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The role of supportive ecosystems in nurturing resilient startups and entrepreneurship: A case of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Purpose: Consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 8, this study explores the role of supportive ecosystems in nurturing resilient startups and entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe post-COVID-19.

Research Methodology: Comprehensive relevant literature drawing on Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, Scopus, ProQuest, and JSTOR was conducted using the Zimbabwe case as the investigative context. Drawing on published peer-reviewed articles and official reports as data sources, fifty-eight articles and reports were thoroughly assessed for this study.

Results: The findings revealed that barriers to the growth of startups and entrepreneurial enterprises in Zimbabwe include difficulties in accessing finances, inadequate institutional support, a deficiency of mentorship networks, economic instability, infrastructure deficiencies, regulatory and bureaucratic hurdles, market constraints, and limited consumer purchasing power. The study also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has created digital transformation and innovation opportunities for startups.

Conclusion: This study concludes that the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Zimbabwe is weak and lacks most of the fundamental principles necessary for a thriving entrepreneurial environment.

Limitations: Overreliance on secondary data: Depending solely on secondary data sources without primary research may limit the depth of insights and understanding of local nuances and contexts.

Contribution: This study emphasizes the value of encouraging public-private partnerships and global alliances to support entrepreneurial ecosystems. This strategy can boost social inclusion, increase job opportunities, and promote economic growth. This study argues that fostering a supportive environment for startups and entrepreneurship can significantly empower emerging economies during post-pandemic recovery efforts.

Keywords: *Developing economies, Entrepreneurship, Resilient startups, SDG 8, Supportive ecosystems*

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1. Introduction

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the significance of the resilience of small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs), including the need for a cohesive support ecosystem to ensure their continuity and survival, facilitate rapid recovery, and enhance their ability to adapt to future disruptions. In this study, resilience denotes startups' ability to quickly adapt to disruptions while

maintaining continuous business operations and safeguarding their employees, assets, and overall brand equity (Suherna & Nasiatin, 2023). It encompasses the capacity to recover from disruptions and setbacks, manage change effectively, and emerge stronger from crises. Even though a wide range of post-COVID-19 recovery strategies have been documented, including financial support measures (Reuschl, Deist, & Maalaoui, 2022; Sutama, Nyoman Diah Utari, & Luh Riniti, 2023), digital transformation initiatives, and workforce upskilling programs, research in developing countries (Yuliastuti et al., 2024), particularly Zimbabwe, is yet to fully appreciate the significance of creating a cohesive entrepreneurship ecosystem in promoting the resilience of startups. However, a growing body of literature presents a strong support ecosystem as critical to startups' sustained recovery and growth; for instance, Kuckertz et al. (2020) highlight the importance of innovation networks and government support in enhancing startup resilience. Ferlito and Faraci (2022) emphasise the role of policy frameworks and public-private partnerships in fostering a robust entrepreneurial environment in post-crisis recovery. Given this convergence of literature, this study addresses this critical question: To what extent can supportive ecosystems facilitate the growth of resilient startups and entrepreneurship in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 8?

Addressing this question is critical, as supportive ecosystems are indispensable for the success of startups in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though their absence in most African countries, particularly Zimbabwe, further compounds this problem (Ianioglo, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to the susceptibility of startups and emphasized the necessity for comprehensive support systems that encompass financial assistance, market access, mentorship, and policy support (Sorgner & Alina, 2023). Research indicates that a robust support ecosystem can bolster startups' ability to withstand and prosper in times of crisis by offering essential resources and networks for adaptation (Brändle, Signer, & Kuckertz, 2023; Ekawati & Yudoko, 2024). Digital transformation projects have enabled startups to adapt and expand their reach to new customer segments (Reuschl et al. 2022). Furthermore, the involvement of public-private partnerships and the implementation of supportive policy frameworks are essential in creating a conducive climate that promotes innovation and growth for startups (Ferlito & Faraci, 2022). However, the absence of such ecosystems in developing economies, particularly Zimbabwe, impedes their efforts to recover and suppresses potential economic expansion and the generation of employment opportunities. Hence, it is important to concentrate on developing and strengthening these ecosystems to guarantee the enduring growth of start-ups and a wider economy. Establishing a resilient and supportive atmosphere has been acknowledged as a key element that improves the sustainability of startup organizations and decreases their failure rates, particularly in times of uncertainty (Isenberg, 2010; Manurung & Putro, 2024). A conducive environment fosters innovation, competitiveness, and economic resilience, resulting in employment opportunities for local communities (Stam and Van de Ven, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected economies worldwide, particularly developing nations, exacerbating existing challenges and disparities (Recoveries, 2021). In response to this crisis, fostering resilient startups and promoting entrepreneurship have emerged as critical avenues for economic recovery and sustainable development (Roth, 2021). This is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) of promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth with decent work for all (UN, 2023). The aftereffects of the pandemic make fostering startups even more crucial. This requires all key players to be involved. By nurturing young businesses, this can assist them in becoming major employers and drivers of local economic growth. This aligns with Ianioglo's (2022) idea that supportive environments are vital for startups and ventures to thrive, especially during challenging times.

Creating resilient startups is also consistent with fulfilling SDG 8, which highlights the importance of advocating policies that stimulate job creation and foster the growth of startups and entrepreneurial organizations across the globe. Therefore, building supportive ecosystems that foster resilient startups and entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era, will be important in driving sustainable economic growth, reducing unemployment, and alleviating poverty (Suyono, Nurhuda, & Sari, 2023; Uchenna, 2021). Nwankwo further noted that support systems can provide essential

resources, such as access to finance, mentorship, and market information, which are critical for the survival and growth of startups. In the absence of such ecosystems, startups and entrepreneurial organizations in developing countries face heightened risks of failure due to limited access to capital, infrastructure, and knowledge networks (D'Andrea, Santos, Costa, & Zen, 2023). Robust ecosystems encourage innovation and competitiveness, enabling startups to adapt to market changes and technological advancements. They also play a vital role in building social capital by fostering collaborations and partnerships among various stakeholders, including governments, businesses, and educational institutions (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). Consequently, investing in the development of these ecosystems is not only beneficial for individual startups but also for broader economic and social development (Ianioglo, 2022). This holistic approach aligns with global efforts to build more inclusive and resilient economies capable of withstanding future crises.

The rest of the study is organized as follows: First, the theoretical framework situates the study within the broader context of existing literature. Second, the methodology and relevant literature in the Zimbabwean context are presented. Third, the major findings from the literature are discussed, followed by an exploration of their theoretical, policy, and practical implications. Finally, the paper concludes with key insights drawn from the study.

2. Literature review

The impact of COVID-19 on the entrepreneurial environment in Zimbabwe, as well as in other parts of Africa is significant, mirroring the worldwide patterns. The implementation of lockdowns and mobility restrictions had a significant detrimental impact on business operations, particularly startups, due to a dearth of entrepreneurial assistance. This has resulted in some businesses closing down and decreasing their working hours, negatively affecting revenue generation and productivity (Chirume & Kaseke, 2020). Simuka and Chinakidzwa (2022) assert that most Zimbabwean entrepreneurs are confronted with a bleak outlook due to the absence of a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem, which contributes to numerous startups' demise. However, some entrepreneurs have effectively adapted their operations to operate within restricted budgets and have established streamlined, efficient businesses that offer cost-efficient solutions without sacrificing quality (Kritikos, 2014). The ability to adapt and alter demonstrates the inherent resilience of Zimbabwe's entrepreneurial spirit.

While Zimbabwe has a Ministry that oversees startups and entrepreneurial organizations, its current efforts fall short (Musabayana, Mutambara, & Ngwenya, 2023), especially during and after the pandemic. The Ministry's mandate includes policy development for micro-, small-, and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) and cooperatives, but studies by Magaisa and Matipira (2017) highlight crucial gaps in government support. One major concern is the lack of capacity building and ICT support available to start-up implementers. This is further compounded by the inability of entrepreneurs to identify suitable technologies for their specific needs. Additionally, existing institutions in the country should strengthen their startups' assistance programs. In addition to the challenges mentioned, the broader Zimbabwean SMME sector faces several obstacles, such as:

1. Limited management expertise
2. Difficulty in obtaining loans
3. Complex policies and procedures
4. Restricted Access to Markets
5. Concerns about product quality; and
6. Time-consuming registration processes (Masuko and Marufu, 2003).

Furthermore, the Government's lack of dedicated resources for startups hinders their growth and development. This disconnect between SMEs and the Government necessitates the creation of a dedicated agency focused solely on their needs, addressing the current absence of a "dealmaker" directly supporting entrepreneurs. In their current state, it is challenging for startups and entrepreneurial organizations to generate employment and achieve SDG 8.

Ndebele (2021) confirms the perception that entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe and other parts of Africa face a lack of significant assistance because there is no supportive environment for them. As a result, startups and entrepreneurial organizations in some parts of Africa face severe challenges when disasters and pandemics occur, especially because there is limited support available to them (Sahoo & Ashwani, 2020). As a result, a significant number of startup enterprises in Zimbabwe exhibit a lack of economic resilience and diversification, relying heavily on external funding, which is not sustainable. Assistance from developing countries may enforce limitations on fund allocation, thereby disregarding the needs and objectives of the local economies. In light of these circumstances, it is imperative for economies to develop and execute tailored ecosystems.

Research suggests that business incubators in Zimbabwe are underutilized (Ndebele, 2021). A lack of awareness hinders their impact. A shift towards fostering innovation hubs and environments that encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing is necessary (Desa & Basu, 2013). Giaccone and Longo (2016) emphasize informal communication for this exchange. Entrepreneurship fuels economic growth through wealth creation and job opportunities (Zvavahera, Chigora, & Tandi, 2018). Zimbabwe can leverage incubators and cultivate innovation hubs to drive economic development by focusing on collaboration, knowledge sharing, and specialized support.

This study adopts the entrepreneurship ecosystem theory, which emphasizes the significance of a strong and linked system that facilitates entrepreneurship through different stakeholders, institutions, and resources (Meyer, Prashantham, & Xu, 2021). Stam and Van de Ven (2021) define an entrepreneurial ecosystem as a system that generates thriving entrepreneurship. The theory applies to this study because it advocates the development of robust startups and entrepreneurship, particularly in the context of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe and other parts of the world. According to the theory, for a successful entrepreneurial environment, several essential elements are needed, such as favorable legislation, availability of financial resources, a supportive culture, well-developed infrastructure, a skilled workforce, and accessible markets, among others (Isenberg, 2010). These components work together to create a favorable environment for entrepreneurs, helping them navigate challenges and capitalize on opportunities and prospects brought about by disruptions. The subsequent sections discuss the fundamental tenets of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and their interplay in promoting the growth of robust startups in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic to attain SDG 8 through the creation of job opportunities.

2.1 Funding and finance

Having access to a wide range of financial options is the essential foundation of a successful entrepreneurial environment. This encompasses a range of choices, such as venture capital, which provides financial resources to promising entrepreneurs with the potential for substantial returns. Angel investors, typically affluent individuals, provide financial support in the seed or early stages of a business in return for ownership shares or convertible debt (Agency, 2023). Crowdfunding platforms enable entrepreneurs to secure cash directly from their vast networks of online contributors. Traditional bank loans offer a different option, providing more organized choices for financing (Rao, Kumar, & Verma, 2024). This assortment guarantees adaptability and accommodates startups in various phases. Seed investment enables them to verify the viability of their ideas and construct prototypes (Alvi and Ulrich, 2023). Expansion money is used to support and drive expansion when a company is expanding rapidly. Moreover, the ability to access reinvestment possibilities enables prosperous entrepreneurs to reinvest their revenues in the business, thus promoting ongoing innovation and growth. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the significance of having strong and adequate funding choices. Most startup businesses encounter substantial financial challenges because of market disruptions, which result in closures due to restricted access to finance (Muhammed, Adenike, & Salahudeen, 2020). An intact ecosystem with a wide range of financial resources offers a crucial support system during difficult economic periods.

2.2 Government policies and regulations

Government policies and regulations significantly impact the environment in which entrepreneurs operate. They can function as either enhancers or obstacles, depending on their design and implementation (A. D. Bank, 2020). Simplifying the process of registering startups, obtaining licenses, and complying with tax requirements can facilitate the establishment of new businesses. This enables entrepreneurs to concentrate their efforts on developing ventures rather than being burdened by administrative tasks. Tax incentives, financial grants, and subsidized loans can offer essential funding for startups and small businesses (Freeman, 2020). This can be particularly advantageous for enterprises in high-risk industries or those that require substantial initial capital.

Investing in transportation networks, communication technology, and research centers establishes a solid basis for startups to prosper. This promotes ingenuity and generates an interconnected network. Government efforts that facilitate entrepreneurship education and offer training programs in fields such as business management and financial literacy can equip potential entrepreneurs with the necessary skills to thrive. Robust intellectual property (IP) legislation safeguards the concepts and discoveries of entrepreneurs, fostering creativity and prompting financial commitment to scientific exploration and advancement (Reis, Moura, & Aragão, 2021). Regulations that enforce anti-monopoly measures and foster equitable competition create an equal environment for emerging enterprises, enabling them to effectively contend with existing entities. Customer protection policies establish a secure and reliable marketplace, fostering customer trust and providing advantages for emerging enterprises.

An abundance of laws can impede innovation and impose unwarranted obstacles on companies. It is essential to strike an equilibrium between safeguarding consumers and promoting a vibrant economic ecosystem. The intricate and burdensome bureaucratic procedures can be a significant hindrance for startups, resulting in delays in their debut and resource depletion. Even meticulously crafted policies can prove ineffectual if not executed with utmost efficiency. Corruption or a dearth of openness might impede the beneficial influence of government programs. Generally, a carefully designed collection of policies and regulations can establish a conducive environment for the growth and success of entrepreneurship. Governments can have a tremendous impact on cultivating a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem by promoting innovation, easing capital access, and assuring a fair and competitive environment.

2.3 Community and networks

A collaborative community in which entrepreneurs support each other is essential. This involves entrepreneurial networks, groups, and associations that foster peer learning and collaboration. Robust connections between entrepreneurs, investors, mentors, and support groups enhance the flow of information and promote collaboration, leading to resilience (Wasim, Youssef, Christodoulou, & Reinhardt, 2024). By organizing events, meetups, and conferences, startups can actively involve the community and promote a feeling of unity and common goals among all players in the ecosystem. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, these networks have played a crucial role in offering assistance and resources to startup organizations. Online networking events and virtual conferences facilitate the maintenance of ties and promotion of collaboration, especially in the face of physical distancing measures. These networks play a vital role in facilitating the exchange of knowledge, resources, and support, thereby strengthening the resilience of the entrepreneurial ecosystem by enabling enterprises to learn from and assist one another (Isenberg, 2010).

2.4 Market access

Access to potential clients in local, national, and international markets is crucial for the growth and innovation of startups. Establishing collaborations with existing organizations is crucial for achieving market access, forming partnerships, and receiving mentorship, which are all necessary for long-term sustainability (Lux, Macau, & Brown, 2020). The pandemic underscored the need to possess a varied market foundation, as enterprises with wider market reach exhibited greater resilience in the face of local disruptions. The drive towards digitalization in Zimbabwe has created fresh market prospects for numerous firms, enabling them to expand their consumer base outside their local vicinity. This growth

not only generated additional sources of income but also enhanced the ability of enterprises to withstand challenges by decreasing reliance solely on local markets (Isenberg, 2010).

2.5 Human capital

Human Capital refers to the collective skills, knowledge, and abilities possessed by individuals that contribute to their productivity and economic value. Having a sufficient number of knowledgeable and proficient staff is crucial for the smooth functioning of a business. Universities and colleges that provide entrepreneurial programs and produce highly trained graduates contribute to the development of capacity and innovations to suit evolving customer needs and preferences. Amidst the pandemic, the transition to remote work and digital solutions highlights the necessity for a workforce that is flexible and proficient in technology (Chaudhuri, Chatterjee, Vrontis, & Vicentini, 2022). The implementation of digital literacy and entrepreneurship education in Zimbabwe is of utmost importance. The Techzim Institute has implemented programs to offer training in digital skills, thereby cultivating a workforce capable of meeting the changing demands of businesses. Developing human capital in this manner is crucial for the durability and enduring viability of the entrepreneurial environment (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021).

2.6 Entrepreneurial culture

Nurturing entrepreneurial culture in startups promotes the development of resilience and innovation. An essential element is a culture that encourages risk-taking and innovation and embraces failure as a means of learning. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, this kind of thinking has been extremely beneficial as entrepreneurs have had to deal with tremendous difficulties. In Zimbabwe, cultivating a conducive entrepreneurial environment entailed commemorating local triumphs and promoting communal backing for new businesses. The Zimbabwe Youth Entrepreneurship Programme has successfully established a community that fosters and promotes entrepreneurial endeavors. An enduring entrepreneurial culture enables firms to endure challenging circumstances and exploit emerging possibilities, such as advancement in technology (Meyer et al., 2021).

2.7 Infrastructure and facilities

Business operations require physical infrastructure, such as office buildings, co-working spaces, and basic utilities (Ianioglo, 2022). The presence of digital infrastructure, including reliable access to high-speed Internet and necessary digital tools, holds similar significance. Amidst the pandemic, the transition to remote work and digital business models emphasized the necessity for strong digital infrastructure. Enhancements in Internet connectivity and digital tools have played a crucial role in assisting businesses in Zimbabwe. Having dependable infrastructure guarantees that firms can maintain efficient operations, even when faced with physical limitations and interruptions. This infrastructure is essential for developing a robust and flexible entrepreneurial ecosystem (Spigel, 2017).

2.8 Education and research institutions

Education and research institutions act as critical engines within the entrepreneurial ecosystem by fostering innovation and nurturing aspiring entrepreneurs (Lehmann et al., 2020). Higher education institutions (HEIs), specifically universities, are crucial anchor organizations within entrepreneurial ecosystems. They contribute to progress in science, technology, expertise, and skills. Moreover, by adopting a leadership role and promoting entrepreneurial thinking, universities fulfill their economic and social roles. This is supported by Hayter (2016) and Civera, Meoli, and Vismara (2019), who equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to launch ventures through entrepreneurship education programmes, while research activities often produce groundbreaking discoveries that can be commercialized into new products and services. Additionally, business incubators and accelerators hosted by these institutions provide startups with mentorship, networking opportunities, and access to resources, significantly increasing their chances of success. This interplay between education, research, and business creation is vital for a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem.

3. Research methodology

The systematic literature review approach was selected because of its ability to offer a thorough, organized, and unbiased assessment of the existing literature on the impact of supportive ecosystems on fostering resilient startups and entrepreneurship post-COVID-19. The study utilized multiple academic databases including Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, Scopus, ProQuest, and JSTOR to obtain relevant literature for the study. This study only included peer-reviewed articles and official reports to guarantee the incorporation of the most recent and relevant literature. A total of fifty-eight articles and official reports were thoroughly examined for this study. A digital search was conducted to ascertain pertinent academic journals, books, and publications. To maintain the integrity of the study and avoid plagiarism, proper citation was done, and all works were acknowledged.

The following search terms were used:

1. Supportive ecosystems for startups
2. Entrepreneurship resilience factors
3. Zimbabwe startups ecosystem;
4. Access to finance for startups
5. Impact of COVID-19 on startups
6. Policy frameworks for entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe
7. Startup incubators;
8. Entrepreneurship development programs
9. Microfinance and startups; and
10. Entrepreneurship

3.1 Inclusion criteria

1. Official reports from institutions and organizations such as the World Bank, OECD, and other cooperating partners;
2. Research undertaken in Zimbabwe and other parts of Africa with a specific focus on startups in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic;
3. Currency;
4. Relevancy; and
5. Previous notable studies have provided essential insights into the area under investigation.

3.2 Exclusion criteria:

1. Studies that simply provided abstracts or summaries
2. Studies that did not specifically focus on the role of supportive ecosystems or their influence on startups and entrepreneurship
3. Studies that did not have a systematic approach or rigorous methodology
4. Pilot studies or initial findings without subsequent data or thorough analysis
5. Articles, blog postings, and informal publications that have not undergone peer review; and
6. Studies for which the complete text was not accessible.

3.3 The method of analysis

Thematic synthesis was used to identify emerging themes and patterns throughout the literature survey. The analysis integrates the literature in alignment with the research question, consolidating key findings from various perspectives. This study offers a comprehensive understanding of the role of supportive ecosystems in nurturing resilient startups and entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe post-COVID-19. This study presents practical recommendations for policymakers, startups, and other stakeholders to effectively address identified challenges and leverage potential opportunities.

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Discussion

The discussion centers on the themes that emerged during the literature survey, which include economic instability, infrastructure deficiencies, regulatory challenges, bureaucratic hurdles, limited access to finance, market constraints, and limited consumer purchasing power. Additionally, the discussion

explores potential opportunities, such as leveraging digital transformation and fostering innovation among startups during and after post-COVID-19.

4.2 Limited Access to Finance

The literature identifies constraints in obtaining financial support from financial institutions in Zimbabwe. The lack of sufficient access to financial resources poses a significant challenge, particularly for developing economies such as Zimbabwe, which is now grappling with economic difficulties (Ianioglo, 2022; Isenberg, 2010; Ndebele, 2021). Rao et al. (2024) highlight the importance of diverse funding options for startup resilience. However, Zimbabwe's entrepreneurial ecosystem lacks this crucial element. Access to finance is crucial for startups, especially in developing economies such as Zimbabwe, which face significant economic challenges (W. Bank, 2024a). The lack of effective financial support from financial institutions hinders the resilience of startups during crises, contrary to entrepreneurial ecosystem theory, which underscores the importance of adequate finance. Countries such as Japan provide financial aid to emerging economies to support startup ecosystems, yet Zimbabwe faces exclusion, possibly due to concerns over government commitment. The Zimbabwean government and key stakeholders must demonstrate a substantial commitment to supporting entrepreneurship, as it can spur job creation and economic strengthening, aligning with SDG 8. Research highlights the global potential of startups to generate employment opportunities, suggesting that Zimbabwe can achieve similar benefits with adequate financial support (Forum, 2019). Addressing the issue of limited access to finance is critical for Zimbabwean startups to build resilience and sustain growth, thereby contributing to broader economic development goals.

4.3 Economic Instability

Zimbabwe's economy has consistently faced significant challenges, including hyperinflation, currency instability, and limited access to finance. Current economic conditions pose a challenging environment for startups seeking to secure funding and maintain financial stability and growth (W. Bank, 2024b)**.** Startups may be adversely affected by high operational costs and unpredictable exchange rates, which can impede their profitability and long-term sustainability. Hence, the government and crucial stakeholders encounter major obstacles in delivering substantial financial assistance both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Zimbabwe, along with other African nations, faces a scarcity of assistance for startups and entrepreneurial ventures due to economic underperformance, as noted by . Recent research suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in substantial disruptions to Zimbabwe’s livelihoods. The number of individuals living in extreme poverty has surged to 1.3 million, leading to an overall extreme poverty rate of 49% in 2020 (Foundation, 2023). These circumstances create a challenging environment for the development of a stable and efficient entrepreneurship ecosystem. An enabling environment can exist only in a robust economy, and economic volatility poses further obstacles to attaining Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). This underscores the urgent need for extensive policy reviews, improved efforts to include more people in the financial system, and specific measures of assistance to strengthen startups’ ability to withstand and maintain their operations in Zimbabwe's vulnerable economic environment.

4.4 Infrastructure Deficiencies

Zimbabwe is currently experiencing severe power shortages, which have a significant impact on organizational activities. The country is projected to incur a total cost of 6.1% of its GDP. This includes 2.3% of GDP due to inefficient power generation and excessive network losses, and 3.8% of GDP attributed to the downstream expenses caused by unstable electricity. The World Bank has provided this estimation for 2023. Insufficient infrastructure poses a significant obstacle for startups in Zimbabwe and Africa after post-COVID-19. Unreliable electricity and Internet connectivity impede operations, communication, and market access (Mhlanga & Garidyadai, 2020). The power supply can be enhanced through investments in grid modernization and private sector involvement (A. D. Bank, 2020). MISA (2024) noted that the nation has been declining Internet quality due to problems with its infrastructure, which is still impacting Internet connectivity. These enhancements are crucial for Zimbabwe's post-COVID-19 recovery, as a robust infrastructure ecosystem stimulates innovation and economic growth

(World Bank, 2020). By addressing these infrastructure deficiencies, Zimbabwe can create a conducive environment for startups to flourish, ultimately contributing to the nation's overall economic revival.

4.5 Regulatory and Bureaucratic Hurdles

Zimbabwe's regulatory landscape is characterized by frequent changes and a lack of clarity, which presents difficulties for startups and entrepreneurs in understanding and complying with the regulations. The presence of uncertainty may deter investment and hinder innovation progress. Strong and comprehensive legal systems are essential for fostering resilient enterprises and thriving entrepreneurial ecosystems in developing countries, particularly as they navigate the challenges following the epidemic. A well-designed legal framework may provide entrepreneurs with stability, protection, and opportunities for growth, all of which are essential for their progress and success.

A robust legal framework for intellectual property protection provides a strong motivation for entrepreneurs to invest resources in research and development. Developing economies often face difficulties related to bureaucratic regulations and administrative procedures (Farole and Akinci, 2011). Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, and Shleifer (2008) confirmed that a regulatory framework that is efficient and straightforward, with streamlined procedures for business registration, permits, and licenses, promotes the development and operation of startups. An effective legal framework that ensures the enforcement of commercial agreements is crucial for the seamless operation of start-up activities. Entrepreneurs require assurance that the contracts they partake in will be honored, which is vital for developing confidence in commercial relationships. A legal framework can enable the availability of funds using methods such as venture capital and crowdsourcing (Gompers & Lerner, 2004). Investors also require legal measures to ensure confidence when investing in start-ups. Some developing countries have established specialized economic zones with tailored legal and regulatory systems to attract investment and foster innovation. These zones can serve as models of how the legal environment can be adjusted to boost entrepreneurship.

Creating supportive environments is crucial for overcoming these obstacles and promoting the development of resilient enterprises. A supportive ecosystem consists of various stakeholders and resources that work together to provide a favorable environment for entrepreneurship. Efficiently simplifying the process of registering and obtaining licenses for businesses can significantly reduce the time and resources required to start and operate a firm. Introducing technology to these procedures and creating centralized platforms for businesses will greatly enhance efficiency and transparency. Lobbying legislators to support measures that enhance startups can help create a more favorable regulatory structure. This encompasses a decrease in unnecessary restrictions, the offering of tax benefits, and the assurance of consistent policy conditions (W. Bank, 2024a).

4.6 Market Constraints and Consumer Purchasing Power

Zimbabwe has faced significant economic challenges for decades, characterized by hyperinflation, currency instability, and high unemployment rates. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, further straining consumer purchasing power. As a result, the local market presents a difficult environment for startups, limiting their potential customer base and affecting sales and revenue generation. This limits the potential startup customer base and can affect sales and revenue generation. Diversifying into regional and international markets is a strategy that can help mitigate this challenge but requires additional resources and strategic planning. While local market constraints and diminished consumer purchasing power in Zimbabwe pose significant challenges for startups, adopting strategies such as market diversification, digital transformation, innovation, and strong financial management can enhance resilience and growth prospects. The post-COVID-19 era demands agility, creativity, and a proactive approach to navigating the complex economic landscape. This contradicts the assumption of a normal operating environment in the entrepreneurial ecosystem in which individuals possess sufficient purchasing power. In Zimbabwe, the presence of hyperinflation and weak currency poses significant challenges for startups in terms of growth and job creation. The next section discusses the opportunities presented by COVID-19.

4.7 Opportunities: Digital Transformation and Innovation

Amidst the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 outbreak, Zimbabwe experienced favorable progress as startups swiftly embraced digital technologies. This increase has facilitated their survival and expansion in a challenging economic environment (Muriithi, 2021). Digital transformation has served as both a reactive measure to the pandemic and a proactive strategy for fostering innovation (Chaora, 2020). Startups have shown resilience by modifying their business strategies to align themselves with emerging demands. During the pandemic, there was a significant shift in attention towards health technology, e-commerce, and delivery services, which experienced substantial growth. The significance of a supportive ecosystem that promotes innovation and resilience is emphasized in this adaptation. The pandemic has expedited the assimilation of digital technology and e-commerce. Startups that adopted digital transformation successfully navigated these challenges and experienced growth by offering online services, digital marketing, and e-commerce platforms (Bańka, Kukurba, & Waszkiewicz, 2022; Onea, 2022). Entrepreneurs who have adapted their company strategies to operate online are more resilient in the face of lockdowns and restrictions (Kosasih and Sulaiman, 2024).

4.8 Limitations of the entrepreneurial ecosystem theory

The notion of entrepreneurial ecosystems provides a general framework that may not fully encompass the distinct issues encountered by certain countries, such as Zimbabwe. Economic volatility and political dynamics in Zimbabwe are significant obstacles that the generic principles of the theory do not sufficiently address. The presence of high inflation rates, currency instability, and political concerns hampers the ability of established financial institutions and regulatory procedures to operate efficiently. This indicates the necessity for more comprehension of local circumstances inside the theoretical structure, integrating the precise economic and political circumstances that can greatly impact the achievement or lack of success of entrepreneurial endeavors.

Furthermore, the theory focuses on formal institutions, such as banking systems and regulatory organizations, which may inadvertently disregard the significance of informal institutions and social networks that play a vital role in environments like Zimbabwe. Informal lending practices, community support systems, and local networks frequently have a substantial impact on the entrepreneurial environment by offering crucial resources and assistance that formal institutions may lack. These informal processes play a crucial role in contexts in which official finance and governance systems may lack strength or effectiveness. The entrepreneurial ecosystem idea presupposes the existence of functioning and efficient governance systems. Developing countries, particularly Zimbabwe, face governance challenges, such as corruption, inefficiency, and lack of transparency. These concerns act as significant obstacles to establishing a conducive entrepreneurship environment. Moreover, the theory may not comprehensively explain the dynamic and developing characteristics of entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly in their response to crises such as COVID-19. The necessity of promptly adapting to quick changes is essential for resilience; however, this is not highlighted in the theoretical framework. This underscores the importance of adopting a flexible and context-sensitive approach.

4.9 Implication for practice

Startup organizations have several funding options available to them, including grants, angel investors, venture capital, and crowdsourcing. Forging relationships with many financial institutions and leveraging other funding possibilities might mitigate the risk of encountering financial hardship. Enhancing the organization's budgeting, forecasting, and financial planning through the augmentation of financial literacy is vital. Effective financial management can help startups manage economic risks and maintain a steady flow of cash.

Startup enterprises must stay updated on regulations and ensure compliance with all legal requirements. The guidance of legal experts or consultants can assist in understanding and navigating complex legislation. In addition, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can actively collaborate with industry associations and advocacy groups to exercise their influence on legislative reforms that aim to create a more favorable business environment. To maintain uninterrupted operations, startup organizations may contemplate investing in backup solutions, such as generators, solar power, and

alternative Internet connections, because of the unstable nature of electricity and Internet infrastructure. Improving supply chain management may be achieved by optimizing logistics and transportation, which involves collaborating with reliable logistics providers and using technological solutions. This approach can result in cost savings and improved operational efficiency.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) should dedicate resources to continuously educate and enhance their personnel to close the skills gap. Engaging in partnerships with educational institutions for tailored training programs can result in substantial benefits. Implementing strategies to retain skilled employees, such as delivering competitive compensation, creating opportunities for career growth, and cultivating a positive work atmosphere, is essential. Retaining highly talented workers is crucial for promoting innovation and achieving success. Encouraging employees to generate and implement new ideas, fostering an environment that supports innovation, and celebrating tolerance for failure can result in significant progress towards promoting an innovative culture.

Participating actively in networking events, mentorship programs, and industry groups enables startups to build relationships, share knowledge, and gain valuable insights from experienced entrepreneurs. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) should explore the potential in both regional and global markets to expand their customer base and reduce dependence on the local market, which is currently small. Understanding export limitations and methods of entering new markets is crucial. Utilizing e-commerce platforms can enhance the scope of the target audience and optimize sales channels. Integrating digital solutions improves operational efficiency, promotes consumer interaction, and optimizes data management, enhancing competitiveness, and streamlining business processes. Allocating resources for research and development to encourage innovation, creating unique value propositions, and collaborating with research institutes can enhance R&D endeavors.

5. Conclusion

Although a literature-based study on the importance of supporting ecosystems in fostering resilient startups and entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe offers interesting insights, it is crucial to recognize its limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data sources may lead to a lack of current, real-time information, especially given the rapidly evolving post-COVID-19 economic landscape. This may have resulted in outdated or irrelevant conclusions. Second, literature-based studies are often limited by the scope and quality of existing research; if prior studies are biased or incomplete, the current study may inherit these flaws. The analysis may also suffer from a lack of empirical data, which can weaken the validity of the findings and recommendations. There is also a potential bias in the selection of literature, where more accessible or well-known sources are favored over less prominent but potentially significant ones. Finally, the absence of primary data collection means that the study cannot directly verify the current effectiveness of support systems or the impact of recent policy changes, thus limiting its practical relevance for contemporary stakeholders. Nevertheless, a number of these obstacles have been successfully surmounted by employing literature from diverse sources with different methodologies.

This study emphasizes the vital significance of nurturing ecosystems in fostering robust startups and advancing entrepreneurship, particularly in a post-COVID-19 environment. A comprehensive environment that includes easy access to financial services, support with regulations, and the development of necessary infrastructure, highly skilled staff, and a supportive cultural atmosphere is essential for the long-term success and growth of startups in Zimbabwe and beyond. Zimbabwean entrepreneurs face significant economic and financial obstacles, including hyperinflation, currency instability, and limited access to financing, which hinder their ability to get necessary investments and effectively manage financial resources. To tackle these issues, the implementation of specific financial strategies and promotion of partnerships between the public and private sectors could successfully mitigate some of these difficulties.

The regulatory system in Zimbabwe is characterized by volatile and uncertain developments, leading to an unpredictable business environment. Implementing efficient processes for business registration

and licensing, ensuring policy coherence, and enhancing legal frameworks are crucial steps to create a more favorable environment for entrepreneurs. Moreover, the lack of proper infrastructure, which is marked by unreliable electricity, and inconsistent Internet access poses significant challenges to the growth and sustainability of businesses. To overcome these challenges, it is imperative to invest in enhancing infrastructure and promoting engagement in the corporate sector.

Startups can derive advantages from engaging in networking, mentorship, and active participation in industry associations, as they can provide essential support and resources for prosperity. Public awareness campaigns and the acknowledgment of successful entrepreneurs can help change society's attitudes towards entrepreneurship. Furthermore, Zimbabwean entrepreneurs face constraints in their capacity for expansion because of the limited scale of the local market and barriers to commerce. Facilitating regional and international trade, supporting enterprises that prioritize exports, and leveraging e-commerce can provide new market opportunities and promote growth. Adopting digital solutions and giving high importance to R&D are essential for enhancing competitiveness and fostering innovation. Facilitating the adoption of technology and offering support for R&D initiatives can enable companies to develop unique value propositions and effectively overcome the obstacles posed by the post-COVID-19 environment. The study argues that effectively addressing these difficulties necessitates coordinated endeavors from the government, financial institutions, private sector, and foreign partners to cultivate resilient startups that spur innovation, create employment opportunities, and enhance economic expansion.

This study concludes that the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Zimbabwe is weak and lacks most of the fundamental principles necessary for a thriving entrepreneurial environment. Key components, such as access to finance, mentorship, regulatory support, and market access, are either insufficient or completely absent. This deficiency makes it challenging for local startup organizations to build resilience and sustainability. Consequently, they struggle to innovate, scale their operations, and remain competitive. Furthermore, a weak ecosystem hinders their ability to create decent employment opportunities. This directly affects their contribution to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8, which promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth; full and productive employment; and decent work for all. Without significant improvements and targeted interventions to strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem, these startups are unlikely to drive the economic and social advancements envisioned by SDG 8.

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