

Received: November 2022

Accepted: June 2023

DOI: 10.7862/rz.2023.hss.11

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THE CHARACTERISICS AND CHALLENGES OF THE INFORMAL SECTOR: IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FOR SMALL AND MICRO-BUSINESSES IN LAGOS, NIGERIA

The future of small and micro-enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria's informal sector has received less attention since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, the challenges and characteristics of the informal sector are used as arguments for understanding the future of SMEs in this sector in the era of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The study recruited a total of 17 informal-sector SME business owners in Lagos, Nigeria. The major implications of the pandemic include reduced patronage, low financial turnout, increased operational costs, poor supply chain functions, and liquidation of many SMEs. The need to embrace innovation and strategic change management is shown as critical to the sustainability of SMEs in the informal sector. This research echoes the need for a more regulatory function of the operations of informal-sector SMEs towards addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for small businesses.

Keywords: Informality, COVID-19, small business, entrepreneurship, economics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus also christened COVID-19, pandemic has continued to engender challenges on business operations and customers' loyalty across the globe (Nasar, Akram, Safdar, Akbar, 2021). The spontaneous spread of the COVID-19 has provoked socio-economic consequences for developed and developing countries with more implications on the survival of small and micro-businesses (SMEs) (Anakpo, Mishi, 2021). According to a recent report by the World Bank on Global Economic Outlook (2020), the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has the most potent implications on economic growth and business survival among all other economic recessions (Khambule, 2020). It suffices to argue that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has engendered more deleterious effect on SMEs, particularly from the Global South countries in Africa with limited

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government support for SMEs (Amankwah-Amoah, Khan, Wood, 2020). The non-pharmaceutical intervention of lockdowns and social distancing indicates serious economic implications for business survival. The COVID-19 pandemic has also stimulated poor business activities for SMEs with truncated demand and market stagnation (Anakpo, Mishi, 2021). In other words, the SME business environment has been transmuted into an atmosphere of uncertainties with decreased business activities.

Across the globe, SMEs in the informal sector are experiencing a strenuous time sustaining and developing their enterprises. There exist sparse possibilities for these categories of entrepreneurs traversing from the traditional business trends to digital business activities even as this COVID-19 implication on survival becomes harder for SMEs. Suffice it to say that, as the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to bite harder, informal sector SMEs will continue to experience a difficult business trend, particularly with countries with low government SMEs support. Globally, studies have shown that informal sector SMEs were the most affected by challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sun, Zhang, Dinca, Raza, 2021; Kumar, Luthra, Mangla, Kazançoğlu, 2020). As a cushioning effect for SMEs, many countries employed various measures, including loans, tax relief measures and other palliative considerations. Specifically, the Nigerian government in 2020 announced some palliative stimuli to alleviate the effect of the lockdown on SMEs in the transportation component of the informal sector with a roll-out fund of 5 billion naira (Premium Times, 2021). Unfortunately, reports have it that the earmarked fund was embezzled and mismanaged, and the challenges of SMEs continued unceasing (Premium Times, 2021).

In general terms, it is evident that some informal sector SMEs are being affected by the disruptions of the Nigerian economy with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Akpan, Udoh, Adebisi, 2020). For instance, SMEs in the travel and tourism, agricultural production, services and transportation were generally more negatively impacted by COVID-19 due to a few constraints, including lean numbers of patronage and low delivery turn-around time among others (Khambule, 2020). The concern of SMEs' future as the COVID-19 pandemic continues no doubt looks skirmish with the challenge of a lack of capital and innovation, and the limitation on skill and technological-driven enterprising drive, among many informal sector SMEs (Sun, Zhang, Dinca, Raza, 2021). To be sure, the far-reaching effect of these factors on the future of SMEs will depend on several policy and strategic interventions constituted for the support and revival of informal sector SMEs. In a recent report released by the National Bureau of Statistics-NBS (2020), SMEs contribute an estimated 48% to Nigeria's national GDP, 96% of all business activities and 84% of total employment in the country. With these narratives, the survival of the informal sector SMEs amid the COVID-19 pandemic becomes crucial to the future of SMEs being pursued for economic sustainability and continuous employment.

The argument pursued in this paper is laced on the narrative that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has engendered disruptive consequences on the operations and activity of Nigeria's informal sector with ensuing challenges for the survival of the SME operators with uncertain sustainability and future for operators selected in the Lagos State informal sector economy. The literature is replete with studies on the informal sector arrangement and structure in Nigeria, including rebased Nigerian gross domestic product: the role of the informal sector in the development of the Nigerian economy (Awojobi, Ayakpat, Adisa, 2014); precarious working conditions and exploitation of workers in the Nigerian informal economy (Akinwale, 2014); and contributions of urban informal enterprises to the economy of Ibadan, Nigeria (Abolade, Adebayo, Ogini, 2013).

Available studies have also interrogated the challenges of the SME operators in the informal sector prior to COVID-19 in Nigeria, such as entrepreneurship and economic growth (Adelekan, Arogundade, Dansu, 2016); women and the informal sector in Nigeria: implications for development (Fapohunda, 2012); and the role of entrepreneurship in rural development in Cross-River State, Nigeria (Ihejiamaizu, 2019). From a global context, available similar studies include COVID-19 and business failures (Amankwah-Amoah, Khan, Wood, 2020); determining the impact of COVID-19 on the business norms and performance of SMEs in China (Sun, Zhang, Dinca, Raza, 2021); a qualitative assessment of entrepreneurship amidst COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan (Nasar, Akran, Safdar, Akbar, 2021); the effect of COVID-19 on the South African informal economy, limits and pitfalls of government's response (Khambule, 2020). However, in the broad canon of informality and SME studies, there exist sparse studies on the understanding of informal sector SMEs' challenges considering the implications and effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the survival and future of SMEs within the Nigerian context. This study hopes to address this gap by bringing on board a context-based approach that can ignite and survive the SMEs in this epoch of the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives include to identify and explain the challenges of the informal sector; assess the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for SMEs in the informal sector and understand the future of SMEs in post COVID-19 pandemic.

The contribution of this paper is the interrogation of informal sector SMEs' challenges within the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic. It is undoubtable that existing studies on informal sector SMEs are not comprehensively interrogated in the broader canon of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses in Nigeria. By advancing this discussion, it is possible to engender a nuanced debate on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the performance and survival of small businesses in the post-COVID-19 era. In view of this, the paper seeks to understand the characteristics and challenges of the informal sector through the prism of the implication of the COVID-19 pandemic on small and micro-businesses in Lagos, Nigeria. After a short explanation of the structure and arrangement of the informal sector, the paper proceeds to expunge COVID-19 implications for small and micro-businesses in the informal sector. The different methodological frameworks employed were subsequently explained. The study echoes the need for a regulatory function of the activities of the informal sector, particularly SMEs, towards addressing the mitigating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses.

2. STRUCTURE AND ARRANGEMENT OF THE INFORMAL SECTOR

The structural explanation of the informal sector defines it as an unregulated and non-formal component of the market that deals with the production or manufacturing of goods for remuneration (Akinwale, 2014). The conceptual understanding of the informal sector activities depicts all economic activities executed or involved in by workers or economic units that are not protected or are inadequately covered by any known formal labour protection or arrangement. In other words, the informal sector is characterised by low entry prerequisites regarding capital experience and educational qualification (Abolade, Adebayo, Ogini, 2013), largely comprising SME operators and low utility of conventional labour practices (Adewumi, Adenugba, 2010). The literature has shown different causatives of informality including structural, institutional and behavioural drivers (Emmanuel et al., 2016). For instance, pressure oozing from the increasing excess of

low-skilled young labour market participants remains a key driving force expanding the informal sector operations and activities in many developing countries (Adelekan, Arogundade, Dansu, 2016). Another important driving force is the introduction of new business pathways within the context of trade liberalisation and expanding global competition, which has given rise to the introduction of more flexible production systems within the confine of informal economic activities (Etim, Daramola, 2020). Institutional constraints, on the other hand, include regulatory difficulties, high taxes and feeble law enforcement direction, which all play important roles in the activities and characterisation of informality (Chiwendu, 2016).

Nigeria's informal sector comprises SMEs with economic activities spanning production, wholesalers, retail traders and consumers (Abolade, Adebayo, Ogini, 2013). There are also economic activities, including middle service providers alongside the value chain production including the production and supply of raw materials. The informal sector workers are almost self-employed, spanning across economic activities, such as traders, artisans, farmers, service providers and craft men, among others (Akinwale, 2014). The absence of conventional technological tools is limiting the production expansion of informal sector workers. The economic operation of this sector operates on a labour-intensive technological approach in production and distribution of goods and services. The concern of safety in production is simply ignored and most informal sectors operates in an uncondusive work environment with eminent dangers to the health and safety of the human person (Chidoko, Makuyana, 2012).

Other concerns of the informal sector work arrangement are lack of job protection and security and social protection to include pension and sick and maternity leave and other important work entitlement (Awojobi, Ayakpat, Adisa, 2014). Across the globe, informal sector workers encounter a greater amount of occupational risk than workers in the formal employment sector. For the Nigerian case, informal sector workers are daily confronted with high incidence of vulnerable work status, and on many occasions, inferior working conditions and high counts of work-related poverty in many developing nations (Awojobi, Ayakpat, Adisa, 2014). In other words, the disruption caused by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic can be argued to have conveyed more deleterious implications for these sets of workers.

The informal sector faces a high propensity to risk and lacks admittance to access appropriate risk-management mechanisms. There are two important impeding factors largely affecting informal sector workers from participating in the benefits of prevention and protection measures against work associated risks. These include the constraint of organisation and prohibition from labour law legislation and protection with an emphasis on occupational and health protection and other social dialogue concerns as enacted by labour standards (Fapohunda, 2012; Sojo, 2015). However, new research frontiers explain that the lack of implementing effective policy standards in the management of risk associated with informal sector workers will continue to spread the mammoth of challenges confronting these arrays of workers daily (Etim, Daramola, 2020).

Nigeria's ambiguous labour laws have been argued to worsen the challenges SMEs in the informal sector economy. For instance, the non-recognition of these workers in any known labour laws continues to expose the myriads of challenging economic activities executed in the informal sector with consequences for participants and family in terms of income, protection and well-being. While several policy papers have been rolled out on the need for a regulatory legislative framework for the control and supervision of the activities of the informal sector, little evidence towards addressing organising the informal sector in

Nigeria is visible. Importantly, the argument pursued in this paper is the position that COVID-19 implications on the survival of SMEs in the Nigeria informal sector will continue unabated as the daunting impact of COVID-19 continues to rampage on in economic spheres across the globe.

3. COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS FOR SMALL AND MICRO-BUSINESSES IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

The outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, considered as one of the most deleterious public health crises in recent times, has provoked strands of hardships on people, with the most discerning concern for businesses, particularly SMEs, across the globe (Shen, Fu, Pan, Yu, Chen, 2020; Eggers, 2020). In Nigeria, an estimated two-thirds of the labour are employed in the informal economy, surviving on low wages and an absence of labour protection (National Bureau of Statistics-NBS, 2020). The overwhelming majority of these workers experienced business fluctuations and low patronage as a result of the non-pharmaceutical prevention of the COVID-19 virus and the consistent lockdowns. Major fallouts in income for SMEs in the hospitality industry are being experienced through social distancing and major international travel bans, especially for SMEs in the business component of ticketing, tour agent and tour guides, respectively (Akpan, Udoh, Adebisi, 2020; Beglaryan, Shakhmuradyan, 2020). The lockdowns and restrictions have further compounded the fragility of the Nigerian economic, thereby affecting the economic abilities and competitiveness of people, with a consequence on economic difference among people in terms of their purchasing power and behaviour with a collapse of many sole proprietorships and SME businesses (Akpan, Udoh, Adebisi, 2020; Gerald, Obianuju, Chukwunonso, 2020).

Many SMEs reported problems with liquidity during the COVID-19 lockdown and only a few could survive past the lockdown. The overwhelming number of SMEs were ill-prepared for the economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this has provoked major business closures among the SMEs across the globe and financial constrictions ensuing from low sales and profit margins (Fairlie, 2020; Adam, Alarifi, 2021). The evidence of economic disruption is manifested on both large conglomerates and SMEs; however, the adverse effects are more discerning on the survival of SMEs. For instance, the Organisation for Economic Corporation and Development (2020) reports that more than half of SMEs surveyed across 40 countries had a depreciating revenue loss and experienced fear of liquidation during the lockdowns, and calls were made for public assistance through government palliatives and other support measures. As a resurgence measure from the economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the literature has shown evidence supporting the utility of digitisation by many SMEs as a coping strategy and means to stay in business (Zhang, Diao, Chen, Robinson, Fan, 2020).

The above reflection is unconnected with the Nigeria situation, as many SMEs have been perpetually collapsed during the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic (Oyewale, Adebayo, Kehinde, 2020). The presence of many SMEs in sectors greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic has been argued as one of the significant factors accounting for the vulnerability of SMEs, including the transportation, retail trade and tourism and hospitality sectors (Fairlie, 2020). Similarly, other vulnerable factors include that SMEs have less cash fall back than large corporations and are more impacted by the human resource and capital underuse (Guo, Yang, Huang, Guo, 2020). The contention also revolves around many SMEs' dependency on international and national supply chains, which were also affected

by the disruption caused by the COVID-pandemic (Lutfi, Buntuang, Erdiyansyah, Hasanuddin, 2020). SMEs also face the challenge of a decrease in consumer purchasing strength as a result of their consumers losing sources of income from the economic disruptions of the pandemic. In other words, it condenses consumers' economic capability ineffectually with consequences on SMEs patronage (Bartik, Bertrand, Cullen, Glaeser, Luca, Stanton, 2020).

Another implication of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs can be argued from the prism of social distancing introduced as a measure to curtail the virus. Studies have shown that the social distancing measure restricts SMEs' movement and interaction on many grounds with consequences such as declining customer bases and frequent patronage (Harel, 2021). Many SMEs have lost touch with customer bases and anticipated patronage. In other words, social distancing has engendered major disruptions to SMEs' business structures and the existing relationships between SMEs and other business partners, including suppliers, distributors and consumers, respectively. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold in strands and varieties, more evidence is being revealed about its impact on SMEs' jobs in the informal sector. Within the short term of impact, the economic performance of many nations continued to decline with mass liquidation of SMEs across major industrial sectors (Marques, Ferreira, 2009). While the uncertainty about the resurgence of SMEs remains unclear, available evidence reveals that the potential impacts on SMEs are probably going to persist for a long time, even after the pandemic (Williams, Kedir, 2018).

There is sparse literature that has interrogated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the performance of SMEs in the informal sector economy, with reference to Nigeria. While it is clear that the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be entirely unravelled at this time, as the pandemic still ravages nations and economies, several arguments have been suggested through government interventions (Gerald, Obianuju, Chukwunonso, 2020). For instance, studies have reported the consistent government support for the revival of SMEs in China (Song, Yang, Tao, 2020; Guo et al., 2020). However, there is no evidence of government support rendered to SMEs during the pandemic. This conclusion explains the narration of liquidation among many SMEs in Nigeria during the pandemic (de Vries, Liebrechts, van-Stel, 2020).

Nevertheless, as the crises continue to linger and the necessity for support deepens, it is important to assess the effectiveness of current policies. For instance, Harel (2021) identified the paycheck and protection programme as significant to small businesses survival prospect in the United States. However, the structural arrangement of the programme lopsided its resource towards larger firms and this may have dwindled its efficacy for the revival of small businesses. In China, Song, Yang and Tao (2020) analysed government support in the form of disbursement deferrals and indemnities for improving SMEs cash streams. The study found that the distribution of loans to small businesses is not effective in easing SMEs cash constraints or reassuring the reopening of small businesses. In contrast to the Nigerian case, there is no available evidence to support the revitalisation of small businesses affected by the global pandemic (Oyewale, Adebayo, Kehinde, 2020). This conclusion provokes the need to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the survival of small businesses in Nigeria's informal sector.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

4.1. Research philosophy

The study employed the interpretivist research philosophical approach to appreciate and understand the characteristics and challenges of the informal sector on the one hand, and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on small and micro-businesses in the informal sector of the Nigerian economy. The interpretivist philosophical assumptions afford the opportunity to qualitatively understand and interpret the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs in the informal sector (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2009.). Interpretivism allows for the integration of human elements into a study. It focuses on meanings that humans convey into a research situation and how these meanings are interpreted (Yin, 2016). The human elements of SMEs are interrogated to make meaning of the characteristics and challenges of the informal sector and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for business owners in SMEs.

4.2. Research design and population of study

The exploratory research design approach becomes important to expand the limited knowledge on COVID-19 implications on SMEs in the informal sector of the Nigerian economy. The population of study comprised SMEs business owners selected from retail traders, construction, agriculture, tourism and transportation, respectively, from the informal sector in Mushin Central Market of Lagos, Nigeria (see Table 1 for sample distribution). The justification for the choice of these businesses were based on their dominance in the SMEs businesses of the informal economy. The large number of businesses in these businesses are predominantly SMEs who are constrained with one challenge or the other, resulting from the global health pandemic (Sun, Zhang, Dinca, Raza, 2021). The characteristics of SMEs employed is defined in the Nigeria context as an enterprise consisting between 11–100 labour sizes (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The main population of study were, however, restricted to the owners of these businesses. A total of 17 SME business owners selected. This sample size is justified as appropriate to unearth deep and explorative research findings in tandem with the qualitative research philosophies (Creswell, 2014). The selection of SME operators does not involve the consideration of any known skills or criteria, hence the pattern of interaction between the interviewer and respondents aided in understanding their specific perceptions, opinions and experiences about the subject matter.

4.3. Recruitment technique and instrument

The study employed the purposive sampling technique to recruit SME respondents. The recruitment procedures start by first identifying a broad base of SMEs in the informal sector, and thereafter referrals were made for the recruitment of selected respondents who understand the characteristics and challenges of the informal sector and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria. Semi-structured interviews were employed as the data collection instrument. The rationale is to allow for the uncovering of supplementary questions and to ensure lucidity to all responses in the circumstance that there are ambiguities (Kumar, 2012). An interview guide was used to guide the flow of questions and responses (Creswell, 2012). There are specific challenges common in the interview method of data collection, including vagueness in language non-clarity of responses to interview questions and the possibility of misunderstandings occurring between the interviewer and respondents (Sekaran, Bougie, 2016; Shields, Rangarajan,

2013). These challenges were overcome in this study as follows. Firstly, the interview questions were designed in the English language, a language understood by all respondents, and it was ensured that the structure of the questions minimises any possible misinterpretations as the interview unfolds. Secondly, possible misinterpretations between the interviewer and respondents were controlled by ensuring that leading and repetitive questions were avoided.

4.4. Data collection approach

The data collection procedures neatly comply with all the non-pharmaceutical interventions in the prevention and spread of the COVID-19 virus and all interviews were conducted through the telephone with the entire procedure lasting for three (3) months. All interviews were pre-recorded with a recording device and notes were taken in some instances to ensure clarity where ambiguity was observed. The interviewees were selected across five informal sectorial businesses. The interview commenced with a brief introduction of the researcher and the goal of the study. It was ensured that respondents indicated their willingness to participate with a consent form appropriately signed. The general question was designed to specifically uncover insight into the implications of the COVID-19 on SMEs in the informal sector of the Nigerian economy. Among the specific questions were: What are the structural arrangement and activities of the informal sector in this COVID-19 era? What are the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations of SMEs in the informal sector economy? How has government support ameliorated these challenges? What are the innovative measures being put in place for business continuity in this COVID-19 pandemic era?

4.5. Data quality and analysis

The reliability of the qualitative data was ensured with Trochim and Donnelly's (2007) four measures of trustworthiness of qualitative reliability, including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of data. For credibility, it was ensured that the opinions of all the respondents were reflected in the results of the study, while the concern of transferability was ascertained by ensuring that the results emerging from the data are transferable to other contexts. Dependability procedure was ensured by complying with all ethical considerations including the secrecy of respondents' information. Lastly, the confirmability of data was ensured such that there is a synergy between the data and results. The recorded interviews were later transcribed, and the NVivo (v.12) qualitative software was employed to make meaning of the data by identifying phrases and relevant themes and sub-themes that are related to the research problems.

The most frequently mentioned themes were identified with the utility of Word Cloud. Thereafter, the content qualitative analytical tool was employed to make sense of the different themes and sub-themes as they speak to the research objectives and problem (Yin, 2016). This procedure was further enhanced by reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews and the analyses of the themes and sub-themes thereafter were performed. The data analysis provides insight into the discourse of the characteristics and challenges of the informal sector, while drawing major implications through the lens of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic era. The themes and sub-themes were discussed and analysed using respondents' verbatim responses and pseudo codes such as Resp.1, Resp. 2, Resp. 3 etc. Regarding ethics, it was ensured that in the conduct of the study and reporting of findings, the identities of all respondents were properly protected, and respondents were adequately

briefed before their voluntary participation in the study. The limitation of the methodology is the challenge of assessing respondents for face-to-face interviews.

Table 1. Matrix of respondents' demographic distribution

| Respondents | Gender | Sector of Business | Experience | Education | Age |
|---------------|--------|--------------------|------------|-----------|-----|
| Respondent 1 | Male | Retail trade | 13 | Bachelor | 44 |
| Respondent 2 | Male | Construction | 10 | Masters | 40 |
| Respondent 3 | Male | Tourism | 9 | Bachelor | 27 |
| Respondent 4 | Male | Retail trade | 12 | Grade 12 | 29 |
| Respondent 5 | Male | Retail trade | 4 | Grade 12 | 30 |
| Respondent 6 | Male | Construction | 5 | Bachelor | 34 |
| Respondent 7 | Female | Agriculture | 11 | Bachelor | 41 |
| Respondent 8 | Female | Agriculture | 12 | Masters | 38 |
| Respondent 9 | Male | Transportation | 3 | Grade 12 | 33 |
| Respondent 10 | Female | Transportation | 7 | Grade 12 | 33 |
| Respondent 11 | Male | Retail trade | 6 | Bachelor | 29 |
| Respondent 12 | Male | Tourism | 10 | Grade 12 | 39 |
| Respondent 13 | Male | Construction | 16 | Bachelor | 30 |
| Respondent 14 | Male | Agriculture | 2 | Masters | 34 |
| Respondent 15 | Female | Agriculture | 10 | Grade 12 | 21 |
| Respondent 16 | Male | Transportation | 8 | Bachelor | 26 |
| Respondent 17 | Male | Tourism | 4 | Bachelor | 26 |

Source: Data Analysis.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

This section of the paper present and analyse the different themes and sub-themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis (see Table 2 and Figure 1). This becomes crucial to lay a foundation for clear analysis and interpretation of the various findings. Each objective is analysed in tandem with the various themes and sub-themes as shown below.



Figure 1. Word Cloud showing themes and sub-themes

Source: Qualitative data analysis.

5.1. Challenges of the informal sector

The informal sector across the globe constitutes the highest employer of labour in any known economy (Etim, Daramola, 2020). The composition and activities of this sector represent the highest revenue generation with different economic sector participants yet remain unorganised and structurally deficient in terms of regulations (Etim, Daramola, 2020). The case of Nigeria explains the myriad of unstructured and non-regulatory activities that make up the informal sector (Akinwale, 2014). The lack of appropriate regulatory frameworks and monitoring activities has continued to engender a constellation of challenges on the activities and for participants in the informal sector economy. These challenges continue to reflect on the nature of economic activities and the economic strength of participants. For instance, despite being the largest employer of labour in Nigeria, the informal sector has been argued as a poverty net for many Nigerians who could not access the formal economy as result of institutional and social constraints (NBS, 2020). The fundamental problem of the informal sector is further enhanced by the overwhelming presence of SMEs as participants who lack any regulatory guidelines within the context of Nigeria.

Most of the respondents express a collection of challenges embedded in the operation of the informal sector. For instance, some of the perceptions shared include precarious work conditions, absence of labour legislation, labour intensive production processes and poor risk management initiatives, among others. Several other challenges include poor working conditions, unorganised work arrangements and low entry requirements. Importantly, the challenge of low entry requirements validates the conclusion that the informal sector activities are largely open to all without checks and regulations. Respondents also argued that the need to constitute a regulatory system for the evaluation of the informal sector activities remains a concern for the growth of the informal sector. The analysis that this paper seeks to advance is the contention that having a regulatory framework without commitment to ensuring that the Nigeria's informal sector is regulated in tandem with international best standards results in activities in futility as the challenges of participants are bound to continue. Therefore, ameliorating the challenges of the informal sector in Nigeria requires charting a new course with robust commitment to address the problems of most of the labour force operating in the informal sector. One of the respondents reminisced in the following way:

I have been in the informal sector for more than 15 years of operation and I can tell you the level of work activities that happens. We keep hearing that this sector generates revenue more than the formal economy and remains a haven for many unemployed Nigerians, yet there are several issues with this sector. The informal sector is not enjoying any form of regulation and the government seems not to recognize this important sector. As a result, every form of work activities is being perpetuated here and people are subject to many forms of work degradation as a result of the lack of organisation on the part of the government (Resp. 7).

Respondents also explain the absence of labour protection and safety for SMEs in the informal sector of the Nigerian economy with consequences for the protection of operators. Many of the respondents expressed an increased level of safety challenges for SME operators whose protection interest is not covered or recognised by any known labour legislation in Nigeria. For instance, the contentions advanced by the respondents include the exclusion of SMEs and informal sector operators from labour law legislation, which

has continued to be reflect as a limitation on the safety and protection of informal sector workers. One of the respondents, a construction SME, explained as follows:

As SMEs operators in the informal sector, it is no doubt that we are daily confronted with several challenges. In my own opinion, one thing I am concern about is the safety of people that work in this sector. The labour law does not give coverage to the informal sector operators in Nigeria, even though this is not the case is some developing country like Ghana. People are subjected to varying work challenges without protection coverage. In the construction informal sector where I work for instance, I am not being protected by any known laws in the instance where I am involved in occupational accident. I have also seen a situation where people are abounded after their involvement in occupational accident. So, for me, the present state of the informal sector needs to be addressed so that SMEs in this sector can relish some labour protection (Resp. 13).

Many of the respondents also add to the challenges with evidence of poor risk-management initiatives and labour-intensive production systems among SMEs in the informal sector. For instance, it was argued that many SMEs lack skills for the management of risk for continuous business growth. This conclusion is a testament of the low entry requirement necessities such that hands on desk experience is not mandatory for operation. In addition, the production system is lacking in the utility of conventional technological expertise, provoking the need for labour-intensive capacity. This analysis explains the context and structure of Nigeria's informal sector considering poor support systems and effective adoption of global production acceptable production systems. In other words, labour-intensive production pathways are time consuming and financially challenging, with many SMEs facing bankruptcy. An agricultural produce business owner reported as follows:

One of the challenges we face as SMEs in the informal sector is the lack of competitive technological process in our production systems. For instance, most of the SMEs in the informal sector that I know are not technology compliance and this has a huge effect on manpower and finances. We must take in more workers to execute a job, and this goes with more finance as well (Resp. 16).

5.2. COVID-19 conundrums for SMEs in the informal sector

The economic disruptions caused by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic have continued to engender havoc on organisations, with more discerning effects on the survival and operations of SMEs in the informal sector economy. Several economic disruptions were recounted during the lockdowns in Nigeria, with fallouts on the activities of SMEs. For instance, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) non-pharmaceutical promulgation of social distancing as a measure of curtailing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of many SMEs as a result of poor purchasing power and declined patronage. Many of the respondents argued that their businesses suffered a massive setback during the pandemic leading to the liquidation of many SMEs. The respondents also reported other challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs performance, including weak financial strength, low profit margin, reduced customer base, and low utilisation of human resources, among others. For instance, the financial strength of many SMEs was reported to be dwindling as a result of national lockdowns resulting in low patronage.

Many of the SMEs interviewed argued that the overwhelming impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on jobs across the industrial and service sector of the Nigerian economy has resulted in loss of jobs and unceasing retrenchment among many SMEs in the informal sector. In other words, many SMEs have gone into extinction with exuding consequence on family and household maintenance. The contention that follows with the constellation of submission is the consequence on the existing Nigerian over-saturated labour market. To be sure, the extinction of many SMEs will improve the unemployment rate with dire implications on the growth of the Nigerian economy.

The array of challenges was more deleterious among SMEs in the agro-allied produce. The argument captures that many SMEs in the agriculture sector were not able to continue with business, as customers continued to decline as a result of the social distancing policy, among others. Many SMEs lacking the appropriate skills and knowledge for a proactive response to the pandemic could not withstand the business challenges provoked by the pandemic. The pandemic engendered a rapid sales decline and poor financial capacity to deal with operational expenses, and poor structure of supply chain functions for many SMEs in the informal sector as it were. One of the respondents has the following to say:

The pandemic has affected so much than I can explain, especially for agro-allied SMEs. We have drastically been witnessing a reduced customer base and low profit margin. We have lost so much since the pandemic started as our business has been witnessing a downward spiral. We cannot afford to pay rent for continued service since we have lost so much of our customer and how production has also been declining. As the impact of the pandemic continues, we might have to close business for now (Resp. 8).

Other SMEs that are still in business reported a reduced financial strength and gradual exit of their businesses as a result of low customer base and patronage. In the areas of maintaining staff strength and salaries, many of the respondents highlighted that the first lockdown measures greatly affected their human resource management, such that many employees were retrenched due to their reduced capacity to continue with the payment of salaries. One of the respondents explained as follows:

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously affected our business. The most devastating effect occur during the first phase of the national lockdown. At this point, we were unable to pay salaries and rents. We were struggling to ensure that the business does not close in every way possible. When the lockdown was lifted, we realized that people become sceptical to patronize us for the safety of their health and all of these made us suffer greatly in terms of financial strength (Resp. 10).

The challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs in the informal sector were also reported through the lens of supply chain functions. For instance, many of the respondents in the service-related component of the informal sector reported disruption in the supply chain business activities. Specifically, the effect of the national lockdown disrupted the smooth running of supply of goods, and this affected the capacity of SMEs to adequately meet the demands of their customers. In effect, business integrity and finance of many SMEs were negatively impacted. A business owner in retail trade reported as follows:

My business was seriously impacted during the national lockdown, and we could not get supply of materials from our supplier. This also affected our supply capacity to our customers and we still observing that our business was being affected negatively in a way. The supply chain disruption has caused also to lose many customers even after the lockdown was lifted, many of customers never patronize us again. It was understandable that some were mindful of their health, but we as SMEs are really feeling the impact (Resp. 10).

5.3. The future of SMEs amid the COVID-19 pandemic

The future of SMEs in the informal sector with the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic worldwide looks uncertain. For instance, the changes that global economies have witnessed in recent times have much to say about the survival and continued relevance of SMEs. Several positive outlooks were argued as critical to the survival of SMEs, such as palliatives and loans, government support measures, the inculcation of technology and innovation, engaging with digital business and the need to adapt to the trends of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the respondents argued that the only option for the survival of SMEs is to embrace important changes in the transaction and management of businesses. It was further contended that since the COVID-19 pandemic still has a long path to extinction, it is logical for SME owners to start adapting to the changing trends of the pandemic.

The general perception of the future of SMEs presents a positive outlook if appropriate measure on the part of SMEs is imbibed for survival. The argument raised in this paper is the verity that SMEs need to employ strategic change tactics in the management of their business for the avoidance of extinction. One of the business owners shared the following:

We have seen that the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to stay at least for a long time to come, and this means a lot for us in the SMEs. We cannot afford to go off from business and put our families and other dependents in hardship. We must do all to stay in business. One of the measures I think we can employ to sustain the future of SMEs is the need to embrace technology and innovation. This I believe we enhance our production and distribution capacities such that the concern of social distancing will be addressed (Resp. 2).

Many of the respondents also reflect on the importance of government support and palliatives for SME survival in the pre- and post-COVID-pandemic. The description of perspectives explains that the economic disruption by the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs' business survival requires support in the form of palliatives from government and relevant stakeholders for SME continuity. This argument dovetails with the practice in other climes to keep SMEs in business. However, one wonders if the Nigerian government can live up to the expectation of rescuing SMEs in the informal sector for continued survival in the COVID-19 pandemic.

I think the future of SMEs as we speak now. COVID-19 pandemic as you are aware has caused SMEs so much lost in terms of finance and customer base. We need the intervention of the government. We need palliatives and loans to be able to stay in business now and in the future. We understand SMEs in other countries are enjoying this privilege, but ours is still not clear. For the future of SMEs to be intact, we need this support (Resp. 15).

Table 2. Major themes and sub-themes

| Objectives | Themes | Sub-themes |
|--|--|---|
| To identify and explain the challenges of the informal sector | Regulatory and monitoring activities, institutional and social constraints, precariousness, absence of labour legislation and unorganized work arrangement | Labour intensive production process, poor management of risk, poor work conditions and absence of labour protection |
| To assess the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs in the informal sector | Liquidation of SMEs, low patronage, low profit margin, weak financial strength and low utilization of human resource | Disruption of SMEs supply chain, loss of job, retrenchment and increased operational expenses |
| To understand the future of SMEs in post COVID-19 pandemic | Palliatives and loans, government support, inculcation of technology and innovation and strategic management of business | Digital business and adoption to global changes and trends in doing business |

Source: Data analysis.

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The focus of this study has been to understand informality through the symbolic characteristics and challenges of the informal sector beyond the conventional discourse of participation to a more recent discussion of the implication of the COVID-19 pandemic on small business operations in the informal sector. The small and micro-businesses offer a rich empirical laboratory for understanding the impact of COVID-19 on businesses and economics across the globe. Small and micro-businesses have been harnessed to upturn the economic growth of many nations, and therefore some fallouts from the global health pandemic have consequently affected the performance of these economics. As the paper demonstrated, a number of challenges were unpacked from the activities of SMEs in the informal sector, such as unorganised and structural deficiency in terms of regulation, precarious work conditions, lack of access to technology and labour-intensive production systems. This array of challenges reinforces the poor management of the activities of the informal sector by the Nigerian government. Other challenges include lack of regulatory frameworks and monitoring activities, absence of labour regulations and poor risk management initiatives (Anakpo, Mishi, 2021; Akpan, Udoh, Adebisi, 2020; Emmanuel et al., 2016).

The findings also show that the COVID-19 pandemic has provoked major implications for SMEs in the informal sector, including continuous declines in purchasing power parity and patronage as a result of the social distancing measures and lockdowns. Many small businesses have been liquidated while surviving ones are left with weak financial strength. The concern of low profit margins and dwindling customer bases was also reported (Shen et al., 2020; Beglaryan, Shakhmuradyan, 2020). The collection of these challenges is evident in small businesses in Nigeria, where many SMEs are seen struggling with poor patronage in this era of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings also revealed loss of jobs and retrenchment, increases in operational cost and poor supply chain functions for SMEs in the informal sector. Again, this reflects the swelling rate of unemployment in Nigeria as

many SMEs are being liquidated. These findings support existing research (Oyewale, Adebayo, Kehinde, 2020; Lutfi et al., 2020).

On the future of SMEs, the study has been able to establish that for survival amid the COVID-19 pandemic, informal sector SMEs must embrace structural changes, including the adoption of new technology for business. In addition, the sustainability of SMEs can also be backed with the provision of adequate government support through palliatives and the availability of loans to cushion the effect of the COVID-19 on small businesses. The crusade for SMEs' inculcation of innovation cannot be overemphasised, especially in this period of COVID-19. For instance, results showed the need for innovative production processes for continuous relevance. Similarly, emphasis on the application of strategic change management was stressed as critical to the sustainability of SMEs in the COVID-19 era. These findings support existing research (Harel, 2021; Gerald, Obianuju, Chukwunonso, 2020).

7. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Stretching the discourse of informality beyond the narrative of structural arrangement and organisation to a more profound theme of the challenges and characteristics of informal sector SMEs in a COVID-19 pandemic offers a new research frontier to appreciate the impact of COVID-19 on small businesses in Nigeria. The study concludes that while the performance of small businesses continued to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to constitute appropriate support measures for the sustainability, survival and future of informal sector SMEs cannot be over-emphasised. This conclusion is premised on the importance of informal sector SMEs to the growth of the Nigerian economy. The canon of informality studies must therefore seek to understand the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic for a more robust understanding of informal sector SMEs' challenges and prospects. Expanding the discussion through this pathway will possibly afford researchers and analysts the opportunity to carefully dissect the analysis of informality through engendering appropriate measures for the future and relevance of SMEs as an important economic hub of development.

The study concluded that the challenges of informal sector cannot be unconnected from the lack of labour protection for these cohorts of the working people. Therefore, SMEs in a bid to survive requires a reasonable level of labour protection. The study also argued that, while the challenge of the informal sector continues to escalate on the working people, there are obvious consequences for the working people in this sector of the economy. The assumption that the labour law is not tilted in favour of informal sector SMEs, for ensuring appropriate regulation possess important pointers for this conclusion. This conclusion supports that the labour law is value as an important tool required for the protecting the interest of SMEs in the informal sector of the Nigerian economy. The study advocates varying conclusions, on the question of the responsibilities of the Nigerian labour union movement as an organization created for the protection of the working people. While this role is staunchly pursued, the study hopes for an improved protection and welfare of SMEs in the informal sector.

The study further concludes on the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs survival in the informal sector economy. In a sense, it is suggested that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic should be strategically measured and understood in the interest of SMEs in the informal sector. This is important for understanding the welfare of informal sector SMEs and how varied assistance can be employed in their best interest. As such, the

study anticipates engendering a robust discussion on how events that shape the COVID-19 pandemic can be employed for improving the conditions of work for SMEs in the informal sector. Perhaps, a probe of likely solutions to overcoming informal economy SMEs challenges remain a component part of the issues constraining regulating the work activities of the informal sector. Nonetheless, that more is anticipated from the realm of the Nigerian Federal Government by ensuring meaningful work activities are engaged in the informal sector, and more importantly by advancing for the protection of these categories of the economy for the future and sustained relevance of informal sector SMEs.

The suggestion is the call for a more supportive measure in ameliorating the challenges of informal sector SMEs in this era of COVID-19. Overall, the study recommends a more regulatory function of the operations of the informal sector SMEs in a bid to address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses. The implication is the goal of ensuring the survival of SMEs in a post-COVID-19 world, particularly for continuous economic growth. The study recommends a realistic solution from the Nigerian government towards reviewing the existing labour law by overhauling the moribund provisions that exclude informal sector coverage in labour protections. This will ensure informal sector SMEs are adequately protected by laws. The government must also show some level of sympathy in the areas of providing loans and palliatives for SMEs affected by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This gesture will only ensure business continuity of informal sector SMEs but will create a future of business relevance. Further research can be investigated to understand the implications of post COVID-19 on SMEs of the informal sector economy. This is important to be able to situate a comparison analysis of the impact of pre and post COVID-19 on the business performance of SMEs in the informal sector economy for policy action.

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