

Evaluating Innovations in Small and Medium Scale Enterprises in Bayelsa State



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ABSTRACT: Innovation in its modern meaning is "a new idea, creative thoughts, new imaginations in form of device or method". Innovation is often also viewed as the application of better solutions that meet new requirements, unarticulated needs, or existing market needs. Such innovation takes place through the provision of more effective products, processes, services, technologies. The aim of the paper is to give the view on innovation activities in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) sector in Bayelsa state. The paper is divided into two parts. Firstly, the paper is to evaluate situation in innovation activities conducted by small and medium enterprises in Bayelsa state, identifying the main barriers to develop innovation activities, formulate some recommendations on how to overcome these barriers. The second part of the paper is to present the importance of innovativeness, which is viewed as one of the prerequisites for successful innovation activities. Main findings revolve around the facts that product innovations are predominant in SMEs in Bayelsa state and that there is a significant impact of these on growth of firms' turnover, profitability and employment generation. And recommended that Prospective entrepreneurs given the resource constraints and weak/unstructured National Innovation Systems (NIS) that characterize developing economies, it makes sense to assume that SMEs therein would focus on incremental innovations and that these would have some positive impact on firm performance and students of entrepreneurship education should be exposed to different innovative schemes, Bayelsa state government should support small and medium enterprises innovation through grants and aid.

KEYWORDS: SMEs; Innovations; Innovation activities; Trend; Bayelsa; Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

Innovation in its modern meaning is "a new idea, creative thoughts, new imaginations in form of device or method" (Merriam-Webster) Innovation is often also viewed as the application of better solutions that meet new requirements, unarticulated needs, or existing market needs (Maranville, 1992). Such innovation takes place through the provision of more effective products, processes, services, technologies, or business models that are made available to markets, governments and society. An innovation is something original and more effective and, as a consequence, new, that "breaks into" the market or society (Frankelius, 2009). The importance of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to national economies has been widely recognized. Indeed, there is now a worldwide interest in motivating entrepreneurship and nurturing the growth of small businesses through several mechanisms, topmost among which is the provision of risk-free capital (Oyefuga et al, 2008). The general argument is that by their very nature, SMEs are highly innovative and extremely impactful as far as national economic development is concerned. To date, several informative studies have explored the subject of innovation in SMEs but existing gaps in the knowledge about innovation among SMEs beg for more studies. Specifically, studies that explore the types of innovation that SMEs pursue are few and mostly based in the developed country context (e.g. Oke et al, 2004; Rizoni, 1991). Main findings revolve around the facts that product innovations are predominant in SMEs and that there is a significant impact of these on growth of firm's turnover. The results on whether or not these firms focus on incremental/radical innovations are inconclusive and other dimensions of firm performance apart from turnover have been largely unexplored (see for instance, Oke et al, 2004; Kanter, 1985).

Bayelsa state is blessed with numerous natural resources and produces over 30% of the Nigeria internally generated revenue. However, it is characterized by a poor state of social infrastructure. Such infrastructure which includes electricity, effective communication system, good roads, good drinking water, etc. are to be made available for SMEs to thrive (Balogun, 2004). Another factor which hinders entrepreneurship in Bayelsa State is the lack of will-power on the part of the state and local government to

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provide the required environment for entrepreneurship (Ajagu, 2005). Our political environment has suffered plethora of mal-administration as well as corrupt leadership and this is the singular reason why a state like Bayelsa, is blessed with numerous human and natural resources would be listed among the poorest states of the federation.

The aim of the paper is to give the view on innovation activities in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) sector in Bayelsa state. The paper is divided into two parts. Firstly, the paper is to evaluate situation in innovation activities conducted by small and medium enterprises in Bayelsa state identifying the main barriers to develop innovation activities, formulate some recommendations on how to overcome these barriers. In second part of the paper is to present the importance of innovativeness, which is viewed as one of the prerequisites for successful innovation activity in small and medium enterprises.

“Innovative small and medium enterprises as a part of knowledge-based economy in the republic of Nigeria precisely Bayelsa state”.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Innovation

There is no single generally accepted definition of SMEs. It has been well-known in the literature that a small enterprise can be defined along three dimensions: in terms of either employment or investment or turnover, or a combination of any two, or all of the above (Atkins and Lowe, 1997; Bala-Subrahmanya, 2005). Specifically, in Nigeria, ministries, research institutes, agencies, private sector institutions, etc. use different definitions which involve the above three dimensions (Oyefuga et al, 2008). Notwithstanding, Ramachandran (2002) argued that SMEs in the Nigerian context are best defined as those with fewer than 100 employees and below 50 million naira in assets. The lower limit for this characterization (in terms of employment) beyond which a firm is regarded as a micro enterprise is 10 employees (see Oyefuga et al, 2008, p. 235).

The subject of innovation has risen in importance to become a global policy issue. Following this, an overabundance of literature on the typology of the innovation concept has emerged. An exhaustive review of such typologies is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is useful to proceed with a clear understanding of the innovation types and effects within the context of this paper. Popadiuk and Choo (2006) presented a thorough review of the literature on innovation types; and from them we learn that product and process innovations are sub-sets of technological innovation which can be more resolved into thorough or incremental, depending on the degree of innovation (see also García-Muiña and Navas-López, 2007; OECD, 2005; Hadjimanolis, 2003; Souitaris, 2003; Tushman and Anderson, 1986).

Three broad categories of the literature on innovation in SMEs can be identified. A previous similar identification and a relatively systematic and thorough review had been made by Oke et al (2004). However, unlike Oke et al, we limit our review to studies published within the last decade. These were considered for two main reasons. First, these studies would be more current and perhaps more well-informed in terms of methods. Secondly, there are an increasingly higher number of empirical studies carried out in the context within the decade.

The first category of research studies investigates the characteristics and entrepreneurial behaviour of owner-managers and how these relate to decisions concerning innovative activities in their organizations (Cosh and Hughes, 2000; Kickul and Gundry, 2002; Adegbite et al, 2007). Central to this body of studies is the finding that the entrepreneur/innovator is critical to the success of innovation efforts in the small- or medium-sized firm.

Studies that investigate the importance of innovation in Small and Medium Enterprises, their role as foster economic growth and policy issues relating to SMEs in national economies make up the second stream of the literature. Like Henderson (2002), Salami (2003) and Oyefuga et al (2008) argued SMEs create jobs; increase wealth and incomes within their host domains; and promote industrial and economic development through the utilization of natural or local resources, production of semi-finished goods and the transfer/transformation of rural technology. Henderson (2002) additionally noted that SMEs connect the community to the larger or global economy. The role of government policies and intervention schemes for Small and Medium Enterprises to overcome barriers to their innovativeness and/or productivity was highlighted by Hadjimanolis (1999) and Oyefuga et al (2008).

The third literature stream dwells on how small firms actually manage the innovation or the process of developing new products and services (e.g. Motwani et al, 1999; Oliver et al, 2000; Keizer et al, 2002 in the developed country context, and Abereijo et al, 2007; Sikka, 1999; Ilori et al, 2000 and Oyelaran-Oyeyinka, 2003; 2005 in the developing country context). A main trend in this body of literature is that both the way of managing innovation and the available supporting structure are important to innovation. Specifically, the availability of innovation subsidies, linkages with knowledge Centre's, firm-level investments in research and development (R&D) and the firm's internal processes of capability building are identified as crucial for successful innovation.

A particular knowledge gap identified in the review of the literature is that most of the recent studies are unavoidably context-specific, making the knowledge on innovation in Small and Medium Enterprises still limited. Also, studies which explore what types of innovations SMEs pursue are generally sparse. Thus, the knowledge about what types of innovation SMEs undertake,

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how they actually do it and the impact of their innovation efforts on different dimensions of firm performance remains limited (Oke et al, 2004) especially in the developing countries (Bala-Subrahmanya, 2005). However, given the resource constraints and weak/unstructured National Innovation Systems (NIS) that characterize developing economies, it makes sense to assume that SMEs therein would focus on incremental innovations and that these would have some positive impact on firm performance (see for instance Bala-Subrahmanya, 2006).

2.2 Small and Medium Scale Enterprises

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have been generally accepted as vehicle of economic growth and development. Vibrant SMEs are considered crucial in solving multivariate problems in developing nations. The problems facing developing nations are poverty, unemployment and inequality. SMEs help in the provision of goods and services, job opportunities, wealth creation, poverty alleviation and utilization of local resources (Odubanjo, 2000). He further buttressed that SMEs are catalyst for technological development, domestic capital formation, source of job opportunities, training avenue for local entrepreneurs. Besides, innovation is one of the key means by which SMEs can overcome harsh business condition.

Small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) are non-subsidiary, independent firms which employ less than a given number of employees. This number varies across countries. The most frequent upper limit designating an SME is 250 employees, as in the European Union. However, some countries set the limit at 200 employees, while the United States considers SMEs to include firms with fewer than 500 employees. Small firms are generally those SMEs with fewer than 50 employees, while micro-enterprises have at most 10, or in some cases 5, workers.

The last decades been characterized by rapid social-economic, political and technological change. The literature has recognized various phrases such as 'globalization, global warming, the borderless world, personal computer and the Internet' has been the language of this era. The movement in organizations and business are becoming more complex rather than simple, dynamic than steady and aggressive in nature than tame (Neu, & Brown, 2005).

In this period, there is confusion in the meaning of innovation and invention. According to Freeman, (1982), "an invention is an idea, a sketch or model for a new or improved device, product, process, or system" whereas "and innovation in the economic sense is accomplished only with the first commercial transaction involving the new product, process, system or device..." Thus, innovation is the utilization of new ideas which stem from the bedrock of ideas and is in essence characterized by change (Andy & Jasper 1998). Moreover, in turbulent periods organization can become flexible when they try incessantly to reinvent their business model (Grant, 2005). The accomplishment of innovation can be reached through technological facilities, trained workforce and management support for innovation.

The significance of innovation as firms' resources has been shown in the literature by a wide range of definitions. Robert, & Tucker (2008), argued that innovation "is the coming up of ideas and bringing them to life".

More so, European Commission (1995), defined innovation as 'the renewal and enlargement of the range of products and services and the associated markets; the establishment of new methods of products, supply, and distribution; the introduction of changes in management, work organization, and the working conditions of the workforce'. The Innovation Union classified innovation as "change that speeds up and improve the way we conceive, develop, produce and access new products, industrial processes and services". In line with the different definitions given, innovation can therefore be viewed as a process of furnishing and improving on products and services to appeal to customers' taste and demand and which expand on workers' aptitudes.

OECD, (2005) differentiates four types of innovation: product, process, organizational and marketing. Product innovation refers to the new or improved product, equipment or service that is successful on the market. A process innovation entails the implementation of a new or enhanced manufacturing or distribution process, or a new course of social service. In addition to product and process innovation, there is organizational innovation. The Organizational innovation results in new ways of categorizing internal associations, directing and empowering employees, molding careers and rewarding work with pay and benefits (Ottenbacher, Gnoth. 2005). This leads to more effective use of human resources that are of importance to the successful utilization of ideas (Andy & Jasper 1998). Marketing innovation engages in the improvement of target mix of markets and how selected markets are attended to. The objective of marketing innovation is to bring about major changes in product design and/or packaging, placement and promotion. Thus, according to Van de Ven, (1986), 'innovation is intrinsically about identifying and using opportunities to create new products, services or work practices. More so the report of OECD, Oslo Manual (2005): had shown that firms decisions to expand on innovations has brought about improvement in workers capabilities, better wages and salaries and a decisive prospect for employees. Consequently, these effects of innovations on firm performance vary in scale from sales, market share and profitability to output and efficiency.

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2.3 Importance of Innovation in SMEs

According to Aliyu & Julius (2015), Small businesses are actually the engine that drives much of the economy. The adage “small businesses” are the backbone of our economy” stands right in modern economies. The small sized business creates more products and services and also helps to circulate money in the economy rapidly. They work at micro-economic stage through the multiplier effects. They provide not only for the household directly, but also aid multinationals with their products and services. Some importance areas are:

- It creates business achievement: Small business should make innovation as fundamental part of their organizational development since innovation creates business achievement. Entrepreneurs must not just set one result to a need; they should come up with ideas for multiple results.
- It stimulates employees to come up with something useful. It is imperative for small and medium scale enterprises to encourage growth of innovation among their employees, by coming up with seminar and trainings to keep their employees stimulated created something useful for others that can in turn, result in financial gain for the company.
- It also promotes competition: competition is another factor that raises the importance of innovation in small and medium scale enterprises. It motivates entrepreneurs to come up with better-improved products and, services than their competitors for a greater share of the market.
- Innovation is vital for the durability of business. Innovation usually begins with a need. Small and medium scale enterprises are generally and directly involved in their communities needs and struggle to come up with results to fulfill those needs.
- Keeping abreast with current trends demands another important factor to entrepreneurs to improve their creativity and innovations. Manufacturers are constantly innovating to produce more without sacrificing quality.

Innovation also helps in improving the economy: innovation in small and medium scale enterprises is without doubt, a significant factor in improving the economy. By embracing innovation to keep with the pace of change in the dynamic world of business, entrepreneurs are surging steadily forward with a wealth of creative and innovative ideas that can transform into competitive products and services, allowing entrepreneurs and their small businesses to gather financial gain that will in turn help boost the country's economy.

2.4 The trend of innovation in Small and Medium Enterprises in Nigeria

By last December, the startups and Tech entrepreneurship sector was expected to have surpassed N50 billion in value, going by increasing funding from donors, venture capitalists and other investors. Also, technologies for prediction, and other flourishing technologies were introduced into the nation's business landscape from agriculture to healthcare and commerce.

According to analysts, young business leaders and visionaries this year by ushering innovative technology firms that will transform industries and make life better for Nigerians. One of those who see the industry exploding is Founder of Tech Circle, O. O. Nwoye in Samuel (2019), who sees innovative startups providing solutions in fintech, digital health, blockchain, logistics and other tech-related sectors.

Specifically, Lagos, the nation's startup capital, Nwoye noted, is vibrant, and will make an ideal city for new businesses. In addition, the thriving tech scene, according to Nwoye, has a great pool of talented persons, diversity of experts and connections that make the city a good base for growth internationally.

However, there is still room for improvement in the access to capital and funding options available for startups.

In line with the wider aspirations of the Federal Government to promote economic growth and prosperity across Nigeria, Nwoye noted that the tech sector will realize its huge potential. He said the impact of tech startups is being felt across the country as they have created employment and generated new opportunities for investors.

According to him, the government and the private sector are working to create tech hubs and business incubation Centre's and connect the most ambitious tech entrepreneurs across the country. While Lagostech sector success is enjoying international recognition, Nwoye said other states tech ecosystems have a vital role to play in driving the country's international connections and ensuring that Nigeria cements its position as a business destination in Africa.

His organization is bringing businesses together, catalyzing a national network of ambitious entrepreneurs, and helping the nation's tech economy to thrive.

With the tech entrepreneurship sector growing, Nwoye maintained that it was clear that technology is a critical component of the nation's growth, both now and for the future.

Partner, Ventures Platform, Kola Aina in Samuel (2019), noted that the success story of local tech ecosystems across Nigeria provided a positive narrative last year. According to him, the economy has generated millions of dollars' worth of deals, reflecting innovation partnerships for the benefit of tech startups and international funders.

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He said this has transformed the perception of Nigeria as a globally attractive place for business, investment, tech and innovation. According to him, what makes the sector unique is its driving spirit of collaboration.

This year, Aina envisaged a huge impact of digital disruption across all industries, seeing technology become an enabling force in sectors such as health, agriculture and finance. According to him, there is a growing government and private sector efforts to help fill the huge funding gaps, and make more people believe in their dreams and launch their ventures, run and grow them on a global scale.

Lagos Smart City Project

If Lagos State can sustain its smart city projects, stakeholders expect it to rub-off on the economy. According to the state, the purpose of a smart city is to provide core infrastructure and give a decent quality life to its citizens. Core infrastructure is expected to include adequate water, uninterrupted electricity, efficient mobility, good governance, health and education. The flagship initiative of Governor Akinwumi Ambode, Nwoye said, is transforming the state into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. Lagos State entrepreneurship programme is backed by Lagos State Employment Trust Fund (LSETF), Google and Microsoft.

Promising tech ecosystem

Nigeria is home to no less than 24 incubators, co-working spaces or other types of tech hubs with more than half located in Lagos alone. Alongside tech hubs and investors, tech giants and banks are also playing an increasing role in growing the nation's tech entrepreneurship ecosystem. Big plans are in the offing for the incubation arena in Lagos and other states of the country including Bayelsa state. New facilities are geared to provide start-ups and small and medium-scale businesses with appropriate infrastructure and services. Organizations such as Fate Foundation incubator is definitely a positive step forward in the nation's incubation movement.

Bayelsa Technology Forum

In Bayelsa, as part of a bouquet of capacity and innovation development plans, young innovators of Nigeria will help the state to organize the Bayelsa Technology Forum design to bring together technology experts, enthusiasts and facilitator targeting the training of 400 youths in Bayelsa on digital skills and entrepreneurship and the emergence of Entrepreneurship, Innovation, Technology (EIT) part in Agudama-Ekpetiama in Yenagoa local government area of the state.

Bayelsa state Incubation Hub

Also, the framework will include the startup of the Bayelsa State Incubation Hub in partnership with the state government. The government of Bayelsa expressed commitment to the plans and said the development of ICT in the state will serve as a catalyst for the overall socio-economic advancement of the state beyond crude oil.

Effective entrepreneurship support from universities

Covenant University is Nigeria's foremost startup university. Its Centre for Entrepreneurial Developmental Studies is dedicated to driving the culture of entrepreneurship and innovation by equipping individuals and organizations through relevant and strategic training, research and startup incubation and development. The university delivers efficient support for startups with its Entrepreneurship Center.

Other universities arrange regular competitions, networking events, workshops and coaching sessions. Especially Niger Delta University were a lot of innovative activities as taking place in the Centre for entrepreneurship and more is still needed, were students of entrepreneurship education can be train and retrain for more innovative activities such as creation of business achievement, stimulates employees to come up with something useful, also promotes competition, Keeping abreast with current trends demands, another important factor to entrepreneurs to improve their creativity and innovations.

3. CHALLENGES

The sector is going to enjoy a healthy influx of new startups. One of the greatest obstacles facing the sector is sourcing the right talent. Stakeholders said there is a shortage of skilled workers and it is difficult to lure talent away from larger companies. Small business owners will face challenges of low income and high overheads. There are plenty of headwinds in the coming months. Uncertainty is already causing businesses to delay investment, hiring decisions and product launches.

Association of Micro Entrepreneurs of Nigeria (AMEN) President, Prince Saviour Iche said small businesses and startups are having a hard time getting funding despite reported efforts to promote entrepreneurship.

According to him, innovative small-scale producers have limited access to financial means to materialize their ideas. Iche urged the banks to ease the funding process for startups.

For most startups, bureaucratic bottle-necks, lack of access to capital as well as high and multiple taxes pose serious challenges. Nigerian a startup has faced legal, administrative, and investment challenges, which hindered them from achieving full growth. Startups is not permitted to raise money through crowdfunding, where they solicit for fund, particularly online.

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4. CONCLUSION

SMEs have become the important force of sustained, rapid and healthy development of Nigeria economy. Moreover, Aliyu & Julius (2015), state the problems facing developing nations are poverty, unemployment and inequality. SMEs help in the provision of goods and services, job opportunities, wealth creation, poverty alleviation and utilization of local resources. Furthermore, SMEs are promoters for technological development, domestic capital formation, source of job opportunities, training avenue for local entrepreneurs. Besides, innovation is one of the vital means by which new products are created. It is so impactful to the extent that success and failure in every small and medium enterprise depends on it. Therefore, this paper addressed major issues on innovation among small and medium enterprises such as meaning of innovation and small and medium enterprises, importance of innovation in SMEs, the trend of innovation in SMEs and problems faced by innovation in SMEs in the 21st century and beyond in Bayelsa state.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made based on the above reviewed literatures that the knowledge about what types of innovation SMEs undertake, how they actually do it and the impact of their innovation efforts on different dimensions of firm performance remains limited, especially in the developing countries. However, given the resource constraints and weak/unstructured National Innovation Systems (NIS) that characterize developing economies, it makes sense to assume that SMEs therein would focus on incremental innovations and that these would have some positive impact on firm performance, prospective entrepreneurs and also students of entrepreneurship education should be exposed to different innovative schemes, should be willing to encourage innovation among their employees through reinforcement, the Bayelsa state government should support small and medium enterprises innovation through grants and aids, should be enlightened on the significance of innovation which is worthwhile or necessary for the survival of their ventures, private credit institutions should encourage innovation and entrepreneurs should be willing to learn from successful innovative entrepreneurs in Bayelsa state.

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