



Business Incubator and Incubatee: A Thematic Review of Challenges and Success in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Business incubation has been widely promoted across Africa as a mechanism to stimulate entrepreneurship, generate employment, and reduce poverty; however, the outcomes of many incubation programs remain below expectations. This study aims to identify and synthesize the constraints that limit the effectiveness of business incubation, with particular attention to the perspectives of both incubators and incubatees. Employing a thematic literature review of thirty-six peer-reviewed sources retrieved from major academic databases, the analysis organized evidence into incubator-level and incubatee-level factors. At the incubator level, recurring challenges include limited staff competencies, unstable funding, inadequate governance structures, insufficient facilities, weak inter-incubator collaboration, policy friction, and sustainability risks. At the incubation level, barriers are manifested in low commitment, restricted access to technical facilities and workspaces, funding obstacles, and fragile peer networks. Networking has consistently emerged as a pivotal mechanism for overcoming resource scarcity and building collaborative capacity. The findings suggest that incubation outcomes are shaped not only by the resources and skills of incubators but also by the engagement and networking capabilities of incubatees. The study concludes that the underperformance of business incubation in Africa results from multiple interacting bottlenecks, highlighting the importance of professional capacity building, robust governance, financial stability, and the institutionalization of networks to improve entrepreneurial outcomes. By integrating fragmented evidence into a two-actor framework, this research contributes to the incubation literature and offers practical guidance for policymakers and program managers seeking to strengthen entrepreneurial ecosystems in resource-constrained environments.

Keywords

Africa; business incubation; entrepreneurial ecosystems; incubatees; incubators

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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial training has been echoed worldwide as a potential panacea for promoting economic development, boosting job creation, and reducing unemployment. This view has motivated countries worldwide to push for the enhancement of entrepreneurial training through business incubation. As reported by the World Economic Forum (2019), the Sub-Saharan African region is the least competitive compared to other regions; thus, there is a great need to fast-track the practice of sustainable entrepreneurship as a way to increase the competitiveness of the region (Adusei, 2016; Bowmaker-Falconer & Herrington, 2020; Omoruyi et al., 2017). To achieve this, there is an urgent need to foster an entrepreneurial ecosystem, which has been highlighted as the best strategy (Bosma et al., 2020). Thus, this study conceived of the notion that incubators are vital elements for the development, promotion, and growth of a conducive entrepreneurial ecosystem capable of stimulating sustainable incubatee spin-offs.

It is clear that the contributions of small and medium size enterprises to general well-being have continued to push governments, non-governmental organizations, and individuals to take initiatives to promote entrepreneurial engagement. As reported in the literature (Eboigbe et al., 2023; Mburu et al., 2017; Muriith, 2017; Oluremi & Maku, 2024; Osunde, 2017), small and medium size enterprises that comprise the majority of family businesses have great potential and have been pushing the growth of African economies, projected to be the fastest growing across the world today. While the potential of business for economic development and societal well-being is clear, the challenges continue to make the attainment of this potential fall below expectations, as research reports high business failure rates across Africa (Akani, 2015).

As observed by previous studies (Botha & Bignotti, 2016; Galloway et al., 2014; Lantu et al., 2021; Ramsgaard & Østergaard, 2017; Yi, 2018), entrepreneurial exposure through internships increases the chances of interns gaining interest in becoming entrepreneurs. Thus, incubators are good and need to enhance business creation, development, and sustenance (Ahmed et al., 2022; Hannon & Chaplin, 2003; Hewitt & Van Rensburg, 2020; Paoloni & Modaffari, 2021). Sadly, entrepreneurial teaching in most of Africa has taken more of a theoretical approach with lectures at the core of action. This approach has been reported to yield little fruit worldwide, thus demanding a more practical approach to entrepreneurial training, which may be achieved through effective business incubation.

Business incubators have been reported to provide better platforms for entrepreneurial formation, especially for young people, as incubators play a vital role in instilling entrepreneurial culture, serving as a fostering avenue for idea generation, new

venture creation, mentorship growth, survival, and sustainability (Boukamcha, 2015; Giordano Martínez et al., 2018; Pauwels et al., 2016). Further, Vanderstraeten & Matthyssens (2012) uphold that incubators make it possible for start-up entrepreneurs to obtain the required assets, support, and backing required to make their ventures functional and competitive. As such, it may be argued that putting in place and ensuring proper training programs at business incubators may significantly affect the growth of incubatee entrepreneurship and incubatee post-incubation start-up initiatives.

Incubators provide supportive environments that are favorable enough to transform ideas into new ventures and provide the necessary support throughout the business registration process. It may be argued that the growing increase in both government and non-governmental organizations, as well as individual incubation programs across Africa, should significantly contribute to the growth of youth start-ups by creating jobs and fighting poverty and unemployment. Sadly, the reported unemployment and poverty situation in Africa is among the highest in the world. This raises the question of what is responsible for low entrepreneurial success despite the growing focus on business incubation across Africa. As highlighted by previous studies (Anholon et al., 2016; Gedsri et al., 2021; Lose & Kapondoro, 2020; Michelacci, 2003), for business incubators to perform effectively, they need be empowered with the appropriate skills and competencies.

Given the aforementioned, the objective of this study is to conduct a literature review on both incubator and incubatee factors that contribute to low success concerning the attainment of best results from business incubation in Africa. Researchers believe that the documentation of these factors may trigger policy makers as well as practitioners to seek solutions, such as helping business incubation initiatives across Africa achieve desired results.

Definitional Underpinnings of the Study

The literature agrees that business incubators are basically structures, systems, and/or programmes with a vision to promote entrepreneurial engagement while simultaneously minimizing business failure (Diawati & Sugesti, 2023; Lian, 2020; Martins, 2023; Rahma & Sudarmiatin, 2023; Sanyal & Hisam, 2018), thus serving as an economic development tool (Al-Mubarak & Busler, 2010). Generally, business incubators will vary in terms of how they get their incubatees, the types of services they render, the type of incubatees they serve, and their structural form as an organization (Lesáková, 2012).

Hackett & Dilts (2004) defined business incubatees as direct beneficiaries of the actions of a business incubator. This implies that business incubatees are those who undergo entrepreneurial support, which may take various forms, including business

mentorship, training acceleration, and even financial support, from a business incubator. Evidently, admission to join a business incubator is based on predefined incubator-specific requirements (Lesáková, 2012), which makes it possible for only deemed fit applicants to become incubatees.

Based on the above adopted definitions for business incubatee, this study dwells on an African literature review to highlight the factors responsible for why success continues to be slow. This study examines both incubator and incubatee factors, drawing from published African literature.

METHOD

The researchers employed a thematic review methodological approach. The review process begins with researchers engaging in online searches for documents. Online sites include Google Scholar, Researchgate, Web of Science, EBSCOhost database, Scopus, and Crossref sources. These were deemed necessary to the researchers, as they assumed through these sites, and the required materials were obtained. Once the researchers agreed to these online sites, the next issue was to agree on the keywords to be used in conducting the search. The agreed keywords included business incubation, business incubators, incubation programs, and business incubatees.

The first search efforts were general, which resulted in materials that helped in the development of the study introduction and the definitional review. This was followed by a more specific search focused purely on African research documents related to the subject aspect under study. Material search and sorting were simultaneously conducted to ease the management of the downloaded documents. This was done by creating separate folders to save documents based on focus.

Document analysis employed the thematic approach, which reviewed downloaded documents and extracted and assembled common issues. Drawing from Guest et al. (2012), the first issue in the thematic analysis was to identify leading themes. This resulted in the identification of Business incubator, and business incubees as the leading themes for analysis. This was followed by the identification of the basic themes that directly guided the analysis to attain the study objectives. The selected basic themes extracted were grouped under the following leading themes: incubator factors with basic themes: staff competences, entrepreneurial skills, funding and sponsorship, government policies, networking, facilities, sustainability, and incubatee factors with basic themes: commitment, networking, access to tech facilities, funding, and facilities.

Given the scope of the study, which focused on Africa, the inclusion criteria for articles to be utilized was twofold. First, all articles were acceptable for the purpose of establishing introductory knowledge and definitions of business incubators. Second, for

the purpose of attaining the study objectives, inclusion criteria included the fact that the articles must treat issues related to success challenges for incubators and incubatees specifically for the African continent, and must be either Crossref, Google Scholar listed, Researchgate listed, Web of Science listed, EBSCOhost database listed, or Scopus listed. Based on these inclusion criteria, the researchers noted that very little was documented as concerns about business incubation in Africa; hence, only 36 articles were finally returned for the study.

RESULTS

Business Incubator Factors Responsible for Slow Success

Business incubators have been highlighted as having great potential to foster the growth of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Bosma et al., 2020). However, there is clear evidence that, in Africa, the potential of business incubators to stipulate sustainable incubatee businesses is still low, as evidenced by high business failure rates (Akani, 2015). Several factors associated with the slow success of incubators in Africa have been documented. For example, Scaramuzzi (2002), Ahmad & Ingle (2011), Cullen et al. (2014), Lose (2019), and Muathe & Otieno (2022) have argued that one of the factors contributing to the slow success of African business incubators has to do with staff competencies at various incubators. Apparently, the competencies of staff managing business incubators in Africa may not be high enough to ensure optimal performance. This implies that staff often try to offer mentorship and coaching services that they have minimal mastery of, often resulting in incubation activities in some cases being more theoretical than real world oriented. In addition to weak staff competencies, Scaramuzzi (2002) argues that management boards that are usually needed to guide and ensure that the functioning of business incubators stay strong and focused within the defined mission and vision are highly absent in African incubators, as such slowing incubator progress in relation to achieving optimal results.

Further, deficiencies in entrepreneurial skills have been reported to affect the performance of business incubators in Africa. According to the literature (Abdullahi, 2017; Cullen et al., 2014; Dlamini et al., 2020; Gwija & Iwu, 2014; Lose et al., 2016; Michelacci, 2003), entrepreneurial skill deficiencies among incubator managers imply that the type of entrepreneurial ecosystem within such an incubator cannot really provide the required results, as entrepreneurial training within the incubator often becomes a mismatch.

Interestingly, although the desire to promote business incubators to boost entrepreneurship is strong across Africa, funding and sponsorship remain a key challenge. As noted by Bigirimana et al. (2015), Choto (2015), Tengeh & Choto (2017),

and Milne (2020), African business incubators have minimal access to the funds and sponsorship needed to record significant success. In some situations, the minimal funds available make it impossible for the incubators to recruit qualified personnel to manage and run the incubators, thereby affecting success.

Moreover, the literature notes that business incubators in Africa have inadequate facilities (Abdullahi, 2017; Lose et al., 2020; Lose & Tengeh, 2015; Tengeh & Choto, 2017), with the situation more disturbing in specialized technological incubators (Adelowo et al., 2012; Ndedi, 2009). All of these factors contribute to the low success rates registered so far by incubators in Africa. In addition, the level of networking among African incubators is reported to be weak (Lose, 2019; McAdam & Marlow, 2007), which further complicates the situation. One could expect that networking incubators can share facilities and expertise, which is scarce for better performance; however, research suggests that contrary to African business incubators operating in isolation of each other, more competition among themselves than joining forces to better serve their incubatees.

Given the aforementioned, sustainability becomes a great challenge to business incubators (Scaramuzzi, 2002); hence, their mission to contribute to entrepreneurial development and success cannot be sustained. While it may be argued that rendering sustained services will build the competences and entrepreneurial skills of business incubators, their inability to sustain their activities makes it difficult for business incubators in Africa to provide the needed assistance and register significant success.

Incubatee Factors Responsible for Slow Success

Coupled with business incubator factors, incubator factors further challenge the level of success and progress being registered. Regardless of the situation, the primary learning success factor is the commitment and determination of the learner. As reported by Choto (2015) and Tengeh & Choto (2017), incubatees in the African context at times are not highly committed during their incubation period, and this slows their actions. These low commitment levels are often noticed through high absenteeism and low interest in engaging in challenges. Coupled with low commitment is the issue of limited access to technical facilities (Abdullahi, 2017).

In many technology incubators in Africa, facilities are largely limited (Adelowo et al., 2012; Ndedi, 2009); thus, the possibility of incubatees having access to limited facilities is low. Often, the managers of the incubators are afraid that allowing incubatees to try to use the facilities exposes the facilities to risk, as such incubatees turn to be passive observers than actively involved in the manipulation of such technological tools. In some situations across Africa, facilities in terms of working space are largely insufficient, making it impossible for incubatees to access and follow training programs

comfortably. All these, as reported in the literature, slow the success of African incubation initiatives ([Abdullahi, 2017](#); [Tengeh & Choto, 2017](#)).

Further, in incubators and incubation programs, where incubatees are required to pay in some matching funds, the challenge of accessing the needed funds by incubatees tends to be low ([Scaramuzzi, 2002](#)). Often, in such situations, the incubatee may miss out on several aspects of the incubation programme as he or she may once in a while being asked to stay out of training due to lack of matching funds. In some situations, the incubatee may drop out of the incubation program even if he or she has been in the incubator for a long time.

Even with the huge challenges, networking among incubatees from varied incubation centers could significantly improve performance ([Eveleens et al., 2017](#)). Sadly, African incubatees appear to have not understood and recognized the power of networking, as networking has been reported to be low among African incubatees ([Lose, 2019](#); [McAdam & Marlow, 2007](#)). Arguably, the low networking among incubatees may be associated with the fact that even African business incubators and incubation programs have been reported to have low networking among themselves ([Kwazu, 2022](#); [Msimango-Galawe & Hlatshwayo, 2021](#); [Pettersen et al., 2016](#)).

CONCLUSION

This study has reviewed the literature highlighting the factors that challenge the success of business incubation efforts across Africa, building from both the incubator and incubatee perspectives. As pointed out in the literature, a recent approach to improve the entrepreneurial ecosystem and boost sustainable start-ups is achievable through the intensification of business incubation initiatives. As can be seen from the reviewed papers, business incubation in Africa is weakly developed, with high incubators and incubatee factors contributing to low success. This is visible in low successful entrepreneurial engagement, which makes the Sub-Saharan Africa region highly competitive when compared to other regions.

Arguably, for optimal results, actors engaging in business incubation need to rethink and strategize on how to go about their initiatives, given the constrained resource setting in Africa. For greater success as a concern for incubation initiatives in Africa, greater networking that provides for exchanges, including the use of facilities and manpower, is necessary. Further, policymakers may consider pushing for the institution of specialized regional incubators financed with state resources in African countries. Such an initiative can boost learning, stimulate entrepreneurial development and engagement among citizens, broaden economic activities, and strengthen competitiveness.

Overall, this review contributes to the body of knowledge on business incubation in Africa by offering a two-actor analytical framework that highlights the interdependence between incubators and incubatees. By synthesizing evidence across multiple contexts, the study demonstrates that sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems can only be achieved through professionalized incubator management, empowered incubatees, and strong multilevel networks. These insights provide a foundation for policymakers, program managers, and scholars to reimagine incubation models suited for resource-constrained environments, with implications for youth employment, poverty reduction, and long-term competitiveness on the continent.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides a valuable synthesis of incubation challenges, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a literature review of thirty-six documents, which restricts the analysis to published materials and may exclude relevant insights from unpublished reports, field data, or practitioner experiences. Second, the reviewed studies come from diverse African contexts with varying institutional and cultural dynamics, yet this review treats them collectively. This synthesis may obscure important country-specific differences in incubation performance, governance, and resource allocation. Additionally, because the study relied on secondary data, it was not possible to evaluate the methodological rigor of each reviewed source in detail, which may affect the robustness of certain claims.

Another limitation concerns the absence of longitudinal and comparative evidence. Most of the reviewed studies were cross-sectional or descriptive, limiting the ability to trace causal relationships between incubator or incubatee factors and incubation outcomes over time. Moreover, the review focused on incubators and incubatees but did not fully consider other actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, such as investors, universities, or regulatory agencies, whose influence may be critical. Finally, the analysis did not incorporate quantitative meta-analytic techniques, which could have provided more precise effect size estimates. These constraints highlight the need to interpret the findings as indicative rather than definitive and emphasize the importance of complementing literature reviews with empirical research.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating empirical and longitudinal designs that capture the evolution of incubation outcomes over time. In particular, studies using mixed methods—combining surveys, case studies, and econometric analysis—could provide richer insights into how specific incubator and incubatee factors interact. Longitudinal tracking of incubated firms would help clarify whether deficiencies in staff competencies, facilities, or networking have short-term or

lasting impacts on venture survival. Moreover, experimental and quasi-experimental studies, such as pilot interventions in networking or training, could directly test strategies for improving incubation effectiveness.

Comparative and context-sensitive studies are also recommended. Cross-country or regional analyses could reveal how institutional frameworks, cultural factors, and resource endowments shape incubation success in Africa. Future work should expand the scope beyond incubators and incubatees to include the role of universities, financial institutions, policymakers, and community actors in strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems. Additionally, incorporating advanced analytical techniques, such as structural equation modeling or social network analysis, may help capture complex interdependencies. Finally, future research should explore digital and virtual incubation models, which may be particularly relevant for overcoming resource constraints and fostering cross-border collaboration in Africa's emerging entrepreneurial landscape.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: P.N.S. & C.W.; Data curation: P.N.S. & C.W.; Formal analysis: P.N.S. & C.W.; Funding acquisition: P.N.S. & C.W.; Investigation: P.N.S. & C.W.; Methodology: P.N.S. & C.W.; Project administration: P.N.S. & C.W.; Resources: P.N.S. & C.W.; Software: P.N.S. & C.W.; Supervision: P.N.S. & C.W.; Validation: P.N.S. & C.W.; Visualization: P.N.S. & C.W.; Writing – original draft: P.N.S. & C.W.; Writing – review & editing: P.N.S. & C.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was not required for this study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to institution's policy.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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