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Empowering economic and community development through entrepreneurial leadership networks

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Abstract

This paper considers how civil society organisations, as a network, can empower entrepreneurial leaders and promote community development and sustainable economic growth. The research also investigated entrepreneurs' challenges and their ventures' impact on local communities. A mixed-methods qualitative research design and methods was adopted that combined qualitative and quantitative data-collection methods. The findings highlight obstacles such as limited access to finance, infrastructure deficiencies, and skill gaps, alongside the significant positive effects of successful entrepreneurship on job creation, social capital, and innovation. The study proposes a comprehensive framework for empowering entrepreneurial leadership, emphasising mentorship, network building between entrepreneurs and community organisations, and streamlined regulatory processes. Ultimately, fostering supportive environments for entrepreneurial initiatives aligned with community welfare can drive sustainable economic growth and holistic community development.

Keywords: Civil Society Organisations; Entrepreneurial Leadership; Networks; Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

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1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship and innovation are the driving forces behind competition and societal progress in today's global economy, especially in the face of evolving work dynamics and post-pandemic realities (Shahare et al., 2022:92). In this context, civil society organisations (CSOs) emerge as the unsung heroes that play a pivotal role in fostering community development and sustainable economic growth, particularly through their unwavering support of entrepreneurial leaders. This research aims to fill a gap in the existing body of knowledge by delving into the dynamics between CSOs and entrepreneurial leaders, and how they can collectively empower each other to promote community development and sustainable economic growth. The insights from this study can be instrumental in crafting strategies that bolster local economies and enhance community welfare.

South Africa faces significant socio-economic challenges, including grappling with high poverty rates and alarming youth unemployment figures, which underscore the urgency of effective community development initiatives such as fostering entrepreneurial endeavours (Manyaka-Boshielo, 2017:1). Entrepreneurship is a vital pathway for economic revitalisation, yet many entrepreneurs encounter obstacles such as limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure, and skill gaps. This research explored how CSOs, functioning as a network, can empower entrepreneurial leaders and drive community development and sustainable economic growth. (Sagar et al., 2023:5941; Acs et al., 2008:219).

CSOs have been recognised for their diverse roles in advocating for economic advancement, governance, and human capital development, particularly in South Africa. They empower communities through various initiatives, including petty trading and other forms of entrepreneurship (Kamara et al., 2022:6).

This research explored how CSOs, functioning as a network, can empower entrepreneurial leaders and drive community development and sustainable economic growth. By examining the pivotal role of CSOs in supporting entrepreneurial leaders, this study aimed to provide valuable insight into developing effective strategies for entrepreneurial support. These strategies could prove crucial for achieving broader economic and social benefits, which will ultimately enhance community development and promote sustainable economic growth.

The research aim to address four research objectives. Firstly, the study aims to explore the obstacles that hinder entrepreneurial success, focusing on access to finance, infrastructure deficiencies, and skill gaps. Secondly, it investigates the broader social and economic effects of entrepreneurship, including job creation, social capital enhancement, and innovation. Furthermore, it aims to understand how CSOs, as part of a network, contribute to the empowerment of entrepreneurial leaders and facilitate community development and economic growth. Lastly, based on the findings, the study seeks to develop a framework that emphasises mentorship, network building between entrepreneurs and community organisations, and streamlined regulatory processes to create a conducive environment for entrepreneurial initiatives.

2. Literature review

The rapidly evolving global landscape demands adaptability from organisations and communities, which necessitates a blend of leadership and entrepreneurial qualities. Simply relying on one set of characteristics is insufficient for sustained growth and success. Thriving in this environment requires pursuing opportunities, embracing risk and innovation, and achieving excellence (Pauceanu et al., 2021:1-2).

South Africa has seen a decline in entrepreneurial activities compared to other developing nations, despite small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) being recognised as vital contributors to economic growth in both developing and established economies (Chinomona and Maziriri, 2015:837; Mhlongo and Daya, 2023:1). Research also indicates a high failure rate of SMMEs in South Africa, ranging from 60% to 80% within the first two years of operation, which is attributed to an unfavourable entrepreneurial environment that is characterised by burdensome regulations, high labour costs, limited funding, economic challenges, municipal expenses, poor service delivery, and heightened competition (Mhlongo and Daya, 2023:2). The high failure rate of SMMEs in South Africa, which poses a significant challenge to economic revitalisation and poverty alleviation efforts, underscores the critical role of CSOs in supporting community development. While CSOs aim to empower entrepreneurs, the systemic barriers faced by SMMEs—such as limited access to funding, burdensome regulations, and inadequate mentorship—threaten the sustainability of these efforts. By addressing these challenges, CSOs can help reduce the failure rates of SMMEs, thereby contributing to long-term economic growth and community welfare. This alignment with the study's focus on CSOs highlights their importance within the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem, as improving SMME survival rates through targeted support can lead to more stable and prosperous communities.

Accessing support remains a challenge for South African entrepreneurs, with the country ranked low in terms of government support and facing significant regulatory barriers according to a GEMstudy (National Youth Development Agency [NYDA], 2019/2020:6). Despite efforts, the entrepreneurial sector's impact on the National Development Plan is not reaching desired levels, with stagnant revenue growth and limited employment opportunities, which typically average between two and four individuals per enterprise (NYDA, 2019/2020:6).

2.1. Entrepreneurship

Most economics, psychology, and sociology research emphasise that entrepreneurship should be viewed as a dynamic process, not a fixed or unchanging concept. According to Vosloo (1994:147), an entrepreneur can be seen as someone who maximises opportunities when defining their role “as a person who has the ability to explore the environment, identify opportunities for improvement, mobilise resources and implement action to maximise those opportunities”. Entrepreneurship therefore fundamentally represents a behavioural trait inherent in an individual. Entrepreneurs might demonstrate this trait only during a particular stage of their professional journey or in connection with specific undertakings (Carree and Thurik, 2002:4-5). Numerous definitions of entrepreneurship exist; some view it as the effective organisation of processes, while others see it as the cultivation of a specific mindset and the development of skills. Nevertheless, the ultimate objective of entrepreneurship is to create employment opportunities and to foster economic growth (Diandra and Azmy, 2020:236).

2.2. Entrepreneurial leadership and entrepreneurial ecosystem

According to Mescon and Khedouri (1988:464), leadership represents “the capability to exert influence on individuals and groups, directing their efforts towards achieving the organisation's [or community's] goals”. According to Koontz and Donnell (1980:490), leadership involves guiding and motivating individuals to willingly dedicate their full efforts towards achieving shared objectives. Lastly, Stogdill (1974:42) defines

leadership as “an influencing process of the activities of an organised group in its efforts towards establishing and achieving the goal”.

Entrepreneurial leadership is a potent leadership skill and a fundamental factor in any enterprise’s prosperity. While the term “entrepreneurial leadership” is employed in some research, only a limited number of studies provide a comprehensive and precise definition of this concept (Roomi and Harrison, 2011:1). It combines leadership aptitude (potential) with the entrepreneurial mindset (spirit) (Ordu, 2020:199). According to Pauceanu et al. (2021:8), entrepreneurial leadership can be defined as influencing and coordinating performance toward the accomplishment of organisational [or community] objectives, which include perceiving...entrepreneurial opportunities. Entrepreneurial leadership should not be confused with entrepreneurship; rather, it represents an innovative and modern approach to leadership (Pauceanu et al., 2021:8).

An entrepreneurial ecosystem, according to Mason and Brown (2014:5), can be defined as “a set of interconnected entrepreneurial actors (both potential and existing), entrepreneurial organisations (e.g. firms, venture capitalists, business angels, banks), institutions (universities, public sector agencies, financial bodies) and entrepreneurial processes (e.g. the business birth rate, numbers of high growth firms, levels of ‘blockbuster entrepreneurship’, number of serial entrepreneurs, degree of sellout mentality within firms and levels of entrepreneurial ambition) which formally and informally coalesce to connect, mediate and govern the performance within the local entrepreneurial environment”. Chinese entrepreneurs view social capital as essential for the success of start-ups, particularly in attracting investment and expanding market share (Yue and Rivera, 2021:505). Entrepreneurial activities do not occur in isolation but are part of a complex and interconnected system involving various stakeholders. Consequently, the term “entrepreneurship ecosystem” has been coined to describe the frameworks that govern how start-ups and entrepreneurs engage with other entities (Wadichar et al., 2022:1).

Understanding entrepreneurial leadership within the context of an entrepreneurial ecosystem is crucial because the success of entrepreneurial initiatives often depends on the interplay between leaders and the surrounding environment (Isenberg, 2010:3; Stam and Spigel, 2017:408). Entrepreneurial leaders need to navigate and leverage the resources, networks, and institutions within an ecosystem to drive innovation and achieve their goals. This interconnectedness means that fostering effective entrepreneurial leadership can enhance the overall health of the ecosystem, which will lead to increased entrepreneurial activity, innovation, and sustainable economic growth.

CSOs can play a significant role within this ecosystem by providing support and resources to entrepreneurial leaders. In doing so, they help to build a robust network of entrepreneurs who can contribute to community development and economic progress. This support includes mentorship, networking opportunities, and advocacy for a more conducive regulatory environment, which are all essential for empowering entrepreneurial leaders and fostering a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem.

2.3. Community development

The concept of community development has likely existed since communities were formed. Many scholars credit the formalisation of community development as a discipline and profession to efforts after World War

II, which focused on rebuilding and improving less-developed nations (Phillips and Pittman, 2015:3). Over time, the community development field has undergone various interpretations and evolving definitions.

As Williams (1976:65) notes, the term “community” remains a “warmly persuasive word ... [that] never seems to be used unfavourably”. It has similar connotations to the more modern, and currently popular, term “social capital”, first coined by Hanifan (1916 in Gilchrist, 2009:8), who described it as “those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people, namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit”. Putnam (2000:19) describes social capital as the “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” that are created and maintained through voluntary associations, civic life, and community activity.

Community development can be defined as “a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, equality, economic opportunity, and social justice through the organisation, education, and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings” (Taylor et al., 2021:1).

As its name suggests, community development aims to improve communities as a means to enhance the overall quality of life, foster a more fulfilling human existence, and facilitate the inclusion of marginalised groups in society (Havasi, 2020:196). Community development should have a dual nature, comprising both a process and an outcome. A concise yet comprehensive definition of community development can therefore be articulated as follows: As a process, it involves nurturing and enhancing the ability to work together collectively, and, as an outcome, it encompasses (1) participating in collective initiatives and (2) the results of those efforts to improve various aspects within a community that span physical, environmental, cultural, social, political, economic, and more (Phillips and Pittman, 2015:6). In defining community development, contemporary scholars like Smith et al. (2023) emphasise the need for a more holistic approach that incorporates elements of environmental sustainability and economic equity. They suggest that community development should not only aim to improve physical infrastructure but also focus on building the capacities of individuals and groups to engage in meaningful civic activities, such as entrepreneurship, that drive long-term societal benefits.

Community development is intrinsically linked to the empowerment of entrepreneurial leaders through CSOs. The role of CSOs in community development has gained renewed attention. Recent research by Johnson and Ortega (2024) points out that CSOs are increasingly seen as pivotal actors in empowering entrepreneurial leaders, particularly in underdeveloped regions. These organisations provide the necessary support structures, such as mentorship and access to funding, that enable entrepreneurs to contribute effectively to community welfare and economic growth. Empowered entrepreneurial leaders can drive initiatives that create jobs, foster innovation, and build social capital within their communities. The presence of a supportive network of CSOs can amplify these efforts by ensuring that entrepreneurial activities are aligned with community welfare and sustainable growth.

2.4. Economic development

Economic development, which is defined as transforming economies through advanced technologies to enhance productivity and living standards, involves infrastructure and institutional improvements (Panth,

2020:1). Growth, synonymous with development, impacts broader societal aspects (Van den Berg, 2017:7). However, Blair (1995:14) notes that growth alone may not consistently improve quality of life, which calls for comprehensive economic development efforts. The Department for International Development (2008:2) stresses the role of sustained growth in poverty reduction and emphasises the need for policies that enable the poor to benefit fully from economic opportunities, which also drives progress towards the Millennium Development Goals of investing in education and entrepreneurship.

“Community development is ... a planned effort to produce assets that increase the capacity of residents to improve their quality of life. These assets may include several forms of community capital: physical, human, social, financial and environmental” (Green and Haines, 2002: vii). The American Economic Development Council (1984) defines economic development as “the process of creating wealth through the mobilisation of human, financial, capital, physical and natural resources to generate marketable goods and services. The economic developer’s role is to influence the process for the benefit of the community through expanding job opportunities and the tax base”.

These two definitions exhibit a clear alignment. Community development aims to create resources for community improvement, while economic development seeks to harness these resources to the community’s advantage. Both definitions revolve around the same community capital assets, namely human, financial, and physical (such as environmental or natural) resources (Phillips and Pittman, 2015:11).

Economic development is deeply linked to the empowerment of entrepreneurial leaders through the support of CSOs. Effective entrepreneurial leadership can stimulate economic growth by creating jobs, fostering innovation, and attracting investment. CSOs can amplify these efforts by providing resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities; thus, enhancing the community’s overall economic development.

3. Research methodology

This research was based on a mixed-methods qualitative research paradigm. single case study design was followed based on the AfriForum Sakenetwerk (business network) initiative. AfriForum is a South African non-governmental organisation (NGO) founded in 2006. It operates as a civil rights organisation that advocates for the rights of minority communities, particularly Afrikaners, within the context of South Africa’s broader socio-political landscape. AfriForum is part of the broader Solidarity Movement, which includes various organisations that focus on community support and advocacy aspects. AfriForum’s primary mission is to protect and promote the civil rights of its members. It seeks to ensure equal treatment and fair opportunities for all South Africans, focusing particularly on issues that affect Afrikaners. The organisation works across various domains, including community safety, education, language rights, heritage preservation, and environmental issues. AfriForum (2024) maintains that its efforts aim to ensure equality and protect minority rights within a democratic framework. An ethnographic design was used to document community member’s experiences of AfriForum. The research is based on a social constructionist research philosophy.

AfriForum Sakenetwerk is an AfriForum initiative aimed at promoting and supporting the business interests of its members. It functions as a network for entrepreneurs and business owners within the Afrikaner community and facilitates business development, networking opportunities, and economic empowerment. The primary mission of AfriForum Sakenetwerk is to empower Afrikaner entrepreneurs by providing them with resources, support, and a platform to grow their businesses. It aims to foster a strong and self-sufficient

economic community by leveraging the collective strength of its members. AfriForum Sakenetwerk aims to create a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem that can contribute to South Africa's broader economic development. By supporting the growth of businesses within the Afrikaner community, it seeks to enhance economic resilience and self-reliance among its members (AfriForum Sakenetwerk, 2024).

Qualitative data were collected from in-depth interviews with 10 participants, all of whom were entrepreneurs based in South Africa. The research instrument consisted of a self-developed interview guide to explore, analyse, and understand small and medium enterprise (SME) entrepreneurs' problems and obstacles in South Africa. Additionally, the research aimed to gather first-hand insight into the support and assistance needed from CSOs, such as AfriForum, to facilitate further economic and community development. The main aim of using qualitative data was to gather rich descriptions and explanations of trends and patterns. The interviews underwent thematic analysis, from which key themes were extracted. According to Kampira and Meyer (2021:4), a theme is recognisable and can be named, described, or categorised in some way. Consequently, there are no unknown or unidentified themes. Extending this argument, a theme is akin to an idea, which does not exist until it has been conceived, articulated, and expressed. Thematic analysis is a technique to analyse qualitative data by identifying and examining recurrent ideas, known as themes, within a dataset (Riger and Sigurvinsdottir, 2016:33).

In simpler terms, it is a way to look at the data collected from interviews or surveys and find common ideas or topics that keep coming up. These themes help researchers understand what the participants are saying and what the key issues or concerns are. For example, if several entrepreneurs mention difficulties with access to funding, that idea would be grouped under a theme related to financial challenges. The thematic analysis involves carefully reading through the data, noting down ideas that stand out, and then grouping these ideas into broader categories, or themes, that capture the main points. This process helps to make sense of large amounts of qualitative data by organising it into meaningful themes that reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives. The goal of thematic analysis is to make the data more understandable and to draw out key insights that can inform the study's conclusions.

Quantitative data was included to determine quantitative data to extract numerical trends. The quantitative data were collected through a closed-ended online questionnaire, which targeted 42 respondents. This approach allowed for the identification of broad trends and patterns related to the challenges that entrepreneurs encounter, such as access to funding, regulatory hurdles, and infrastructural deficiencies.

AfriForum Sakenetwerk was selected as the focus of this case study due to its unique position within the South African entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly in the context of supporting entrepreneurs. As a significant initiative of AfriForum, a prominent South African non-governmental organisation, Sakenetwerk is a vital network that promotes business interests and economic empowerment within a specific community.

This initiative is representative and significant for the study because it exemplifies how CSOs can play a pivotal role in fostering entrepreneurial development, especially in communities that may face socio-political challenges. AfriForum Sakenetwerk's approach to creating a self-sufficient economic community through networking, resource sharing, and business development support aligns closely with the research's focus on the impact of CSOs on community development and economic growth. By analysing this initiative, the study aims to provide insights that are not only relevant to a specific community but also applicable to broader discussions on the role of CSOs in empowering entrepreneurs in diverse socio-economic contexts.

The study involves human subjects for data collection, and as such, strict ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Additionally, measures were taken to ensure participants' confidentiality; all data were anonymized, and any identifying information was removed or securely stored to prevent unauthorized access. The study was designed and conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, ensuring that participants' dignity, privacy, and well-being were respected and protected throughout the study.

4. Results and discussion

Figure 1 presents descriptive statistics derived from the questionnaire data, focusing on the challenges encountered by local entrepreneurs in South Africa. The data collected from the online questionnaire were analysed using Microsoft Excel.

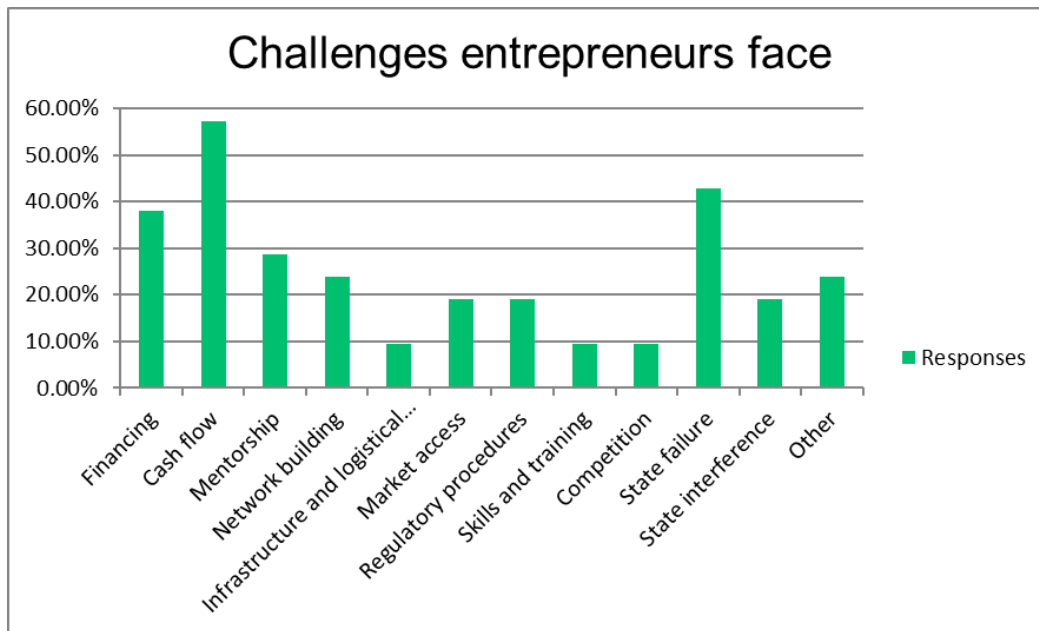


Figure 1. Challenges faced by entrepreneurs

Figure 1 presents local entrepreneurs' challenges in South Africa, with cash flow emerging as the most prominent concern, as cited by 57.14% of the respondents. If a business is unable to generate sufficient revenue from its sales to meet its expenses, it can result in a cash flow deficit.

Financing ranked as the second most prevalent challenge that entrepreneurs encounter, representing 38.10% of the respondents' concerns. The respondents highlighted the necessity of financial management training to effectively handle their enterprises' monetary aspects and expenditure. Additionally, they expressed a lack of financial resources to procure essential equipment for their businesses. They emphasised

the need for guidance in accessing low-interest business loans and affordable bookkeeping services. Furthermore, the respondents identified a demand for easy financing options tailored to small enterprises that lack substantial assets, as well as basic audit courses and mentoring opportunities related to business operations. The prevalent finance-related issues and challenges underscore the importance of training and mentorship initiatives to address these concerns effectively.

Ranked third, state failure emerged as a significant challenge for SMEs and local entrepreneurs, accounting for 42.86% of the respondents' concerns. This encompasses issues such as load shedding, which is influenced by the failure of entities such as Eskom. Additionally, the need for mentorship and access to proficient mentors was highlighted, which constituted 28.57% of the respondents' concerns. The respondents emphasised CSOs' need to furnish a comprehensive list of mentors spanning diverse sectors to facilitate entrepreneurs' access to influential mentorship initiatives. These programmes are envisioned to establish connections between entrepreneurs and suitable mentors who are capable of providing ongoing guidance and support to nurture the growth of entrepreneurial endeavours.

Challenges related to network building, including the scarcity of events for networking both in-person and online, were also identified, with 23.81% of the respondents expressing the need for more frequent community-based networking opportunities. Moreover, obstacles such as the costliness of networking events, the recruitment of suitable personnel with strong work ethics, effective marketing strategies, and time management were underscored, which collectively represent areas where training is deemed essential.

Market access, regulatory procedures, and state interference presented challenges for 19.05% of the entrepreneurs. These individuals expressed a need for access to a database containing information on local entrepreneurs to facilitate mutual support and market access. Furthermore, the entrepreneurs encountered regulatory hurdles characterised by excessive bureaucracy and paperwork. They desired training or workshops to simplify regulatory processes for establishing and running their businesses. Entrepreneurs advocated for CSOs to oppose governmental intervention, particularly in Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), South African labour regulations, and the Employment Equity Act. These entrepreneurs argued that such interventions, especially provisions within the Employment Equity Act, can potentially lead to instances of racial discrimination.

A subset of entrepreneurs, comprising 9.52%, encountered challenges related to infrastructure and logistical issues, skills and training (entrepreneurship education) deficiencies, and competition. Specific training includes access to affordable courses tailored for business managers or owners, instruction on entrepreneurial skills and business planning for children or young entrepreneurs and developing work ethic skills. While entrepreneurship education has been advocated globally and in South Africa as a means to enhance entrepreneurial engagement and to eliminate poverty in the long run, challenges persist in the effective delivery of entrepreneurship education in South Africa, including a general absence of entrepreneurial components in the educational system (Foxcroft et al., 2002:15), unsuitable teaching methods (Botha, 2006:5), a deficiency in outcome-orientated or skills development-focused education programmes (Ladzani and Van Vuuren, 2002:155), and a prevailing preference for large corporations as a career path, with a significant portion of students intending to work for others following graduation, rather than considering entrepreneurship as a viable option (Antonites, 2003:31).

Entrepreneurs advocated for CSOs to lobby for the inclusion of entrepreneurship training in the school curriculum from an early age, beyond the current limited coverage in Grades 6 and 9. This expanded

curriculum would equip students with the knowledge and skills to initiate and manage businesses effectively, including risk assessment and management, thorough market research techniques, financial literacy, and basic security measures.

The study employed a concurrent mixed-methods design, where qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed simultaneously. This approach allowed the researchers to explore the participants' experiences in depth through qualitative data while concurrently gathering quantitative data to measure and validate the identified themes and patterns. By integrating both data types at the same time, the study was able to cross-validate findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and support needs of entrepreneurs. The concurrent design ensured that the insights from the qualitative data were immediately informed by the quantitative results, creating a more robust and interconnected analysis.

As mentioned earlier, thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected through interviews. The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several key themes that were consistent with those identified in the questionnaire data, which reinforces the rigour of the findings. The interview data were transcribed and then read repeatedly while noting down initial ideas. Interesting features of the data were then coded in a systematic fashion across the entire dataset and organised as relevant to each code. The codes were then collated into potential themes while gathering data relevant to each potential theme. An ongoing analysis was followed to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis told to generate clear names for each theme.

The fact that the themes identified through the thematic analysis of the interview data align with those from the questionnaire data enhances the credibility of the findings. This consistency suggests that the themes are robust and not merely artefacts of a particular data-collection method.

The themes are outlined below.

4.1. Theme 1: Mentorship

This theme emerged prominently from both the interviews and questionnaire responses, which encapsulated the participants' shared experiences, perspectives, and challenges related to cash flow and finances. It highlights their need for mentorship on these specific topics and guidance on securing capital or finding investors for start-up businesses. It is also important to provide access to young entrepreneurs regarding mentorship programmes.

4.2. Theme 2: Skills and training

Another significant theme reflects the participants' and respondents' common challenges and concerns and highlights the need for entrepreneurial education. It is challenging for entrepreneurs to find the time to stay up to date with the latest research and guidelines. Entrepreneurs must also stay updated with the latest knowledge and Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act guidelines and protocols to ensure that the most current information is communicated. There is a significant skills gap in areas such as software, business management, taxation, and month-end processes, which are areas where entrepreneurs have not received training. Children should learn about entrepreneurship at the school level and be empowered on how to start a business from the ground up. Education can focus less on theory and more on the practical aspects of a career,

including preparation for taxation, business management, and marketing. This way, when a person enters a profession or starts a business, they can manage all aspects or at least understand how the different parts work. CSOs must advocate for the inclusion of entrepreneurship in the school curriculum beyond only Grades 6 and 9. Training in basics such as bookkeeping, Microsoft Office, and graphic design tools like Canva for a small business is also needed by many entrepreneurs.

4.3. Theme 3: Network building

The interviewees repeatedly mentioned the importance of networking. This theme aligned with the questionnaire findings, which indicates widespread recognition of its relevance. Competitiveness and sustainability are challenges because larger-scale businesses have better resources and thus provide more competitive services. It can sometimes be difficult for entrepreneurs to compete at the same level due to a lack of resources or funds. Young entrepreneurs must also be provided with more networking opportunities. Networks must be encouraged to support young local entrepreneurs instead of large brands or corporations. Regarding state failure, load shedding and power outages significantly impact small businesses by, for example, disrupting mobile phone and network connectivity where clients may struggle to reach entrepreneurs and card machines often fail to work because of signal issues. This results in lost business or providing services without receiving payment. Additionally, load shedding negatively affects the economy, and when the economy suffers, entrepreneurs are hit the hardest. Networking is therefore important to share resources, however possible, to overcome challenges.

CSOs can help small businesses mitigate the impact of load shedding and power outages by facilitating access to alternative power solutions like solar panels and generators, enhancing digital and network resilience through partnerships with telecommunications providers, and promoting resource-sharing initiatives among businesses. Additionally, CSOs can advocate for improved energy policies and infrastructure at the governmental level and offer training on emergency preparedness and risk management to ensure businesses can continue operations during power disruptions. These strategies collectively support economic resilience and sustainable development by helping businesses navigate the challenges posed by unreliable power supply.

4.4. Theme 4: Regulatory procedures

The final key theme relates to the need to simplify regulatory procedures. This theme captures the nuanced views and suggestions provided by the participants and offers valuable insight for future research and practice. CSOs must promote the interest in entrepreneurs', including gaining approval by government organisations such as Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), B-BEEE, labour laws, Employment Equity Act, and red tape. Health and unpaid sick leave is another challenge for entrepreneurs as not all are approved for income protection (usually due to pre-existing conditions). The South African Revenue Service (SARS) is not always cooperative, and funds are frequently withheld or not disbursed, which raises concerns about potential financial issues.

The alignment of themes between the interviews and the questionnaire demonstrates the robustness of the findings and enhances the credibility of the research. Thematic analysis has proven to be effective for refining complex qualitative data into coherent and meaningful themes. These themes provide a rich understanding of

the participants' experiences and perspectives and offer valuable insight for CSOs and their role in empowering entrepreneurial leadership to achieve community and economic development.

The thematic analysis of the interview data illuminated key areas of interest and concern and provided a deeper understanding of the underlying issues. This analysis reinforced the questionnaire's findings and offered a comprehensive view of the participants' experiences. Future research should further explore these themes and delve deeper into the nuances and implications for practice.

The results of this study align with the research objectives and provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by South African entrepreneurs and the role of Civil CSOs in addressing these challenges:

- The findings highlight that cash flow and financing issues are the most pressing concerns for entrepreneurs, with 57.14% and 38.10% of respondents, respectively, citing these as significant challenges. These results underscore the first research objective, which aimed to explore obstacles hindering entrepreneurial success, particularly in areas such as access to finance. The data suggests that entrepreneurs struggle not only with generating sufficient revenue but also with securing affordable financing options and financial management training. This directly affects their ability to sustain and grow their businesses, which in turn impacts broader economic development.
- The study also aimed to investigate the broader social and economic effects of entrepreneurship, particularly in job creation, social capital enhancement, and innovation. The challenges related to state failure, including issues like load shedding and regulatory barriers, point to the significant external factors that stifle entrepreneurial potential. These challenges not only inhibit business growth but also have a ripple effect on job creation and community development. When entrepreneurs struggle, their ability to contribute to local economies and social welfare diminishes, which can slow down overall community development and economic growth.
- The third objective was to understand how CSOs, as part of a network, contribute to empowering entrepreneurial leaders and facilitating community development. The study reveals that CSOs like AfriForum Sakenetwerk play a crucial role in addressing these challenges by offering mentorship, facilitating network building, and advocating for regulatory reforms. The consistent demand for mentorship and access to proficient mentors, as highlighted by 28.57% of respondents, suggests that entrepreneurs highly value the support structures provided by CSOs. This aligns with the study's focus on how CSOs can enhance entrepreneurial leadership through targeted support.
- Finally, based on the findings, the study proposes a framework that emphasizes the importance of mentorship, network building between entrepreneurs and community organisations, and streamlined regulatory processes. The challenges related to network building and regulatory procedures, as identified in the data, reinforce the need for a more supportive environment for entrepreneurs. By addressing these issues, CSOs can help create a more conducive environment for entrepreneurial initiatives, which is essential for fostering sustainable economic growth and community development.

5. Findings

The interview data revealed that participants' experience of Afriforum was positive. Participants viewed AfriForum as a reliable and supportive organisation that plays a significant role in promoting their businesses

and the broader Afrikaner community. The participants highly valued the mentorship and networking opportunities provided by AfriForum Sakenetwerk, which strengthened their sense of connection and empowerment. Moreover, the respondents felt that AfriForum effectively represented their interests within the broader socio-political context of South Africa, particularly in advocating for minority rights and economic self-sufficiency. This positive experience, deeply rooted in the shared values and culture of a community, suggests that AfriForum plays a crucial role in fostering entrepreneurial spirit and community development within this specific group. However, it is important to recognise that these findings are specific to a certain community, and further research is needed to determine whether similar results would apply in other communities and contexts.

After the triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative results, main themes emerged, which together informed the formulation of a comprehensive framework for CSOs (see Figure 2). These themes are not just theoretical constructs, but practical guidelines that can be applied to the work of CSOs. The findings suggest several practical implications for CSOs and policymakers.

- *Mentorship* underscores the importance of mentorship programmes, which facilitate knowledge transfer, skill development, and guidance for CSO members. Mentorship programs should be expanded and tailored to address the specific needs of entrepreneurs, particularly in areas related to financial management and business operations. This support will be critical in helping entrepreneurs overcome the obstacles currently hindering their success.
- *Skills and training (alternatively referred to as entrepreneurial education)* emphasise the necessity of equipping CSO members with essential skills and knowledge through structured training initiatives to enhance their efficacy and adaptability in addressing societal challenges. There is a clear need for more accessible financial management training and easier access to funding, particularly for small enterprises.
- *Network building* advocates for establishing and cultivating robust networks both within and beyond CSOs to foster collaboration, resource sharing, and collective action towards common goals. CSOs should work to build stronger networks within the entrepreneurial community, fostering collaboration and resource sharing that can help mitigate the effects of external challenges like state failure. By focusing on these areas, CSOs can significantly contribute to empowering entrepreneurial leaders and the overall economic resilience of the communities they serve.
- *Simplifying regulatory procedures* highlights the importance of simplifying bureaucratic processes (red tape) and regulatory frameworks, thereby reducing administrative burdens for entrepreneurs. SOs should continue to advocate for simplified regulatory processes and provide entrepreneurs with the necessary tools and resources to navigate these challenges.

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by South African entrepreneurs and the role of CSOs in supporting them, several limitations may affect the generalisability of the findings. The small sample size and the focus on a single case study, AfriForum Sakenetwerk, limit the study's ability to represent the broader entrepreneurial population and other CSOs in different contexts. Additionally, the cross-sectional design does not account for changes over time, which could impact the long-term relevance of the findings. The focus on AfriForum Sakenetwerk might introduce a bias due to its specific cultural and socio-political context in serving the Afrikaner community. The research acknowledges the potential bias, however, because

the research is based on an ethnographic design, this study does not seek to generalise the findings of the study to other groups, the aim of the study is to interpret the experiences of a specific community.

Despite these limitations, the study highlights significant areas where CSOs can play a crucial role in addressing entrepreneurial challenges, such as through mentorship, financial management training, and advocacy for regulatory reforms. Furthermore, future research should aim to expand the sample size, include diverse case studies, and utilise longitudinal designs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving entrepreneurial landscape and the impact of CSO support over time. These steps will enhance the robustness and applicability of the research findings, providing a clearer roadmap for empowering entrepreneurial leaders and fostering sustainable community development.

6. Recommendations

Recommendations are provided based on the main themes identified from the challenges encountered by entrepreneurs. Based on the main themes, the following comprehensive framework for empowering entrepreneurial leadership for economic and community development is recommended:

Entrepreneurial leadership framework



Figure 2. Comprehensive framework for empowering entrepreneurial leadership for economic and community development

Under each specific suggestion on how CSOs can implement the proposed strategies, clear steps or guidelines that take into account potential resource constraints and barriers are provided to make the recommendations more actionable and practical for CSOs. Based on Figure 2, each element of the entrepreneurial leadership framework is discussed next.

6.1. Enhancing mentorship

A CSO can accelerate economic and community development by implementing a robust mentoring programme that combines both formal and informal approaches. Formal mentoring can provide a structured framework with specific goals and durations that offers career progression, guidance, and increased self-confidence to new entrepreneurs (Van der Sijde and Weijman, 2013:196; Armstrong et al., 2002:1111). Informal mentoring leverages existing relationships and encourages natural development within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, which often results in higher satisfaction due to voluntary, trust-based interactions (Inzer and Crawford, 2005:35). Effective mentors play a multifaceted role by acting as coaches, protectors, supporters, counsellors, and networkers and engaging in both active and passive activities to support mentees (Klasen and Clutterbuck, 2002:17). This comprehensive approach fosters personal and professional development and enhances leadership and organisational growth within the community (Bozeman and Feeney, 2007:17; Wong and Premkumar, 2007:4). By integrating these mentoring strategies, CSOs can create a sustainable impact that will empower individuals and drive community and economic development.

To boost economic and community development, CSOs should allocate resources strategically to establish a structured mentorship program. This program should incorporate both formal mentoring, with clear objectives and timelines, and informal mentoring that leverages natural, trust-based relationships. By matching mentors with mentees based on specific needs and industries and by providing ongoing training for mentors, CSOs can ensure that the program is effective. Additionally, implementing a system for monitoring and evaluating the mentorship's impact will help refine the approach and maximise its benefits for new entrepreneurs.

6.2. Skills and training (entrepreneurial education)

A CSO can significantly accelerate economic and community development by implementing comprehensive entrepreneurship education programmes that are both interactive and experiential. Despite its inherent risks, entrepreneurship encompasses many trainable skills, and effective education in this field is crucial for nurturing leadership, especially within non-profit and social enterprises (Okudan and Rzasa, 2006:197; Chell et al., 2007:149). These educational programmes should foster self-employment, innovation, and economic development while addressing poverty alleviation and job creation, with a particular focus on marginalised groups, especially women (Arogundade, 2011:27; Van der Merwe, 2008:48; Botha, 2006:146). Key elements of such programmes include addressing emotional and social aspects, decision making with limited information, and tailoring approaches to individual learning styles, which are essential for effective entrepreneurship education (Okudan and Rzasa, 2006:197). By incorporating active participation and reflection, experiential learning can facilitate both individual and organisational innovation (Deakins and Freel, 1998:146; Warren, 2004:7; Franco and Haase, 2009:631). To maximise impact, CSOs should collaborate with various stakeholders, including NGOs, educational departments, private universities, local schools, churches, and local entrepreneurs and businesses, which will create a supportive ecosystem for entrepreneurship and community development.

CSOs can significantly contribute to community development by developing and delivering practical, experiential entrepreneurship education programmes. Collaborations with educational institutions and industry experts can help design curricula that address the specific needs of entrepreneurs, particularly those

in marginalised groups. These programmes should prioritise interactive learning methods and be made accessible through partnerships with local universities and businesses. Continuous assessment and feedback mechanisms will ensure that the training remains relevant and impactful, helping participants develop the necessary skills for self-employment and innovation.

6.3. Network building

Economic and community development can be accelerated when a CSO leverages both formal and informal networks to enhance collaboration, communication, and trust among stakeholders and local entrepreneurs. Networks, defined as groups of interconnected actors or nodes, facilitate relationships such as cooperation and friendship (Borgatti and Halgin, 2011:2; Cachero Vinuesa, 2017:64). The rise in network studies highlights the importance of collaborative governance and the need to address challenges through collective efforts (Kapucu et al., 2014:1087). By fostering informal networks, which emerge organically and involve non-governmental stakeholders, CSOs can improve service delivery, capacity building, and problem solving (Isett et al., 2011:162; Kapucu and Hu, 2020:4). By benefitting from higher levels of trust, informal networks can enhance collaboration, commitment, and performance (Gilbert and Behnam, 2012:142). These networks, built on shared values and visions, enable robust human activity organisation and can significantly contribute to the sustainable development of communities (Yang et al., 2017:3; Serrat, 2009:1). Through the strategic use of these networks, CSOs can mobilise resources, share knowledge, and create synergistic partnerships that drive economic growth and community empowerment.

CSOs should focus on enhancing economic and community development by strengthening both formal and informal networks among entrepreneurs and stakeholders. This can be achieved by organising regular networking events and creating platforms for resource sharing and collaboration. By mapping existing networks and identifying opportunities for expansion, CSOs can foster stronger connections that lead to more robust partnerships and shared initiatives. Continuous engagement through various communication channels will keep these networks active, promoting trust and cooperation among members.

6.4. Simplifying regulatory procedures

Although the government has taken steps to enhance the regulatory landscape for small businesses by minimising red tape and simplifying the business start-up process, the persistence of policy uncertainty and inadequate policy execution continues to pose a substantial obstacle to entrepreneurial activities and investments (United Nations, 2023:5). South Africa holds the 84th position in the Doing Business Index due to, among other reasons, a significant number of bureaucratic hurdles that hinder the creation of a dynamic business environment (World Bank Group, 2020:4). As highlighted in a report by the International Finance Corporation (IFC, 2018) concerning South African SMMEs, multiple studies indicate that the regulatory landscape is consistently identified as one of the most formidable challenges for local entrepreneurs who are seeking to initiate and expand their businesses. SMMEs identify excessive regulation as the second most prominent factor, following a shortage of skilled personnel (IFC, 2018:57).

CSOs can promote or implement methods to streamline regulatory processes by advocating for simplification, intra-governmental collaboration and coordination (such as one-stop service centres), and the adoption of digital solutions (digitalisation) (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021:1). As an example,

Figure 3 demonstrates how intra-governmental coordination can simplify the business start-up procedures of a guesthouse through the implementation of one-stop shops.

The CSO AfriForum Sakenetwerk serves as a database of businesses owned or operated by AfriForum members, as well as businesses that are not members. Those who register with AfriForum and indicate their membership will automatically have their businesses registered on both databases. Businesses belonging to individuals who are not members of AfriForum are only registered on the general database. AfriForum members are encouraged to support other members’ businesses through the AfriForum business network (AfriForum Sakenetwerk, 2024).

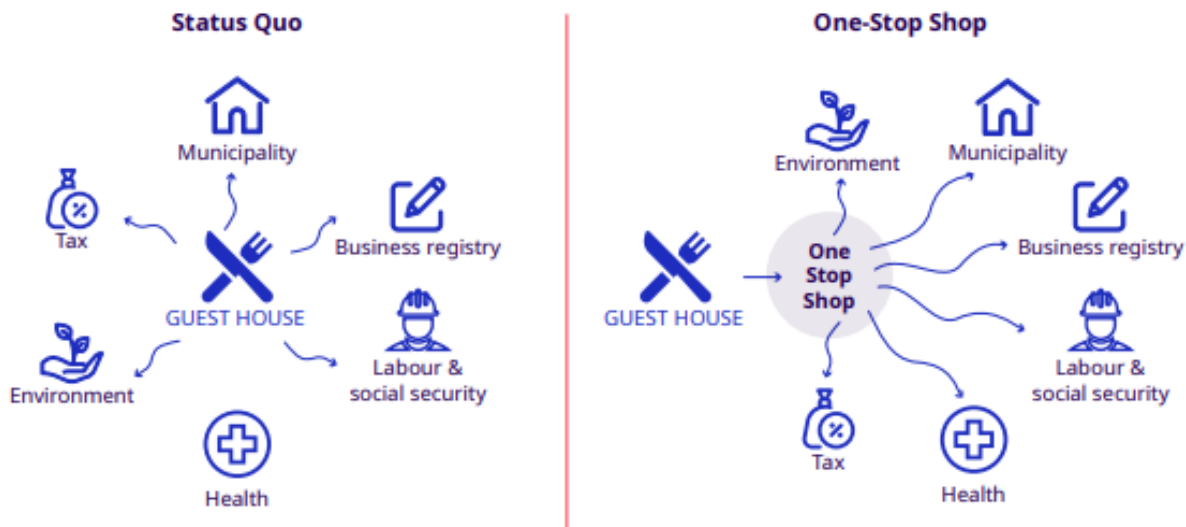


Figure 3. One-stop shops: Simplifying business start-up formalities of a guesthouse through intra-governmental coordination (Source: ILO, 2021:3)

CSOs can play a vital role in reducing the regulatory burdens entrepreneurs face by advocating for simpler and more efficient processes. They should engage with government agencies to push for the creation of one-stop service centres and the adoption of digital tools that streamline compliance. Additionally, CSOs can organise informational workshops to educate entrepreneurs on navigating existing regulations effectively. Establishing a feedback loop where entrepreneurs can voice their challenges will also help CSOs tailor their advocacy efforts and provide targeted support.

7. Conclusion

This research underscores the critical role of CSOs in bolstering the entrepreneurial ecosystem for economic and community development. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study delved into the challenges faced by entrepreneurs and the impact of their ventures on local communities. Notably, it identified hurdles such as limited access to finance, infrastructure inadequacies, and skills deficiencies, juxtaposed with the significant positive impacts of successful entrepreneurship on job creation, social capital, and innovation. In proposing a comprehensive framework for nurturing entrepreneurial leadership, the study advocates for mentorship and

collaboration between entrepreneurs and community organisations through network building and streamlined regulatory processes. Fostering conducive environments for entrepreneurial endeavours aligned with community welfare can ultimately fuel sustainable economic growth and holistic community development.

The findings aim to provide actionable insights for developing frameworks that emphasise mentorship, network building between entrepreneurs and community organisations, and streamlined regulatory processes. These frameworks are crucial for creating supportive environments that foster entrepreneurial initiatives that are aligned with community welfare, which will ultimately drive sustainable economic growth and holistic community development.

Future research should further investigate CSO involvement in entrepreneurship by assessing the effectiveness of proposed interventions. Longitudinal studies can track how CSO-supported ventures evolve, as well as their lasting impact on economic growth and community welfare. Comparative analyses across regions can highlight contextual factors that shape CSO initiatives. Qualitative studies capturing entrepreneur and CSO perspectives will offer deeper insights. Overall, continued research is vital for informing policies that promote inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurial development.

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