East African SMEs’ Post-COVID Recovery: Exploring the Influence of Business Continuity Plans (BCPs) and the Role of Governments and Stakeholders.

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1. Rationale

East Africa is a younger region, with 80% of the population of 177 million people under the age of 35 (Awiti, A., 2016). Despite limited access to economic opportunities, youth in 3 targeted East African countries (Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda), have demonstrated tenacity to launch and run multi-sector SMEs. Defined by their early-stage agility to iterate and scale in different markets settings, SMEs in our research was defined in capital and employment parameters: less than 250 employees and less than annual operating capital of 1,000,000 USD.

The state of global emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic instantly affected SMEs, the majority of whom did not have enough financial and organizational agility at their disposal to cope with the evolving economic disruptions. In Uganda, about 47% of SMEs are in manufacturing, 49% are in services, and 80% are in agriculture. Across these sectors, the workforce has been reduced by more than a quarter (Lakuma, C, Sunday, N, 2020).

In Rwanda, at least 57.5% of SMEs operating across different industries closed operations between March and April 2020. According to the World Bank's Enterprise Survey, 60% of manufacturing firms in Africa use material inputs and/or supplies of foreign origin and about 14% of firms export either directly or indirectly (World Bank, 2020). The supply chain disruptions have reduced both material capital and market accessibility prompting SMEs to halt their operations.

With the influence of information technology (IT) between 1970-1995, the Business Continuity Plan (BCP) approach gained momentum in the private sector. It was consolidated as a backup plan for industrial businesses if the IT and machinery malfunctioned or faced security implications. Nowadays, it has become a backbone and an integral documented approach for each kind of business to consider in a catastrophic period. BCP is typically perceived as part of organizational risk management. Including crisis and emergency management (Schmid, B, Raju,E., 2020).

According to the World Trade Organization (WTO), components were split into strategic responsibilities, managed at the executive level, tactical responsibilities, addressed at director level, and operational duties (WTO, 2013). Like other business operation segments, BCP requires a financial budget for implementation and necessary personnel for implementation.

The survival rate will correspond to SMEs' internal capability to build a long-term risk mitigation strategy that they can rely on even beyond the Covid-19 Pandemic. There is a potential need to assess how the SMEs are well-positioned to cope with catastrophes or demanding times, ensuring their business continuity plans can be financed to build long term resilience. Within this research, we explore how East African SMEs can leverage business continuity plans to build resilience and how the Government, Financial Institutions and NGOs can support the SMEs business continuity plans through their Covid-19 pandemic recovery programs to ensure a high SMEs survival rate even beyond the covid-19 pandemic times.
We leveraged both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The research design was mainly descriptive, presenting and analyzing the data in a theoretical manner. As we collected data from SMEs that continued to operate their businesses that correlated with business continuity plans, we relied on correlational research to assess the correlation between gaps in business continuity plans with the SMEs that temporarily or permanently suspended their operations. We also used the case study research design to examine the recovery programmes launched by the government, financial institutions, as well as NGOs and develop relevant actionable frameworks to support SMEs business continuity plans.

We conducted both online surveys and interviews. The research targeted 75 SMEs (25 from each participating country). A survey containing a maximum of 15 qualitative and quantitative questions was developed. In partnership with several entrepreneurial hubs in the region, we distributed the survey using various online channels.

The survey requested respondents to express their interest in a focus group to amplify their insights. We had 36 respondents that expressed interest in participating in focus groups. We organized 4 focus groups that were conducted in July 2021. During the focus groups, we dived deeper into the questionnaire and asked more follow-up questions to collect as many insights as possible. Purposive sampling was used to select young entrepreneurs that shared the same entrepreneurial characteristics.

We sorely focused on entrepreneurs who are active in manufacturing, trade and agriculture. All our target entrepreneurs were in the youth age bracket (16-35) the general age bracket used by both countries. We also took into consideration the SMEs definition to set up a parameter of respondent selection. In the East African Community of which all focus countries are members, SMEs are defined as businesses that have less than 500 employees and an annual budget of less than 100000 million USD.
Quick Facts

- Case studies & reliable resources were used to extract necessary secondary data.

- Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze descriptive statistics.

- FIVE E-approach was used to develop policy recommendations

We leveraged online resources to extract secondary information ranging from country statuses in different economical aspects which assist us to provide the focus countries’ background. Such data also provided a benchmark in the development of recommendations. The data were obtained from trusted and reliable sources including regional and international think tanks organizations, government bodies, as well as credible regional newspapers.

Case studies were crucial in assessing how the effectiveness of program support launched in the covid-19 pandemic in both target countries. We identified and presented over 5 programs in each country based on their size of the impact. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Gender equity was considered important hence, an equal number of females and males were sampled presenting 37 female-led SMEs and 37 male-led SMEs.

Based on the data analysis, we developed policy recommendations and used FIVE E-Approach which assess the effectiveness, efficiency, ethical considerations, evaluations of alternatives, and establishment of recommendations for positive change.
Located in east-central Africa, Rwanda has a predominantly mountainous terrain and is popularly known as the “land of a thousand hills”. Kigali is its capital and largest city. Located south of the Equator and east of Lake Kivu, one of the African Great Lakes. A landlocked country, Rwanda is bordered by Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, and Uganda. Spoken and its official languages are Kinyarwanda, English and French and Swahili.

Based on Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data, the current population of Rwanda is 13,371,338 as of Sunday, July 24, 2021 (Worldometer, 2021). The population density in Rwanda is 525 per Km² (1,360 people per mi²) while the total land area is 24,670 Km² (9,525 sq. miles) 17.6% of the population is urban (2,281,330 people in 2020), while the median age in Rwanda is 20.0 years (World Population Review, 2021).

Rwanda's economy is mainly driven by tourism, agriculture and service industries. Growth averaged 7.2% over the decade to 2019, while per capita gross domestic product (GDP) grew at 5% annually. The lockdown and social distancing measures, critical to controlling the COVID-19 pandemic, sharply curtailed economic activities in 2020. GDP fell by 3.4% in 2020 (The World Bank, 2021). Rwanda has also made significant strides towards gender equality – almost 64% of parliamentarians are women, compared to just 22% worldwide – which has enabled women in the country to make economic advances (WEF, 2017).

To catalyse its economic growth, Rwanda launched entrepreneurship development policies. Notably, the ‘Made in Rwanda Policy’, which aims to increase locally made products and services. In addition, there is the NST1 policy that calls for strategic interventions to develop a specific policy on entrepreneurship development to create a conducive ecosystem for the growth of vibrant and competitive enterprises across all sectors of the economy. Other policy initiatives range from Vision 2050, National ICT Policy as well as National Education Policy.
Commonly known as the pearl of Africa, Uganda embraces many ecosystems, from the tall volcanic mountains of the eastern and western frontiers to the densely forested swamps of the Albert Nile River and the rainforests of the country's central plateau (Britannica, 2020). It is a landlocked country across the equator in Eastern Africa, bordering Lake Victoria in the southeast. South Sudan borders it in the north, the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the west, Kenya in the east, and Rwanda and Tanzania in the south. Spoken languages are English (official), Luganda (a major language of Uganda), Swahili, and other native languages.

The current population of Uganda is 47,624,745 as of July 2021, based on Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data (Worldometer, 2021). The population density in Uganda is 229 per Km² (593 people per mi²), while The total land area is 199,810 Km² (77,147 sq. miles). 25.7 % of the population is urban (11,775,012 people in 2020), and The median age in Uganda is 16.7 years (World Population Review,2021).

Uganda’s real gross domestic product (GDP) grew at 2.9% in FY20, less than half the 6.8% recorded in FY19, due to the effects of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. GDP is expected to grow at a similar level in FY21. real GDP growth is expected to contract by up to 1% in 2020, compared to 7.5% growth in 2019, and, as a result, real per capita GDP growth is expected to contract by about 4.5% (World Bank, 2021). Even if GDP growth rebounds strongly by 2022, the level of per capita GDP is likely to remain well below its pre-COVID trajectory (Bank of Uganda, 2021).

To spearhead her economic growth, Uganda has enacted and implemented several policies, including Vision 2040 and NDP II. They aim to stimulate the growth of sustainable MSMEs through enhanced business support service provision, access to microfinance, technical and business skills, and the creation of conducive policy, legal and institutional framework. There are other supplementing policies; MSME Policy, LED Policy, BUBU Policy, National Sugar Policy, Textile Policy, Grain Trade Policy, Leather Policy, Accreditation Policy, Quality and Standards Policy, Cooperative Policy (Uganda Invest, 2021).
Quick Facts

- Located in East Africa.
- It's capital city is Nairobi.
- It has a total land area of 569,140 Km²
- It has 1 official language; English & other main local languages.
- It's population is 47,624,745 with a median age of 20.2
- Manufacturing & Financial services sectors mainly form the backbone of it's economy.
- It's GDP per capita is $ 1838
- Notable entrepreneurship policies: National Employment Authority Act, SMEs Act, Youth Enterprise Development Fund State Act,

6. Country Background: Kenya

Known for its magnificent safaris, Kenya is a country in East Africa bordering the Indian Ocean in the south-east; neighbouring countries are Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. With an area of 580,000 km², Kenya has a population of 46 million people (2015). Spoken languages are Swahili and English (both official), and numerous indigenous languages. (Britannica, 2020).

The current population of Kenya is 55,321,337 as of July 2021, based on Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data. The population density in Kenya is 94 per Km² (245 people per mi²). The total land area is 569,140 Km² (219,746 sq. miles) 27.8 % of the population is urban (14,975,059 people in 2020), and The median age in Kenya is 20.1 years (Worldometer, 2021).

Over 2015-2019, Kenya’s economic growth averaged 5.7%, making it one of the fastest-growing economies in Sub-Saharan Africa. The economy’s performance has been boosted by a stable macroeconomic environment, positive investor confidence and a resilient services sector. Real GDP in Kenya contracted by 0.3 per cent in 2020, mainly due to the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). ICT continues to be a catalyst to Kenya’s economic transformation. The value of output from the ICT sector increased by 2.5 per cent to KSh 538.3 billion in 2020, a slower growth compared to the 5.8 per cent registered in 2019 (World Bank, 2021).

Kenya has established several entrepreneurship development policies. Notable policies are the National Youth Service Act and National Employment Authority Act that aim at establishing the National Employment Authority, which provides a comprehensive institutional framework for employment management, increasing employment by the youth, minorities and marginalised groups. In addition, Uwezo Fund (Public Finance Management Act) was established as an affirmative intervention to provide technical and financial support to Youth, Women and Persons with Disabilities in Enterprise development. Other policies include; Technical and Vocational Education and Training Act, Medium and Small Enterprise Act, Women Enterprise Development Fund and Youth Enterprise Development Fund State Corporations Act (PRB, 2021)
Before the Covid-19 Pandemic emerged, SMEs were optimistic, scaling and ambitious.

When asked about the business status before the covid-19 pandemic, SMEs responded optimistic and scaling. 47% of survey respondents indicated that they were running a fully operational business in the process of breaking even, while 39% had a fully operational business recording profits and 14% running businesses in the piloting phase. SMEs highlighted different achievements in the pre-covid-19 pandemic, which demonstrated their optimism and scalability as the following focus group participants discussed:

“We were doing great. In January 2020, we just secured a big contract for supplying our products to Tanzania. This was a major milestone as we were projecting a 67% increase in our revenues” A Kenyan Focus Group Respondent.

“We had new employees who joined the newly established production site that we launched in November 2019. We were expecting big returns as we believed that such a workforce would be a driver to high production and sales” A Ugandan Focus Group Respondent

“I remember just 1 week before the first case was recorded, we were launching our first branch outside of Kigali. I even recruited a branch manager that week. I was so excited as we were the first mover in the eastern province. Definitely, I was looking forward to capturing a bigger market share”- A Rwandan Focus Group Respondent.

“I was so excited as our initial plan for 2020 was hiring new talents to grow our team from 12 to 21 employees. We were planning to launch the call for applications by the end of March but as the first case of Covid-19 was recorded in Rwanda in mid-march, we had to temporarily suspend the recruitment”- A Rwandan Focus Group Respondent.

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**Figure 1: Distribution of respondents across business sectors.**

**Figure 2: The pre-covid status across Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda**
Quick Facts

In Covid-19 Pandemic, SMEs’s income drastically decreased.

When Covid-19 emerged, Governments started to implement tight measures to curb down the spread of the virus. Among such measures, lockdowns were introduced, halting SMEs operations. When asked about how the covid-19 pandemic affected their business income, 36% of survey respondents revealed that they partially recorded a loss equivalent to less than 50%, while 55% indicated that they fully recorded a loss equivalent to more than 100% decrease in income. Only 9% of the respondents have neither recorded loss nor profits.

Besides highlighting the income fall downs issues, SMEs cited different problems ranging from employee downsizing, mental health issues to supply and market access issues as revealed by the following focus group participants:

“When I got a message from my supplier saying that he will not be able to send the for almost a month, I felt troubled and anxious. I lost control. It continued in the first and second month of the lockdown till I started to feel depressed”- A Rwandan Focus Group Respondent.

“We lost a big client we secured in Tanzania. The borders were closed, and getting clearance for the movements of goods was so intense and bureaucratic. Our client lately decided to opt for local suppliers”- A Kenyan Focus Group Respondent.

“We had no clients so we figured out the best option is downsizing the employees to maintain our cash flow. We reduced the number of employees from 34 to almost 7 who remained to oversee the assets and other crucial business domains” A Ugandan Focus Group Participant.

“Usually, Before Covid-19 we used to have an average of 125 clients per day. But in the pandemic, we had an average of 40 clients per day. This is really outrageous as our income has badly been affected”. A Kenyan Focus Participant.
Before Covid-19 Pandemic, SMEs hadn’t Business Continuity Plans (BCPs) in place.

When asked if they had a Business Continuity Plan or another risk mitigation plan before the covid-19 pandemic, 65% of all respondents indicated they didn’t consider it. Besides attributing such strategies and processes to corporates and big businesses, SMEs considered BCPs as highly capital intensive business procedures that need technical-how knowledge. Time for developing BCPs was also noted as a constraint as they considered it a less priority than other business activities.

Some of the focus group participants share their insights:

“I think the Business Continuity Plans approach was only tailored for corporates. Yes, because they are the one that has the resources at their disposal to really put such strategies in place. I had 12 employees before Covid-19 Pandemic, how could I expect them to consider BCPs while there other business urgencies to do?” - A Kenyan Focus Group Participant.

“Honestly, who could have imagined that we would face such a magnitude pandemic? I knew the BCPs and other risk mitigation plans, but I didn’t consider them a high priority. I am active in fashion retail with weekly sales targets to meet, 24 employees to manage and 4 point of distribution in the city that needs my attention. How could I have gotten time to think about BCPs or other related risk mitigation strategies” - A Ugandan Focus Group Participant.

“I studied such approaches (BCPs) in my university, and I do understand their importance in preparation for the future hazards. I used to do it independently without involving my employees as I didn’t consider these strategies crucial. But now lessons learned”. - A Rwandan Focus Group Participant.

“To be honest, I just learned it from a friend whom I heard that he had BCP during the pandemic. I explored and later and found it interesting. I should have considered even before the pandemic as it can provide a realistic plan B in a pandemic or similar circumstances” - A Kenyan Focus Group Participant.
Quick Facts

For SMEs that had BCPs in place, finance became a constraint in implementing BCPs.

35% of SMEs survey respondents had documented BCPs in place. They developed BCPs considering their long-term plan strategies, the business's weaknesses and strengths and the nature of their product or service portfolio. However, 75% of them had no financial capacity to implement their BCPs in the pandemic. While the BCPs were developed with their relevant budgets, SMEs didn't consider putting aside a contingency budget dedicated to BCPs. While external funding resources was a major viable option, SMEs cited funds accessibility issues ranging from low credit score, the rarity of SMEs-oriented financial loan products and collateral security issues.

“All strategies in my BCP were ready to be implemented. In fact, before covid-19, we usually had a quarterly meeting to discuss and re-evaluate our BCP. But when the covid-19 emerged, we didn’t have money to implement some of the BCP strategies. It was a big shock for us. We tried approaching some banks, but our credit score wouldn’t allow us to secure a significant loan” - A Ugandan Focus Group Participant.

“Seriously, there were no financial means to implement some of our strategies. We used to have a certain percentage of profits that were put aside for BCP funds, but things sometimes became tough, and we had to use them. When Covid-19 hit, we were desperate as we had strategies on how to move on but lacked the finance to implement them” - A Rwandan Focus Group Participant.

“They constantly requested collateral security as my business is a sole proprietorship. I didn’t secure it on time, so most of the BCP strategies were not implemented. It was a setback as I had set a routine of revising BCPs monthly before the Covid-19 pandemic emerged” - A Kenyan Focus Group Participant.

“It was really so painful, having a plan but lacking means to implement it. I was about to take the risk of using personal savings but I started wondering what the pandemic has in store for me. What if the lockdowns took a long time? “ - A Rwandan Focus Group Participant.
SMEs requested financial assistance from the government and other stakeholders.

Aside from bank loan financial instruments, SMEs applied for Government funds established to finance SMEs in the pandemic. All survey respondents have applied for financial support across government and non-government programs, but only 34% of them got approved. Besides such programs having a small fund size for numerous SMEs demanding support, SMEs cited different issues, including lack of transparency in the selection process, biases towards some business sectors and unrealistic conditions and requirements to meet. While the Government-affiliated institutions and independent NGOs introduced some affiliated funds, SMEs found them insufficient given the huge demand and urgency demonstrated in the pandemic.

“The selection process wasn’t clear. No metrics or a rubric shared publicly on what criteria they based selecting SMEs that will be funded. SMEs struggled in the pandemic; they deserved a transparent process as many businesses were demanding funds” - A Kenyan Focus Group Respondent.

“I found the selection process questionable. We expected a robust and unbiased selection process that considers the business merits among other factors.” - A Kenyan Focus Group Respondent.

“Some business sectors were given a high priority and were considered as essential businesses. This is unfair given that we all pay taxes and we have a common vision of transforming our lives and our communities.” - A Rwandan Focus Group Respondent.

“Perhaps a more press release highlighting the selection process and the criteria considered would have been sufficient. In this case, I should have been more decisive if I would give it a shot or not.” - A Kenyan Focus Group Respondent.

“We have so many SMEs in Uganda; their fund size was so small given a big number of SMEs that were looking for Support. More strategies should have been developed to attract more funds from other sources” - A Ugandan Focus Group Respondent.
Quick Facts

Beyond financial support, SMEs are requesting soft support.

While finance was a significant issue, SMEs highlighted the need for soft support that could assist them in building internal capacity, reviving and boosting their sales. 86% believed that financial support from governments and stakeholders should come along with soft support, including training and education, with risk management being ranked as the most important. SMEs believe that the COVID-19 pandemic will have a long-term negative impact on their businesses. Therefore, capacity building in risk management and the development of Business Continuity Plans is a prerequisite for survival. They also envisage legal and accounting support that could assist them in tackling payment delays and refining their financial documents to secure financial support.

“No matter the level we are stressing the need for finance, another important support needs to be provided simultaneously. Some of us didn’t even know the BCPs approach and other risk management techniques. We need upskilling in risk management. We can’t afford to be hit by other disasters in the future. Preparedness is vital for survival” A Ugandan Focus Group Respondent.

“I recently applied for financial assistance in an NGO program. My application was rejected, and their feedback included how poor and unrealistic our financial projections were. I need accounting support to revise my projections”- A Rwandan Focus Group Respondent.

“I would appreciate if this funding support would be combined with capacity building in different domains. It would be great if such support was tailored to the business stage and needs. I am interested in both legal support. So many clients have long-pending payments, and legal actions need to be taken.” A Kenyan Focus Group Respondent.

“We all have been affected by the pandemic, and I firmly believe we could prepare for similar potential hazards that might come in the future. I need to develop a BCP, but my skills and experience in this field are quite limited. Hence I need training support.”

Figure 12: 89% SMEs respondents believe that Soft support is as crucial as finance support.
While the pandemic remains unpredictable, it’s notable that SMEs will continue to face challenges that will drastically affect their businesses. Both SMEs, policymakers and financial services providers should restructure their means of operations, regulations and agenda to align with the Covid-19 pandemic conditions. Using FIVE E-Approach, we discuss the findings and assess the effectiveness, efficiency, ethical considerations, evaluations of alternatives, and establish recommendations.

1. Governments should provide alternatives to business-related covid-19 restrictions to drive optimism among SMEs.

SMEs have developed pessimism throughout the pandemic due to lockdown related restrictions introduced by the governments throughout several periods. It has affected the entrepreneurs’ business and their own lives. Most of the covid-19 restrictions and regulations were introduced without giving alternatives or providing alternatives late. While essential businesses had some alternative actions, what were considered non-essential businesses were left without any alternatives. An alternative should be developed for any covid-9 restriction or regulation that could halt a business, indicating how SMEs will continue their operations amid new restrictions or regulations.

**Table 1: Five-E framework for the policy recommendation.**

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<th>Efficiency</th>
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<td>• SMEs could continue to operate, providing services or goods while maintaining their sales levels.</td>
<td>• Developing alternatives to the restrictions and regulations will require joint efforts to set a common ground between governments, trade unions and the general private sector.</td>
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<td>• It could strengthen entrepreneurs’ optimism, allowing them to focus on setting and achieving their entrepreneurial goals.</td>
<td>• SMEs should provide information regarding their current status to allow data-backed decision making.</td>
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<td>• SMEs could meet the financial obligations they have towards banks, clients, suppliers and their shareholders.</td>
<td>• Realistic implementation plans should be provided, indicating concerned parties, timeframes and associated compliances requirements.</td>
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**Evaluation**

| • Providing alternatives is more optimistic and effective than one-sided restrictions that potentially affect SMEs losing clients, downsizing their employees, or fully closing their operations. |
| • Keeping businesses operating by providing alternatives, could keep economies more functional through taxes contributions and infrastructure support provided by the SMEs. |

**Ethical Consideration**

| • Alternatives shouldn't be considered a means to avoid the covid-10 protocols; SMEs will neet obliged ethically according to protocols that come in hand with the alternatives. |
| • Constant monitoring of the alternatives will provide a basic understanding of how alternatives will evolve throughout a defined timeline. |
**Recommendations:** We call for governments to develop alternatives for each covid-19 regulation and restrictions. When developing alternatives, joint efforts between the governments and private sector should be emphasized, ensuring that alternatives being developed are convenient, transparent and safe. We call for SMEs to abide by alternatives, coping with them to ensure effectiveness and efficiency.

2. **BCPs Support Programs should be developed to increase SMEs survival rate.**

Most SMEs support programs ranging from accelerators to incubators and SME-survival clinics focused on traditional entrepreneurial education approaches. More robust programs tailoring BCPs could develop a high SME survival rate. Such programs should possess risk management experts who could facilitate SMEs to assess risk across different business domains and liaise with them to develop an effective risk and contingency system for their businesses. BCPs would ensure SMEs sustainability even beyond the Covid-19 times.

**Effectiveness**

- BCPs could enable SMEs to maintain business disruptions allowing them to customize their business operation in alignment with local and global conditions.
- Leveraging BCPs, SMEs could build long-term resilience even beyond the covid-19 times, as BCPs consider multi-hazards approach assessment.

**Efficiency**

- Joint efforts between governments, ecosystem supporters, financial institutions, and SMEs are required to provide real-time data based on the development of BCP-tailored SMEs Support Programs.
- Program accessibility should be accounted for when developing service packages that can be subsidized for SMEs that the pandemic has badly hit.

**Evaluation**

- BCP-tailored SMEs Support Programs could be more long-term-focused and resilient than other typical accelerators and SMEs survival clinics.
- Many SMEs can be enrolled in the BCP-tailored SMEs programs as it could take a short period rather than other programs that provide multi-services to a few SMEs for a long period.

**Ethical Considerations**

- BCPs-tailored SMEs Support Programs couldn’t fully replace other SMEs program supports. All programs are there to complement each other for the survival of SMEs.
- A regulatory approach is crucially required if governments give the private sector the tenders for the development and management of the program.

Table 2: Five-E framework for the policy recommendation.
**Recommendations:** We call for the Private Sector, NGOs and Civil Societies to design and implement BCP-tailored SMEs Support Programs. Governments should support by providing funding to ensure the implementation of such programs. We call for SMEs to share factual information about their current challenges to allow the stakeholders to design BCP-tailored SMEs Support Programs that fit in their contexts.

**Establish SMEs-Tailored credit registries to facilitate access to finance.**

To implement their BCPs, SMEs need access to finance. Financial products provided by the financial institutions should be tailored to SMEs’ conditions and capabilities. Governments need financial institutions to cover the finance gap in the market. To access the financial loan services, SMEs are obliged by financial institutions to provide their credit scores. Credit registries offering online access can provide faster service and better data quality. Building up credit scores based on registry data provided would be a highly predictive measure of a borrower’s future repayment capacity and help expand access to finance.

**Effectiveness**

- SMEs could be able to tap into several loan services to finance their BCPs throughout the pandemic.
- Financial institutions could increase their SMEs clientele through diverse economic sectors.

**Efficiency**

- SMEs should provide concrete and real-time data to support the establishment of Credit registries.
- Private Sector Federations and Trade Unions should liaise with the governments to develop a concrete plan for the operations of trade registries.

**Evaluation**

- The credit application process could be more efficient and fast for SMEs compared to the current approaches.
- Credit registries could provide more financial flows due to the transparency and trustworthiness they could bring in financial sectors.

**Ethical Considerations**

- The privacy policy should be developed, governing the management and processing of Credit Registries.
- A regulatory framework should be developed, to govern the data collection process to ensure transparency and quality throughout the process.

*Table 3: Five-E framework for the policy recommendation.*
**Recommendations:** We call for the governments to establish SMEs tailored credit registries. Financial institutions should liaise with the governments to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in developing credit registries. We call for SMEs to provide concrete and real-time information that can assist in designing fitting credit registries.

**9. Conclusion**

Unpredictable situations posed by the covid-19 call for urgent actions for the survival of SMEs. Business Continuity Plans undoubtedly provide a robust risk mitigations approach that SMEs can incorporate in their operations to track Covid-19 trends and the relative foreseeable impact the pandemic can have on their business.

As a majority of SMEs were not aware of the BCP approach before the pandemic, more efforts are needed to design and implement programs that train SMEs to plan and implement their BCPs. Finance will be required by the SMEs to implement their BCPs, hence governments should create or re-innovate credit registries to facilitate access to finance. Such credit registries will go a long way to facilitate SMEs to establish their creditworthiness, allowing them to secure the finance required to put in action their BCPs.

SMEs could form the backbones of the Rwandan, Kenyan and Ugandan economies, hence joint efforts from governments, incubators, accelerators and financial institutions are urgently needed to ensure transformational survival and the growth of SMEs.

“We are in an era that calls for joint efforts for businesses’ survival. It’s not that the country has limited resources, but the required forces to make changes are uncollaborative and priorities aren’t targeted”

– A Kenyan respondent
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