			0.744
The initial fund of the entrepreneur	0.701			0.623
Factor 2: Characteristics of the entrepreneur				
The academic background of the entrepreneur		0.89		0.757
The social network of the entrepreneur		0.864		0.744
The entrepreneurial culture of the entrepreneur		0.838		0.693
The family support to the entrepreneur		0.722		0.634
Factor 3: External environment of the enterprise				
The availability of and inputs used by the enterprise in the local markets			0.855	0.609
The promotion of the products and services of the enterprises by public institutions through some national events such as fairs and exhibitions			0.819	0.555
The infrastructure of the area of the location of the enterprise			0.655	0.43
Eigenvalue	5.719	2.97	1.473	
Variance (total= 71.50)	40.744	21.919	8.835	
Chronbach alpha (73.7)	0.951	0.894	0.822	

4. DISCUSSION

The study investigates the factors affecting the development of SMEs in the Niger Republic. The results showed that most entrepreneurs were young, men, and graduated from Universities. The enthusiasm of young men who have graduated from universities



for entrepreneurship could be explained by the fact that it is a means for them to escape unemployment. These results are consistent with those of Owualah (1999), Reynolds, and Curtin (2008) who underline that entrepreneurship is a career goal and a means by which young people can integrate into the economy.

According to the findings of the study, the majority of SMEs were located in urban areas. This location of the majority of SMEs in urban areas may be encouraged by the fact that such areas are more favorable to their development. Similarly, FLORIDA (2010), GLAESER (2010), and Freire-Gibb and Nielsen (2014) highlight that urban areas are important centers for creativity as the majority of innovative enterprises flourishes in such areas.

It was also noted that most SMEs were small-sized and focused on the primary sector such as agriculture and livestock. The concentration of the enterprises in these sectors may come from the benefits they obtain from the government as the Niger Republic has adopted a national strategy namely called *i3N "Nigeriens Nourish Nigeriens"* in 2012. This strategy states that agriculture and livestock are significant vectors for rural areas' development as well as national economic growth (High Commission for the 3N initiative, 2012).

On the other hand, the results of the exploratory factor analysis revealed that the "*internal structure of the enterprise*" was the most significant factor affecting the development of SMEs in the Niger Republic followed by "*the characteristics of the entrepreneur*" and then "*external environment of the enterprise*" respectively. The "*internal structure of the enterprise*" includes the internal infrastructure of the enterprise, the level of innovation, the marketing strategy, type of products and services, the social network, and the initial fund of the enterprise. The level of innovation of the enterprise could offer competitive advantages to the enterprise in the market vis-à-vis other ones. Likewise, Woolley (2014) mentions that infrastructures create business opportunities for enterprises, and Jogaratnam et al. (1999) stress that innovations are essential for the starting of a fruitful business. Besides, the results revealed that the social network of the enterprise with other enterprises is a key element of the internal structure of the enterprise. The social network of the enterprises could be an important means that connect them with resources and, therefore contributes to the productivity & growth of the enterprises. This result is consistent with those of Klyver et al. (2008) who underline that social network enables users to gain access to valuable resources such as start-up knowledge, business connections, and emotional support from their social groups. In addition, the initial funding reveals a key element of the internal structure of the enterprises. This could be because initial funding is required for the implementation of entrepreneurial activities.





In the same view, McCormick and Pederson (1996) state that initial funding determines the size of the enterprise better than any other variables.

The marketing strategy of the enterprises also reveals another component of the factor affecting the development of the SMEs; the internal structure of the enterprise. The marketing strategy encompasses the entire organization of the enterprise that contributes to client retention and increased sales of their products. Previously, Kenu (2019) mentions that marketing strategy is crucial to reinforce the share of the market of an enterprise and minimize the impact of its competitors.

The second factor affecting the development of SMEs was the “*characteristics of the entrepreneur*”. It includes the academic background, the social network, the entrepreneurial culture of the entrepreneurs, and the family support to the entrepreneurs. Good academic background, social network, and entrepreneurial culture could inspire young people to be entrepreneurs. As most entrepreneurs in this study were university graduates, this could increase their enthusiasm for entrepreneurship, as Debarliev et al. (2020) state that university graduates tend to be more engaged in entrepreneurship. Equally, Wagner et al. (2021) indicate that Universities contribute to entrepreneurial cultures and environments. In addition, Acs et al. (2018) and Isenberg (2010) underscore that culture and human capital are essential parts of the environment that contribute to entrepreneurial activities, economic growth, and social wellbeing.

Another key component of the external environment of the enterprise is the promotion of the products and services of the enterprises by public institutions. Organizing numerous events such as fairs and expositions by public authorities could help the enterprises to promote their products and services and therefore, increase their visibility. Equally, Kantis and Federico (2012) mention that public policies are essential in creating the conditions for the development of entrepreneurship whereas Kantis et al. (2020) underscore that they play an essential role in improving entrepreneurial environments capable to stimulate the development of new and dynamic businesses.

The results of factor analysis also showed that the external environment of the enterprises affects the development of SMEs. The components of these factors are the infrastructure of the area of the location of the enterprise, the availability of inputs used by the enterprises on the local markets, and the promotion of the products and services of the enterprises by public institutions through some national events such as fairs and exhibitions. As most enterprises are located in urban areas, the entrepreneurs could easily access the inputs required for the functioning of their enterprises in local markets. Correspondingly, Audretsch et al. (2015) mention that business practices and



entrepreneurial endeavors are highly dependent on the physical environment and infrastructure of their locations. For instance, Ma et al. (2021) mention that reliable transportation infrastructure is vital for developing new business opportunities and creating business relationships. Faggio and Silva (2014) stress that urban areas represent market opportunities for the development of entrepreneurship and for starting a business.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study examines the factors affecting the development of SMEs in the Niger Republic. It revealed that the majority of entrepreneurs were men who had graduated from Universities and that the majority of SMEs are situated in urban areas, and concentrated on primary sector activities. Furthermore, the results of the factor analysis revealed that the "*internal structure of the enterprise*" was the most significant factor affecting the development of SMEs in the Niger Republic, followed by the "*characteristics of the entrepreneurs*" and "*external environment of the enterprise*," respectively. As a result, the results of this study have significant implications for public policy and decision-makers, as well as higher education institutions of the Niger Republic.

From the results of this study:

a. The government of the Niger Republic should:

1. Improve rural infrastructures such as roads, public markets, and other public facilities to increase the chance of implementing SMEs in such areas;
2. Support the SMEs by organizing more events such as expositions and fairs to promote the products and services and the visibility of the SMEs as well as to enhance the enthusiasm of young people for entrepreneurship;
3. Ensure the availability of important inputs utilized by SMEs in the local markets to sustain their operationalization SMEs.

b. The higher educational institutions should:

1. Consider entrepreneurship training to be an important component of their curriculum. This might effectively train and prepare the future graduates to be self-employed and therefore, reduce the unemployment rate in the country.

c. The entrepreneurs should:

1. Create social networking with other entrepreneurs to share their experiences and get mentorships that could help them to overcome the daily challenges they may face in their activities. For instance, creating an association of SME owners could help them to negotiate with the politics to access some facilities such as entrepreneurial training, taxes, and loan subsidies.

6. CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author declares there are no potential conflicts of interest for the study, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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