

Market Linkages and Growth of Small and Medium Enterprises: Insights from County Government Support Programs

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Abstract

Small and medium enterprises suffer from inability to grow their markets and growth was curtailed by years of existing in the narrow markets at inception. This study sought to assess how market linkages offered by the county government affect the growth of SMEs in Laikipia East Sub-County, Kenya. This proposed study adopted a descriptive survey design and targeted 1200 registered SMEs in Laikipia East Sub-County who have had contact and engagement with the County Government of Laikipia via the Laikipia County Enterprise Development fund. A sample of 291 SMEs was calculated from which data was collected from the founders using a questionnaire. Data was then analysed using descriptive and regression analysis for quantitative data with the help of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences and content analysis for qualitative data. The study found that most of the respondents indicated that they were helped to get new customers to a small extent by the county government. Regression analysis showed that market linkages were statistically significant, $F(1,289)=110.$, $p<.001$ explaining 77.4% of the variance in SME growth. The study concluded that market linkages offered by the county government also significantly affect the growth of SMEs in Laikipia East Sub-County, Kenya. It was recommended that county governments ought to assist SMEs in marketing their products & services. Training programs in conjunction with institutions of higher learning on marketing and digital marketing strategies can enhance SMEs' capabilities in marketing. The findings of this study have significant implications for the Kenya Micro and Small Enterprises Policy. The significant role of market linkages in SME growth indicates a need for the policy to enhance strategies that facilitate market access.

Keywords: *Small and medium enterprises, market linkages, growth, government interventions, Laikipia County*

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1. Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are a great force of good, source of employment, and key drivers of economic growth across the globe. SMEs account for over 99% of all businesses in the developed world (Thukral, 2021). In the United States of America, SMEs employ 52% of the workforce and account for 51% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In the United Kingdom, they account for 62% of total employment and account for 25% of the GDP. SMEs provide employment to over 60% of urban population in China and cater to over 70% of Chinese GDP. SMEs have also generated employment to a tune of 65% and 54% in Thailand and Philippines respectively (Godwin & Ezekiel, 2019). SMEs also contribute to over 60% of

formal employment and over 40% of national incomes in Africa. In Kenya, there are over 2 million SMEs are found in rural areas with one million in urban areas in Kenya. They create over 80% of the jobs in Kenya and contribute between 40% and 50% of the GDP (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), 2018). It is for these reasons that growth of SMEs in any country cannot be ignored.

The term growth of SMEs is a wide, evolving, and multi-dimensional concept. At the basic level, it means changing the state of SME characteristics from that of inception to a new one with passage of time (Nkwabi & Mboya, 2019). Despite having the most developed SMEs with significant reputations in the international market, the use of well-developed incubation services for SMEs has not yielded the desired growth due to inadequate government support and a lack of support systems for SMEs (Rens et al., 2021). The growth of SMEs in Kenya has continually been affected by a number of factors. According to Awinja and Fatoki (2021), limited exposure to digital services such as digital marketing, digital loaning, and use of social media sites for marketing have been reported to significantly affect sales, and profitability of SMEs in Kenya. The SMEs also suffer from narrow access to markets and often deal with local markets characterized by low purchase power. In United States of America, growth of SMEs has two stages of evaluation; indicators related to size, age, capital and sales size of market SMEs create, level of internationalization, quality of products, levels of innovation, and the aptitude SMEs have for growth (Garcia et al., 2023). In the European Union, the growth of SMEs is determined by the extent to which innovative products, entry into new markets, how quickly they adopt and apply technology, and how they streamline internal operations to fit peculiarities of operating environment (Bi et al., 2017). In Greece, the growth of SMEs is being curtailed by a lack of appetite to seek an international market, an unfriendly financing regime, and a lack of customized strategy for growth of SMEs in various sectors of the economy (Bagheri et al., 2019). In Nigeria, Adeosun and Shittu (2022) found that SMEs were making an impact on the economy by alleviating poverty and unemployment by the sheer numbers of SMEs started every year. The growth of SMEs in Kenya has continually been affected by a number of factors associated with financing, skills of the operators, and the operating environment (Awinja & Fatoki (2021). Invariably, almost all studies on growth of SMEs in Kenya point to a grim future as the challenges of funding and skills limit the growth prospects of SMEs right from inception of the business idea (Ombongi & Long, 2018; Kinyua & Jagongo, 2022).

Market linkage refers to support rendered to SMEs to expand the reach of their goods and services beyond that one at inception to new categories of clients or new geographical locations by individuals and organizations. This market linkage can be in form of according to the SMEs a platform to showcase their products, offering the SMEs needed skills to expand their markets or even direct linkages to clients from within and without their immediate operating zones (Gudeta & Tulu, 2022). In the instances where it is a government offering market linkage, this may incorporate according to SMEs the needed capacity for an international market and offering accreditation and partnerships with marketers and clients. The other indicators of market linkage include the quality of market information offered to the SMEs, the profitability of the new markets accorded, the quality of digital marketing skills gained, and even improvement in market share. The extent to which SMEs have embraced market expansion through linkages differs with stark contrast in developed and developing countries. While SMEs in the developing world are yet to fully embrace market expansion beyond their immediate local markets, the focus for SMEs in the developed world seems to be internationalization and growth in export market. A study by Garcia et al. (2023) in the United States of America found that export market was the desire of SMEs and investigated the factors

that affected internationalization by SMEs. Without government support and encouragement, some SMEs even in the developed market werereluctant or unable to venture into lucrative export markets. A study by Bagheri et al. (2019) in theUnited Kingdom and Greece found that the overriding challenge in accessing foreign markets forSMEs in Greece was fear and reluctant to enter the profitable markets in other countriesin the European Union while those in the United Kingdom were bullish in doing so because of government support. Market expansion has been cited as one of the reasons that SMEs in the East African region have failed to compete effectively with foreign SMEs in the region or even make a significant mark in the export market. A study by Hamisi (2017) in Tanzania found that SMEs in that country could not grow their markets without targeted government support due to factors associated with inward-looking tendencies and a lack of ambition to grow beyond the narrow and low profitability market that they presently serve. It has been established that SMEs in Laikipia County suffer from inability to grow their markets and growth was curtailed by years of existing in the narrow markets at inception which are most of the time very competitive and with low-profit margins because of the low purchase power of the populace there.

The problem motivating this study is the slow and poor growth of SMEs in Laikipia County Kenya. SMEs in Kenya face a high death rate and failure to grow beyond the state of inception or change the economic fortunes of the founders in a significant way without tacit and targeted government support. This is more the case in Laikipia County where SMEs and their founders continue to face various challenges (Ndemi & Mungai, 2018). The plight of SMEs in Laikipia County mirrors the situation in other parts of Kenya where the growth of over 40,000 SMEs in Kenya has not produced good tidings in income and sustainable jobs because there is a high failure rate of SMEs in Kenya with over 70% of SMEs closing shop within one year and most of the remaining SMEs end operations before by fifth year of operations making any significant growth or expansion from the state of inception (Kinyua & Jagongo, 2022). The failures and stagnation of SMEs curtail the contribution of SMEs in economic development and threaten livelihoods and incomes of many people in absence of strategic government interventions (Ombongi & Long, 2018). Moreover, empirical evidence indicates that SME growth bereft of government support is minimal due to several challenges. The role of government intervention in growth of SMEs is under-researched in Kenya with the bulk of existing studies on growth of SMEs mostly investigating the effect of diverse management practices on growth of SMEs (Makhamara, 2022). However, there are few studies on the role of government policies and interventions on growth or performance of SMEs. This study therefore sought to assess how market linkages offered by the county government affect the growth of SMEs in Laikipia East Sub-County, Kenya.

2. Materials and Methods

The research philosophy employed in this study was positivism. This proposed study adopted a descriptive survey design because the design allowed not only for sampling but also collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. The target population for the study was 1200 registered SMEs in Laikipia East Sub-County who have had contact and engagement with the County Government of Laikipia via the Laikipia County Enterprise Development fund. The respondents were the founders of the SMEs with complete knowledge and information about the SMEs including the growth of the SMEs since inception and the efficacy of interventions by the County Government of Laikipia. The sample size for the study was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination tables. From the reading of the online Krejcie and Morgan tables (1970), a target population of 1200 SMEs was reduced to a sample size of 291 owners of SMEs.

Table 1: Target Population and Sample

Strata of Sample	Population Size	Sample Size
Agriculture	351	85
Manufacturing	284	69
Hospitality	216	52
Urban Based Traders	349	86
Total	1200	291

This study undertook the following sampling techniques: purposive sampling settled on the founders or owners of the businesses to be the respondents to the study because they are information-rich on the topic of the study on both growth of SMEs and role of government interventions. Stratified sampling was used to ensure that SMEs from all sectors of the economy were included in the sample. The strata were the sector of the economy SMEs operate in namely; agriculture, manufacturing, hospitality, and retail sectors. Systematic sampling techniques were adopted within each of the strata to ensure that SMEs in each of the sectors of the economy have an equal chance of participating in the study.

This study exclusively relied on primary data collected using a structured questionnaire for that purpose and self-administered by the researcher. The questionnaire collected quantitative data using closed and scale-type questions for all the study variables. A pilot study was conducted in a similar environment and with similar participants to those of the actual study. Validity of the questionnaire was ascertained through scrutiny by experts. After the test-retest, the reliability of the questionnaires was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha Co-efficient with 0.7 scores set as a threshold for all the times' failure to further refining of the instruments. Data was collected by the researcher aided by trained research assistants by locating and administering questionnaires to the owners of SMEs in Laikipia East Sub-County. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and regression analysis. Descriptive statistics included frequency, percent, mean, and standard deviation which were used to summarise the results on respondents' demographic characteristics, growth of SMEs, and market linkage. To find the association between market linkage and growth of SMEs, regression analysis was carried out using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The regression model used is shown below.

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon$$

Where, Y = Growth of SMEs, β_0 = Constant, X_1 =Market Linkage and ε = Error term

Results were presented in form tables, charts, and narration. Qualitative data was analysed using content analysis and presented by narration.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Response Rate

A total of 291 questionnaires were sent and received back from owners of SMEs in Laikipia East Sub-County. The response rate of the study is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Response Rate

Sector	Sample Size	Respondents	Response rate (%)
Agriculture	85	85	100.0
Manufacturing	69	69	100.0
Hospitality	52	52	100.0
Urban Based Traders	86	86	100.0
Total	291	291	100.0

The study registered a maximum (100%) response rate. The response rate in this study is deemed high as it is above the 70% recommended by Kothari for descriptive surveys. This high response rate means that the sample accurately represents the target population and the study findings have a high statistical power.

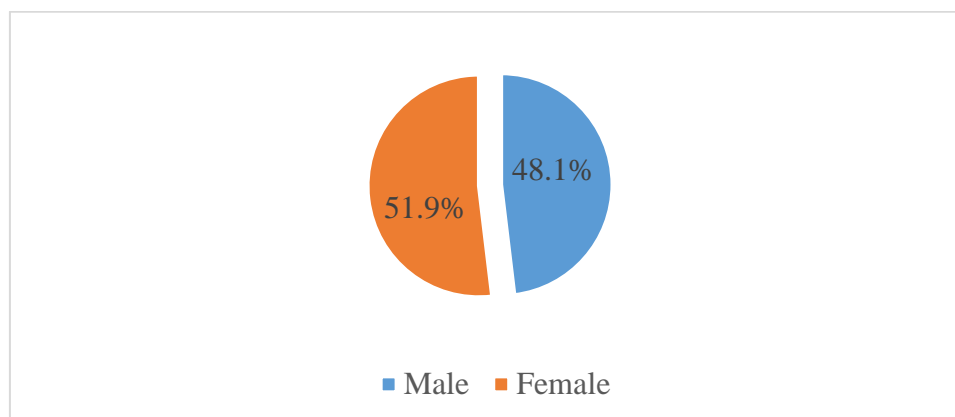
3.2 Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics of respondents were collected. This included the gender and age of the owners of SMEs in Laikipia East Sub-County who took part in the study.

Distribution of Respondents by Gender

Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents by gender.

Figure 1: Gender of Respondents

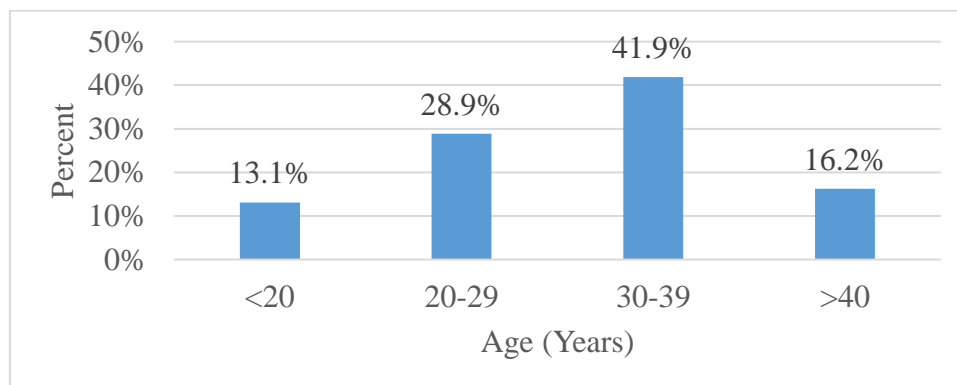


As shown in Figure 1, slightly above half (51.9%) of the respondents were female whereas male respondents accounted for 48.1% of the sample. This shows that both men and women were well represented in the study.

Distribution of Respondents by Age

Figure 2 shows the distribution of respondents by gender.

Figure 2: Respondents' Age



Results show that 41.9% of the respondents were in the 30 to 39 years age group whereas those aged between 20 and 29 years and over 40 years accounted for 28.9% and 16.2% respectively. The average age was 30 years. These results suggest most of the SMEs are owned and run by the youth (35 years and below). The results also show that both young and old people were well-represented in the sample.

3.3 Growth of SMEs

Respondents in the study were asked to estimate the growth of their SMEs using a variety of indicators such as expansion, sales, profit, assets, and number of employees. The data was analysed using mean and standard deviation and results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Growth of SMEs

Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Enabled me to expand my business	291	1	5	3.19	1.302
Enable me to open a new branch	291	1	5	3.68	1.222
Enabled me to increase sales	291	1	5	4.19	0.91
Enabled me to increase in profit	291	1	5	4.13	0.937
Enabled me to buy more assets for my business	291	1	5	4.97	0.733
Enabled me to increase the number of employees	291	1	5	3.32	1.326
Total				3.91	1.072

Respondents indicated that engagement with the Laikipia Enterprise Fund had expanded their business ($M=3.19$, $SD=1.302$) and opened new branches ($M=3.68$, $SD=1.222$) to a medium extent. The results also show that engagement with the Laikipia Enterprise Fund enabled respondents to increase sales ($M=4.19$, $SD=0.910$) profit ($M=4.13$, $SD=0.937$), and buy more assets ($M=4.97$, $SD=0.733$) to a large extent. In addition, it was indicated that enabled them to increase the number of employees ($M=3.32$, $SD=1.326$). The average mean of 3.91 demonstrates a high agreement with the items in Table 3 which suggests a high Impact of the Enterprise Fund on the growth of their SMEs. This finding is similar to Disi (2012) that governments have introduced policies and support programs to help SMEs set up their businesses and access development services that aid in advisory, capability development, access to finance, and access to markets. It is similar to Zindiye et al. (2012) results which indicated that government and other institutions are playing a positive role in the performance of SMEs despite the prevailing economic conditions. This result was in contrast to findings of Gopaul and Manley (2015) in which SMEs felt that local government and municipalities were

not doing enough to support and assist them. In an open-ended question, respondents in the study were requested to list other ways in which the County Government of Laikipia had contributed to the growth of their business. Some of their responses are captured below.

"The county government has improved the local infrastructure, making it easier for customers to access my business."^{R97}

"They have provided training programs that have helped me and my staff develop new skills."^{R103}

"They have implemented policies that reduce the cost of doing business, such as lowering taxes and providing subsidies."^{R21}

"They offer business advisory services that have helped me make informed decisions."^{R55}

"The county has invested in security, which has made the area safer for business operations."

^{R188}

Analysis of responses revealed various initiatives by the county government such as reduced bureaucracy and cost-cutting policies, alongside investments in infrastructure and internet connectivity, contribute to improved market access for both SMEs and their customers. Additionally, the county's role in facilitating access to affordable financing and resources like office spaces addresses key financial and operational hurdles. Finally, investments in security contributed to a more stable environment for business operations.

3.4 Market Linkage

Respondents in the study were therefore asked to rate the extent to which the County Government of Laikipia had enabled them to market their business. The data was analysed using mean and standard deviation and results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Market Linkages

Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Getting an opportunity to do business with Laikipia government	291	1	5	2.83	1.003
Conducting online marketing for my business	291	1	5	3.32	0.945
Getting information about demand and supply for my business	291	1	5	3.45	0.850
Getting accreditation by relevant government agencies like KEBS	291	1	5	3.77	1.146
Earning customers from outside the country	291	1	5	3.52	1.313
Total	291	1	5	3.38	1.051

The opportunity to do business with the Laikipia government had a mean score of 2.83, indicating a generally low level of agreement, with a standard deviation of 1.003 reflecting some variation in responses. Conducting online marketing for businesses scored a mean of 3.32, showing moderate agreement, and a standard deviation of 0.945 suggesting relatively consistent responses. Respondents rated the information about demand and supply for their businesses with a mean of 3.45, indicating moderate agreement, and the standard deviation of 0.850 pointing to a fairly consistent experience. Getting accreditation by relevant government agencies like KEBS received a mean score of 3.77, reflecting a more positive perception, though the standard deviation of 1.146 indicated some variability in responses.

Gaining customers from outside the country had a mean score of 3.52, showing moderate agreement, with a standard deviation of 1.313 suggesting a wider range of experiences. Overall,

the total mean score of 3.38 and a standard deviation of 1.051 indicated a generally moderate but varied perception of the county government's role in enabling businesses to market themselves. This means that the County Government of Laikipia had enabled respondents to market their business to a moderate extent. This lends support to Dlamini et al. (2023) finding that governments play a crucial role in supporting SMEs in marketing their products/services through various means. Shohibul et al. (2019) also highlighted that government has a role in providing policy to support various program activities through dissemination and assistance, training and human resource development, production technique, market information and marketing strategy, network expansion, capital assistance in the form of equipment, ease of access on financial system, and product promotions. Participants were also asked to suggest more ways the County Government of Laikipia could help them in marketing their business. The responses are captured below:

"Many small businesses struggle to reach a wider customer base. The county could offer marketing assistance programs to help us develop marketing strategies and promote our products or services." R103

"The county could offer workshops or training programs on marketing" R99

"If a small business wins an award or gets recognized for its quality products, it would be great to get some publicity for it." R41

The respondents suggested that the county government could help them by reaching customers and awards to popularize their businesses. They also recommended more training. This is consistent with Scheers (2018) finding that although the SME owners do understand that they can grow profits through proper marketing, they lack the marketing skills to conduct effective marketing. Similarly, Njoroge (2015) also recommended that the government should develop effective policies on marketing since marketing is one of the major determinants of SME performance.

3.5 Association of Market Linkage and Growth of SMEs

Regression analysis was carried out between scores of market linkages and growth of SMEs. Table 5 shows the model summary.

Table 5: Model Summary on Association of Market Linkage and Growth of SMEs

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.880 ^a	.774	.751	1.543

a. Predictors: (Constant), Market

The results indicated a strong positive correlation, $R=.880$. The R square demonstrates that the model explained 77.4% of the variance in the growth of SMEs. This demonstrates a strong influence of market linkages with growth among SMEs. This agrees with previous studies such as Amadasun and Mutezo (2022) where factors used to measure market-driven strategies influenced SMEs' competitive growth. Consistent with this finding, Hamzah et al. (2023) results suggested that on their own, market orientation and entrepreneurial orientation have linear (positive) relationships with small business growth. Muazu and Shehu (2021) also discovered that marketing strategies were crucial for the sustainable growth and competitiveness of SMEs in developing countries.

Table 6 shows the ANOVA output.

Table 6: ANOVA on Association of Market Linkage and Growth of SMEs

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1381.602	1	1381.602	110.082	.000 ^b
	Residual	3627.147	289	12.551		
	Total	5008.749	290			

a. Dependent Variable: Growth2

b. Predictors: (Constant), Market

The results show that the model was statistically significant, $F(1,289)=110$, $p<.001$, indicating that market linkages significantly predict SME growth. The regression model accounted for a significant portion of the variance, with a sum of squares of 1381.602, compared to the residual sum of squares of 3627.147. The result is consistent with the findings of Nyamanza (2019) which revealed that a significant relationship exists between the growth of SMEs and certain types of marketing activities performed. Joensuu-Salo et al. (2022) also found that marketing capability significantly impacts both the initial growth rate and the ongoing growth trajectory of SMEs. Other studies such as Alhalwachi et al. (2024) Gbandi and Iyamu (2022) and Olonde (2017) also found a significant association between marketing and growth among SMEs.

Table 7 shows the table of coefficients.

Table 7: Coefficients on Association of Market Linkage and Growth of SMEs

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.170	.578		0.294	.710
	Market	.663	.035	.725	18.94	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Growth2

The unstandardized coefficient (B) for market linkages was 0.663, with a standard error of 0.035, $t(289)=18.94$, $p<.001$. This suggests that for every unit increase in market linkages, SME growth increased by 0.663 units. The standardized coefficient (Beta) was .725, indicating a strong positive relationship between market linkages and SME growth. This result is in tandem with Githinji and Nyaga (2022) who also found that a unit increase in marketing strategies significantly increased the growth of the SMEs by 0.147 units, increased customer base, and resulted in branch expansion. It agrees with Anoke et al. (2022) where need-oriented marketing and technology-driven marketing are pivotal to the growth and sustainability of SMEs. It also agrees with Osei et al. (2016) study where results indicated that the provision of support for SMEs to participate in trade shows and exhibitions highly impact positively on SMEs' growth, followed by the provision of support in access to international market, and support in the training of marketing staffs of SMEs.

4. Conclusion

Market linkages offered by the county government also significantly affect the growth of SMEs in Laikipia East Sub-County, Kenya. The study found that market linkages had a significant, strong, and positive effect on growth of SMEs. This was achieved through assistance of SMEs getting accreditation by relevant government agencies like KEBS and getting information about demand and supply for my business. Growth of SMEs cannot be achieved without

appropriate marketing and government support in training and connecting SMEs with markets is necessary. The findings of this study have significant implications for the Kenya Micro and Small Enterprises Policy as outlined in the Sessional Paper No. 05 of 2020. The significant role of market linkages in SME growth indicates a need for the policy to enhance strategies that facilitate market access.

5. Recommendations

The county government ought to assist SMEs in marketing their products & services. Training programs in conjunction with institutions of higher learning on marketing and digital marketing strategies can enhance SMEs' capabilities in marketing. The county government could enhance access to affordable design services or workshops on branding principles to help SMEs develop a strong brand identity. In addition, consumer education programs to raise awareness about the benefits of supporting local businesses and the quality products and services they offer could be implemented.

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