

Challenges Faced by Foreign Entrepreneurs, a Stumbling Block in Running Their Businesses in South Africa?: Case Study of Alice Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa

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ABSTRACT In developing countries, small and medium enterprises are important for economic growth and development. Entrepreneurship supports the process of economic development, fosters economic growth, job creation, and reduces rural unemployment and migration. Foreign entrepreneurs are part of those who build capital through risk and initiative. This study is to find out how foreign entrepreneurs in South Africa cope with the challenges they have to face in running their businesses in Alice town in the Eastern Cape, through a qualitative design. This study came up with plausible recommendations to make the foreign entrepreneurs journey a success for both the South African economy and the business owners.

INTRODUCTION

There are several definitions as to what an entrepreneur is, the word generally carries the meaning of new ideas and creative development in the framework of large organizations (Maziriri and Madinga 2016). Gree and Thurnik (2003) note that entrepreneurship was recognized as one of the economy drivers in most countries. According to Bogan and Darity (2008), entrepreneurship can provide immigrants with work plus income, because they find it difficult to enter into the labor markets. Globally immigrants who are entrepreneurs are becoming significant driving forces in the creation of new businesses opportunities (Thakkar 2015). Entrepreneurship is a process of creating something new with value by devoting the necessary time and effort, assuming the accompanying financial, psychic, social risks and receiving the resulting rewards of monetary, personal satisfaction and independence. In South Africa the reduction unemployment was estimated at 25.6 percent due to high contributions of foreign entrepreneurs (Statistics South Africa 2013). In South Africa, SMEs contribute fifty-six percent of private sector employment and thirty-six percent of the gross domestic product.

For example, research found that foreign entrepreneurs have founded or co-founded up to

25.3 percent of most of the science and technology firms in America (Hohn 2012). Wong and Primecz (2011) in their study found that in Hungary in Budapest, Chinese entrepreneurs significantly contribute to the development of local markets and fill the gaps in local markets with sought-after goods but often face tremendous challenges. To stimulate entrepreneurship it is imperative to understand the challenges that affect entrepreneurs in order to overcome the challenges and promote new policies and measures to create new business ventures (Maziriri and Madinga 2016).

South Africa's case is no different, most of the foreign entrepreneurs establish businesses as alternatives to working in low-paying jobs and face enormous challenges. Pendleton et al. (2006) note that South Africa is a rainbow nation which is composed of various racial groups from all facets of the earth, from them emerge entrepreneurs. These foreign entrepreneurs due to several unwelcoming reasons in a foreign land often move into low-rent neighborhoods with minimal economic activity coupled with deteriorating physical conditions. Foreign entrepreneurs in Alice Town, South Africa, face several challenges in running their business. All around the world the smooth sailing of foreign entrepreneurs has been hindered by the fact of their immigrant status. Brian (2008) says that in Rus-

sia foreign entrepreneurs face many barriers such as difficulties in the process of registering a business. He went on to mention that the immigration office is also quite strict with the education requirements and problems with the tax office's regulation requiring a guarantee of paying taxes. Alice Town in South Africa has foreign entrepreneurs who are facing challenges in their business. They experience problems in opening bank accounts, acquiring visas or permits, and they have no access to finance and credit, which slows down the development of entrepreneurial activity in the country (Gough 2016). Despite the fact that they struggle in their business they still find strategies to cope so that they prosper in running their businesses. Therefore this study investigated how foreign entrepreneurs in Alice Town coped with challenges they faced in running their businesses.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design which is explained by Stangor (2011) as a descriptive research that is focused on observing and describing events as they occur, with the goal of capturing all of the richness of the everyday behavior. The qualitative research takes place in natural settings employing a combination of observations, interviews, and document reviews. The research used qualitative method of data collection with in-depth interviews as research instrument. More to that interviews were used in the research to collect as much information from the respondents as they can since they are dealing with a delicate issue, as the primary methods of data collection in qualitative research are observations, interviews and focus group discussions.

RESULTS

Problems with Shortage of and Expensive Infrastructure

Foreign entrepreneurs in South Africa face challenges of inadequate infrastructure both financial wise and in terms of accessibility (Peberdy 2015). Basic physical infrastructure is required for economic development, such as good roads, buildings, ample power supply, good rail and transportation facilities (Akwani 2009). However this is a huge set back to these immigrants

in business. During the interviews respondents said that they are facing difficulties in getting offices of their own where they can operate from. They said that *"the municipality said that they are not able to get offices because the spaces were fully occupied."*

Five foreign entrepreneurs said that *"even though we have managed to acquire offices, we are having a problem of paying high rent and the space in the offices is too small."* One respondent said: *"We are paying rent which is too high in these new offices at Kwantu Mall; this makes us to remain with little profit. At times we have to cut the salaries of the employees in order to pay the rents."*

To deal with this problem these participants said that *"we end up squatting in other people's offices or we start building shacks which are illegal so that they may be able to operate."* The other three respondents said that *"we have been given spacious offices and they cannot complain about paying high rentals because it is worth it."* They were satisfied about the infrastructure they acquired.

Inadequacy of Appropriate Skills and Machinery

For successful and efficient delivery of services and goods, machinery and skills work as the vehicle of achievement (Peberdy 2015). The participants during the interviews also shared about the challenges they faced in their businesses due to the lack of adequate machinery and appropriate skills. Four of the respondents said *"we did not manage to proceed with my school due to lack of capital a contribution factor to lack of machinery to boost the business."* Participants further mentioned that there were qualified degree holders in various fields but were not getting relevant opportunities. One respondent whose highest level of education was secondary school said, *"I really need to be more educated in order for me to fit in this changing world."*

In terms of machinery most foreign entrepreneurs did not have the up-to-date equipment which could enable them to do their business without flaws. Those who ran cell phone shops said *"we do not have enough money to buy the machinery that will make our business effective, like the one for blocking cell phone hackers"* thus they lacked new android equipment which could help them to block cell phone hackers. Two participants who run a saloon busi-

ness, during the interview noted that they were comfortable with the equipment they had, because thoughts of upgrading had become mere dreams. Others who run the sewing business said: *“latest machinery is expensive and it needs a lot of capital to buy the machinery this makes us to improvise and rely with what we have.”*

Participants said *“sometimes we do short courses but not all of us can afford this.”* As a result these entrepreneurs end up renting the machinery and borrowing each other rather than buying their own because they cannot afford. Some resort to buying in instalments which is time and profit consuming.

Difficulties in Acquiring Work Permits and Operating Licences

According to this research, foreign entrepreneurs are not popular in South Africa, hence acquiring legit business papers/permits is a huge challenge. A work permit is a written record that authorizes specific work, at a specific location, for a specific period of time to certain people in certain countries (Timberg 2005). The interviewees said *“they were facing challenges in attaining work permits and operating licences.”* which led them to being asked on how they deal with issue of getting relevant documentation to operate. Three of the interviewees stated that *“we end up marrying South Africans for us to acquire these permits or for us to get permanent residence to make our life easy since following the right procedure is not easy.”* They end up marrying South African citizens for them to work and stay in South Africa. *“We are using asylum paper instead of business permit visa”* said some of the respondents.

Five of the participants said that they had work permits and were legal immigrants but they echoed concerns of delays in getting the operating licences. One of the interviewee said: *“I had to wait for long hours and being directed from one office to another to get a licence, and I couldn’t operate my business without one because the fine imposed is heavy.”* They complained that the process was too long and strenuous but they had to be patient.

Challenges in Opening Bank Accounts and Accessing Credit Loans

Mauchi et al. (2014) note that lack of access to capital, credit schemes and the constraints of financial systems are regarded by potential en-

trepreneurs as main hindrances to business innovation and success in developing economies. It was noted that interviewees faced challenges of attaining bank accounts and of accessing loans for their businesses. Three participants said that they did not have bank accounts to invest their money because a lot was demanded from them as foreign entrepreneurs. They said *“the banks charge us high interest and there is a lot of documentation required.”* Seven of the participants said *“we do not have collateral so it is difficult for us to get loans from banks.”* These entrepreneurs are denied bank loans because they do not have collateral security. Viriri and Makurumidze (2014) emphasized that access to capital and lack of customers are the two major barriers to self-employment. However, Knight and Cavusgil (1996), have also pointed out that entrepreneurs are denied loans because they do not present acceptable feasibility study or good business plan and they are unwilling to acquire formal training in how to run a business hence many banks would rather deny to give entrepreneurs loans rather than giving what they believe to be a high risk loan.

Therefore, to deal with that challenge the participants said *“we end up getting loans from friends or families but this has caused problems because some people delayed paying back the money which is supposed to be used for business.”* Nonetheless, Fisher (2005), notes that entrepreneurs need to be creative, real entrepreneurs can start something out of nothing. This is called “bootstrapping”, and an overwhelming number of these African entrepreneurs obtain finance through this highly creative process, as they have problems in opening bank accounts and acquiring visas and permits.

Government Regulations and Policies which Bind Foreign Entrepreneurs

Despite existing policies on financial support for foreign entrepreneurs, very few entrepreneurs receive financial help when they need it. Some of the participants said *“government taxes and regulations are one of the major challenges we face.”* Herrington et al. (2008) argue that the government offers little assistance to foreign entrepreneurs who contribute to the growth of entrepreneurship in South Africa. The researcher asked the interviewees how they deal with the policies of the government. One of the respondents said:

“Policy problems are quite often caused by multiple factors; negative practices of sellers like commodity trade unionism cause inflation, as people in business we feel the pinch of harsh government policies such as high taxes, statutory enactments which have a direct impact on our business.”

In order to deal with such a challenge, the foreign entrepreneurs said *“we hire few Xhosa employees and encourage them to work overtime and to provide good customer services so that we generate more profit.”* Mandipaka (2014) defines discrimination as distinguishing unfavourably; or the detection of the difference between one thing and another. According to Peberdy (2016), research some South African participants commented that: *“The fact that we are not treated equally, it affects us foreigners.”* Others were more specific, identifying such problems as *“locals threatening to close down my business”* and being *“assaulted by South Africans because I am a foreigner.”*

Lack of Entrepreneurial Education and Skills

Steenekamp et al. (2011) notes that South Africa has creative spirit, but the lack of business education, entrepreneurial skills to empower individuals is the challenge. There exists a gap in entrepreneurial training, signifying that education systems currently of South Africa fail to encourage entrepreneurship rather is seen as a failure alternative. Also Choto et al. (2014) designated that lack of training and education as a main inhibitor of entrepreneurial growth within the economy. Entrepreneurs including foreign ones often lack financial expertise, specialist business management, legal expertise and because of this failure and challenges arises. (Enabled4Enterprise 2008).

DISCUSSION

Foreign Entrepreneurs Strong Tool for Economic Growth in South Africa

The informal economy plays a significant role in the entrepreneurial, fears about the numbers of international informal economy entrepreneurs and their potential impact on South African businesses are undoubtedly exaggerated (Peberdy 2016). Choto et al. (2014) note that entrepreneurship is a strong tool for immigrants' economic

and social integration and is a means by which immigrants without education or technical skills can escape poverty. Charman and Piper (2015) were of the same idea that foreign owned small business enterprises are now a particularly significant element of the changing economy and landscape of inner-city Johannesburg. Lazear (2005) claims that Immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa are visible in a narrow band of activities of small businesses, mostly in retail or service rather than in production. Their activities involve selling curios, retailing ethnic clothes and foods, motor-car repairs, panel beating and operating hairdressing salons. Other activities include operation of restaurants, nightclubs, cafes, music shops, several import-export businesses and traditional healing practices. These foreign entrepreneurs face the following challenges in running their business.

Challenges Faced by Foreign Entrepreneurs in South Africa

The foreign entrepreneurs face infrastructure problems which hinder their progress. To overcome the problem on shortage of infrastructure, foreign entrepreneurs should form partnerships with local municipalities and government also so that they are given a priority when attaining offices or stand to operate their businesses (Khoza and Kalitanyi 2014). More to that the foreign entrepreneurs are disadvantaged as most of them have inappropriate skills and machinery. This limits their capability of gaining new entrepreneurial knowledge and being innovative (Pearson 2000). Failure of businesses in many sectors of the economy is knowledge-based thus skill shortages in the artisanal, technical and professional fields that are fundamental to the development and growth of our economy (Gough 2016). Hence, there is a need for much more substantial programs that improve qualifications, support career-pathing, enable greater flexibility and mobility and increase productivity.

Tengeh et al. (2012) says foreign entrepreneurs are at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing capital from formal financial institutions. There are not stopped by this obstacle, however from pursuing their entrepreneurial dreams (Peberdy 2016). Mostly they make use of personal savings, family credit, informal financial institutions loans and business credit, but they face challenges as their businesses

grow and require additional financial assistance which is difficult for them to get. They conventionally turn to friends, co-ethnics and self-help financial associations to feed their need for further funding (Fatoki 2014). Access to formal debt and equity markets is limited for immigrant entrepreneurs (Fatoki 2013). Thus, foreign entrepreneurs have to adopt bootstrapping strategies to keep their business standing and going forward. Due to these obstacles, immigrant entrepreneurs' need the support of government (Tengeh 2013).

These foreign entrepreneurs are individuals who take calculated risks in their businesses endeavours (Klapper et al. 2006). This involves investing in enterprises which yield financial benefits when successfully managed. These entrepreneurs face several challenges in running their businesses but they have taken initiatives of not being drawn back by these challenges they face. The foreign entrepreneurs go an extra mile to make sure they flourish in their businesses despite negative national perception of these immigrant entrepreneurs by Kalitanyi (2010) shows that foreign entrepreneurs work in the most challenging situations. According to Kalitanyi (2010), foreign entrepreneurs face challenges in accessing loans for their businesses, also even to register their businesses and when they do register they also face the challenge of paying taxes which at most times will be exorbitant. However despite the challenges they face, they still manage to continue running their businesses and at times even flourish more than the non-foreign entrepreneurs who have most advantages to prosper (Gough 2016).

Kalitanyi (2010) goes on to say that stigmatization as a result of being non-South African entrepreneur is one of the social risks a foreign entrepreneur has to take. These entrepreneurs also endure considerable xenophobic hostility directed at them and their business. Rogerson (1999) maintains the notion that most of immigrant entrepreneurs express their optimism and look at the possibilities of expanding their business enterprises elsewhere in South Africa. Surviving these conditions proves that immigrants possess the entrepreneurial quality of perseverance.

Despite the xenophobic attacks on some entrepreneurs in 2010 and the recent 2015 attacks (Peberdy 2016), Herrington et al. (2011) note government policy was considered as key

constraining factor to foreign entrepreneurs in South Africa. Bureaucracy, legislative compliances, labour legislation, time consuming administrative and legislative requirements related to registering and starting a business are amongst the factors that constrain entrepreneurial activities in the country (Gough 2016). Inefficient government bureaucracy is the most constraining factor for doing business in South Africa, which is resulting in low levels of entrepreneurial engagement. (Global Competitiveness Report 2012).

Research conducted from the South African Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2011) revealed that the government taxes and regulations are one of the major limiting factors identified. At times taxes imposed by the government on these foreign entrepreneurs are exorbitant, resulting in lower profits for the businesses (Chen 2012). Herrington et al. (2008) argues that the government offers little assistance to foreign entrepreneurs who contribute to the growth of entrepreneurship in South Africa. Generally the government's support programme for entrepreneurial development was ranked second lowest in comparison to other countries. Many development finance institutions exist in South Africa such as Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA), South Africa Micro-Finance Apex Fund (SAMAF) amongst others. These are there to assist entrepreneurs, but foreign entrepreneurs get little or no assistance from these institutions OECD (2016). There is criticism with regard to how these initiatives are managed and implemented. Herrington (2008) argues that they have no access to finance and credit as they have problems in opening bank accounts and acquiring visas and permits (Peberdy 2016). They also have to deal with customs, harassment by police and local officials and being targeted by criminals and gangs. Despite the difficult local conditions in which they operate in most of immigrant entrepreneurs express their optimism and look to the possibilities of expanding their business enterprises (Charman and Piper 2012). Foreign entrepreneurs in South Africa have no access to finance and credit from the banks and the government. Nonetheless, Fisher (2005) notes that, entrepreneurs need to be creative, real entrepreneurs can start something out of nothing. This is called "bootstrapping". An overwhelming number of these African entrepreneurs obtain finance through this highly cre-

ative process, as they have problems in opening bank accounts and acquiring visas and permits. They also have to deal with customs, harassment by police and local officials and being targeted by criminals and gangs (Peberdy 2016). Despite the difficult local conditions in which they operate, most of immigrant entrepreneurs express their optimism and look to the possibilities of expanding their business enterprises (Rogerson 1999).

CONCLUSION

The results revealed that foreign entrepreneurs face challenges but they have adopted strategies of coping in running their businesses despite the challenges they face. The study recommends that government must increase the number of support programs for foreign entrepreneurs. Institutional support organisations such as Khula and SEDA must support foreign entrepreneurs in urban areas as well as in rural areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the results of the research, numerous suggestions can be made to the government about the importance of assisting foreign entrepreneurs in the challenges they face. These suggestions, if adopted, will help business entities improve on the overall efficiency of their businesses, thereby it could be possible to drive them to profitability.

- The government must intervene and set up more support programs in the form of providing research and development as well as training for new entrepreneurs also supporting foreign entrepreneurs.
- Foreign entrepreneurs must also form joint programs in which they hold entrepreneurial seminars and workshops which will help them to address key problems that they will be encountering in their day to day operations. This will help them understand the nature and extent of the entrepreneurial environment.
- Institutional support to foreign entrepreneurs such as Ntsika, Khula, DTI and SEDA should speedily establish entrepreneurial training centres in both rural and urban area and these institutions should be targeted to teach and train owners/managers of the businesses.

- More funding should be made available to those foreign entrepreneurs which will be interested in expanding their operational bases to take advantage of economies of scale.
- Entrepreneurship should be introduced as a subject in schools so as to enhance skills and encourage upcoming entrepreneurs.

Overall, the study recommends that the government must provide a supportive and conducive environment for foreign entrepreneurs as they are seen as the engines of many world economies and help increase employment creation which leads to poverty alleviation.

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