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Role of Enterprise Support Organizations (ESOS) in the Growth and Sustainability of MSMEs in Nigeria

Seye Olurotimi
PhD Scholar, Swiss School of Business Research Zurich, Switzerland-, Lagos Campus

Julius Bolade Anjorin
Visiting Professor, Swiss School of Business Research Zurich, Switzerland, Lagos Campus

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Abstract: *This study examined the roles of Enterprise Support Organisations (ESOs) in the growth and sustainability of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Nigeria. The study was conducted in Lagos State, Abuja FCT, Abia State and Rivers State, with the aim of assessing the major roles played by ESOs and determining the effect of ESO support on MSME growth and sustainability. A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select 371 respondents, comprising MSME owners/managers, ESO personnel, programme facilitators and industry stakeholders. Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires and interview guides and analysed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. The findings showed that ESO participation strengthened the managerial capabilities of MSMEs, with a mean score of 3.63; encouraged business innovation (3.52); expanded professional networks (3.47); strengthened long-term business sustainability (3.44); and improved market access (3.40). All the mean scores exceeded the 3.0 decision benchmark, indicating that respondents generally agreed that ESOs contribute positively to MSME development. The regression result further revealed that ESO support had a positive and statistically significant effect on MSME growth and sustainability (B = 0.582; $\beta = 0.580$; $t = 16.17$; $p < 0.001$). The model was statistically significant ($F = 261.45$; $p < 0.001$) and explained 42.8% of the variation in MSME growth and sustainability ($R^2 = 0.428$). The study therefore concludes that ESO interventions are important for strengthening the capacity, competitiveness and sustainability of MSMEs in Nigeria. It recommends that ESOs strengthen managerial training and mentorship, expand market-linkage, networking and innovation support, and improve the coordination, monitoring and continuity of enterprise-support programmes.*

Keywords: Enterprise Support Organisations, MSMEs, business growth, sustainability, entrepreneurship, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) constitute an important component of the Nigerian economy because of their contribution to employment generation, income creation, entrepreneurship development and economic diversification. Their activities cut across agriculture, manufacturing, trade, services, technology and other sectors, making them important vehicles for broad-based economic participation. The development of MSMEs is therefore closely associated with economic growth and the expansion of livelihood opportunities, particularly in developing economies where small businesses provide an important source of employment and income (Taiwo & Yusufu, 2012; Yahaya et al., 2016).

The importance of MSMEs to Nigeria's economic transformation has been recognized in successive national development and industrial policy initiatives. The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy emphasized private-sector development and enterprise expansion as important components of economic transformation (NEEDS, 2004). Similarly, studies on Nigeria's industrial development have emphasized the need to strengthen domestic enterprises as part of efforts to diversify the economy, expand productive capacity and reduce dependence on primary commodities (Chete et al., 2013; Chete et al., 2016). A strong and sustainable MSME sector can therefore contribute not only to individual enterprise development but also to broader economic transformation.

Despite their importance, Nigerian MSMEs continue to face several constraints that limit their growth and sustainability. These include inadequate access to finance, weak managerial capabilities, poor infrastructure, limited market access, technological constraints, regulatory difficulties and intense competition (Awoyemi & Aderonke, 2020; Evbuomwan et al., 2016). These challenges can restrict the ability of enterprises to increase production, improve productivity, enter new markets, employ additional workers and remain operational over time. The vulnerability of MSMEs is further intensified by changes in the macroeconomic environment, including inflation, exchange-rate instability and rising operating costs.

The persistence of these challenges has increased the importance of Enterprise Support Organisations (ESOs) within the MSME development ecosystem. ESOs are institutions and organisations that provide various forms of support aimed at strengthening the capabilities, competitiveness and sustainability of enterprises. Their interventions may include entrepreneurship training, business advisory services, mentorship, access to finance, incubation, infrastructure, technology support, networking, market linkages and other forms of capacity development. Through these interventions, ESOs seek to address resource and capability gaps that individual enterprises may be unable to overcome independently.

The role of ESOs can be explained from the perspective of the Resource-Based View, which argues that firms can achieve competitive advantage through valuable resources and capabilities that are difficult to replicate (Barney, 1991). In the context of MSMEs, ESOs can facilitate access to financial, human, technological and informational resources that strengthen enterprise capabilities. Similarly, human capital theory emphasizes the importance of knowledge and skills in improving productivity and economic performance (Becker, 1964). Training, mentoring and technical assistance provided by ESOs can therefore enhance the managerial and entrepreneurial capabilities required for business growth.

Institutional theory also provides an important basis for understanding the role of ESOs. Institutions influence the rules, incentives and structures within which economic organisations operate (North, 1990; Scott, 2001). ESOs can serve as institutional intermediaries that connect MSMEs with financial institutions, markets, government programmes, technical experts and other business networks. By reducing information gaps and facilitating access to resources and opportunities, ESOs can help MSMEs navigate difficult business environments and improve their chances of growth and survival.

Enterprise growth involves improvements in business size, sales, profitability, employment, market coverage and productive capacity, while sustainability concerns the ability of an enterprise to remain viable and competitive over time. ESO interventions can contribute to both dimensions by improving managerial practices, facilitating access to finance, supporting innovation and strengthening market connections. Financial support may enable enterprises to acquire productive assets and expand operations, while training and mentoring may improve planning, record keeping, financial management and decision-making. Market-linkage and networking interventions can also enable enterprises to reach new customers and business partners (Bassey & Uche, 2019).

Technology and innovation support represent another important dimension of ESO interventions. MSMEs operating with outdated production methods may experience high costs, low productivity and weak competitiveness. ESOs can facilitate access to technology, digital tools, technical knowledge and innovation networks that enable enterprises to improve production processes and respond to changing market conditions. Innovation is particularly important for enterprise sustainability because businesses must continuously adapt their products, services and processes to remain competitive (Hamilton & Nwokah, 2009).

Access to finance remains particularly important to MSME growth in Nigeria. Many enterprises have limited access to formal credit because of inadequate collateral, poor financial records, high lending costs and perceived risks associated with small businesses. As a result, enterprises may depend heavily on personal savings and informal sources of finance, which are often inadequate for substantial expansion (Awoyemi & Aderonke, 2020). ESOs can help address this constraint by providing direct financial assistance, facilitating access to credit, improving financial literacy and connecting MSMEs with appropriate financing institutions.

However, the effectiveness of ESO interventions depends not only on the availability of support but also on its relevance, accessibility, quality and continuity. Support programmes that are poorly designed or disconnected from the actual needs of beneficiaries may have limited effects on enterprise outcomes. Similarly, fragmented interventions, weak coordination among support providers and inadequate monitoring and evaluation can reduce the effectiveness of enterprise-support programmes. The World Bank (2020a, 2020b) emphasizes the importance of monitoring and evaluation in determining whether interventions for small and medium enterprises generate meaningful outcomes.

Although existing studies have established the importance of institutional support to MSMEs, there remains a need for a comprehensive assessment of the specific roles played by ESOs in promoting both enterprise growth and sustainability in Nigeria. Much of the existing literature focuses on particular constraints such as finance, managerial capacity or general MSME sustainability. Less attention has been given to examining the broader range of functions performed by ESOs and how these functions collectively support enterprise development.

Against this background, this study examines the roles of Enterprise Support Organisations (ESOs) in the growth and sustainability of MSMEs in Nigeria. The study focuses on the support services provided by ESOs and their relevance to enterprise development, with the aim of providing evidence that can guide policymakers, ESO providers and MSME stakeholders in strengthening enterprise-support programmes and improving the contribution of MSMEs to sustainable economic development.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

MSMEs remain important to Nigeria's economic development, yet many enterprises continue to experience difficulties in achieving sustained growth and long-term survival. The persistence of these difficulties raises concerns about the adequacy and effectiveness of existing mechanisms designed to support small businesses. Although different government agencies, development organisations and Enterprise Support Organisations provide interventions to strengthen MSMEs, many enterprises continue to struggle with inadequate finance, weak managerial capacity, limited market access, poor infrastructure and technological constraints (Awoyemi & Aderonke, 2020; Evbuomwan et al., 2016).

One major problem is inadequate access to financial resources. MSMEs often require finance to acquire equipment, increase production, employ workers and expand into new markets. However, many enterprises face difficulties accessing formal credit because of collateral requirements, high financing costs, inadequate business records and perceived lending risks. Although ESOs have introduced financial-support and financial-linkage programmes, there is insufficient evidence on whether these interventions adequately address the financing requirements of MSMEs and contribute meaningfully to their growth.

Managerial and technical capacity also remains a major concern. Weaknesses in financial management, strategic planning, record keeping, marketing and operational management can reduce enterprise productivity and competitiveness. ESOs provide training, mentoring and advisory services to address these deficiencies, but the extent to which these interventions translate into improved managerial capabilities and sustainable enterprise growth remains insufficiently established.

Market access presents another important challenge. Many MSMEs struggle to attract customers, establish reliable market channels and compete beyond their immediate local markets. Limited market information, weak business networks and inadequate marketing capabilities can restrict sales and revenue growth. Although ESOs often provide networking, business linkage and market-access opportunities, there is limited empirical evidence on the extent to which these services enable Nigerian MSMEs to expand their markets and achieve sustained growth.

The sustainability of MSMEs is also a major concern. Enterprise survival depends on the ability of businesses to adapt to changes in market conditions, manage financial risks, maintain customers, control costs and innovate. The high vulnerability of small businesses to economic shocks suggests that support received at the initial stage of business development may not be sufficient to guarantee long-term sustainability. While institutional support and managerial capabilities have been identified as important determinants of enterprise sustainability (Ajibola, 2020; Afolabi & Yusuf, 2021), the specific contribution of ESOs to maintaining MSME operations over time remains inadequately documented.

Another problem concerns the fragmentation and possible duplication of enterprise-support interventions. Different organisations may provide similar training, financing, mentoring and business-development services without adequate coordination. Such fragmentation can result in duplication of resources, uneven coverage and difficulty for MSMEs in identifying and accessing the support most relevant to their needs. Weak coordination may therefore reduce the overall effectiveness of enterprise-support programmes.

There is also a problem of inadequate evidence for evaluating the actual roles of ESOs. The existence of an enterprise-support programme or the number of businesses that participate in it does not necessarily demonstrate that the programme has contributed to enterprise growth or sustainability. An MSME may receive training, funding or mentoring without achieving improvements in sales, productivity, employment, profitability or business continuity. Consequently, there is a need to distinguish between access to ESO support and the actual contribution of such support to enterprise outcomes.

Furthermore, differences in the needs and characteristics of MSMEs may affect the usefulness of ESO interventions. Enterprises operating in agriculture, manufacturing, trade, services and technology may require different forms of support. Similarly, micro-enterprises may have different needs from small and medium enterprises. A uniform approach to enterprise support may therefore fail to address the specific constraints faced by different categories of MSMEs.

The limited availability of comprehensive evidence on the roles and effectiveness of ESOs creates a significant research and policy gap. Without adequate empirical evidence, policymakers and ESO providers may find it difficult to determine which support services should receive greater attention, how interventions should be targeted and how resources should be allocated. This may limit the ability of enterprise-support programmes to generate sustainable improvements in MSME performance.

It is therefore necessary to examine the roles of Enterprise Support Organisations in promoting the growth and sustainability of MSMEs in Nigeria. Such an assessment will provide evidence on the major forms of support available to MSMEs, the extent to which ESOs contribute to enterprise growth and sustainability, and the challenges that may limit the effectiveness of their interventions. The findings will provide useful evidence for improving the design, coordination and delivery of enterprise-support programmes and strengthening the capacity of Nigerian MSMEs to contribute to employment generation, income creation and sustainable economic development.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Lagos State, Abuja FCT, Abia State, and Rivers State (Port Harcourt), Nigeria. The locations were purposively selected to reflect diverse business environments and regional contexts in which Enterprise Support Organisations (ESOs) operate. The study population comprised 1,853 respondents, consisting of 1,599 MSMEs that had received ESO support, 154 ESO management staff and programme facilitators, and 100 industry experts and stakeholders. The MSMEs covered agriculture, manufacturing, trade, services, ICT and other business sectors.

A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted. The study locations were purposively selected, while supported MSMEs were identified through ESO records and networks. The MSMEs were stratified

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according to enterprise size and sector, after which simple random sampling was used to select business owners, founders and senior managers with direct experience of ESO interventions. ESO staff and industry experts were purposively selected based on their knowledge of enterprise-support programmes. A total sample of 371 respondents was selected for the study.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire captured information on the characteristics of MSMEs, types of ESO support received, and indicators of business growth and sustainability. ESO interventions were assessed in terms of financial support, training and capacity building, mentorship and advisory services, incubation and infrastructure support, and networking and market access. MSME growth was assessed using indicators such as revenue growth, customer expansion, employment creation and business expansion, while sustainability was assessed in terms of operational continuity and the ability of enterprises to remain viable over time. Interviews with ESO personnel and industry experts provided additional information on the effectiveness and challenges of ESO interventions.

The validity of the research instruments was established through expert review, while reliability was assessed through a pilot test involving 30 MSMEs outside the study area. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the measurement scales, with a coefficient of 0.70 or above considered acceptable. Data were collected through physical and online administration of questionnaires, while interviews were conducted physically or virtually. Informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the data collection process.

The quantitative data were analysed using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondents' characteristics and the extent of ESO support. The simple linear regression model evaluating the relationship between Enterprise Support Organisation (ESO) support and MSME growth and sustainability is expressed as:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_i + \epsilon_i \qquad (1)$$

Where:

Y_i = MSME Growth and Sustainability Index

X_i = ESO Support Index

β_0 = Constant (Intercept)

β_1 = Unstandardized Regression Coefficient

ϵ_i = Error term (residuals)

i = Index representing each sampled MSME

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Summary of Business Characteristics of Respondents (N = 371)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Primary Business Sector	Agriculture	104	28.0
	Construction and Real Estate	6	1.6
	Creative and Entertainment	21	5.7
	Education	23	6.2
	Financial Services	8	2.2
	Health and Wellness	17	4.6
	Hospitality and Tourism	7	1.9
	ICT	36	9.7
	Manufacturing	44	11.9
	Others	34	9.2
	Services	41	11.1
	Transportation and Logistics	4	1.1
	Wholesale and Retail	26	7.0
Years of Operation	1–3 years	187	50.4
	4–6 years	100	27.0
	7–10 years	50	13.5
	More than 10 years	34	9.2
Current Number of Employees	1–5 employees	290	78.2
	6–10 employees	58	15.6
	11–15 employees	9	2.4
	16–20 employees	12	3.2
	More than 20 employees	2	0.5

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The results show that agriculture constituted the largest business sector, accounting for 104 respondents (28.0%). This was followed by manufacturing with 44 respondents (11.9%), services with 41 respondents (11.1%), ICT with 36 respondents (9.7%), and other business activities with 34 respondents (9.2%). Wholesale and retail accounted for 26 respondents (7.0%), while education and creative and entertainment businesses represented 6.2% and 5.7%, respectively. The least represented sectors were transportation and logistics (1.1%), construction and real estate (1.6%), hospitality and tourism (1.9%), and financial services

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(2.2%). This distribution indicates that the respondents were drawn from a relatively diverse range of business activities, although agriculture had the strongest representation.

With respect to years of operation, the findings indicate that most of the businesses were relatively young. Specifically, 187 respondents (50.4%) had operated their businesses for between 1 and 3 years, while 100 respondents (27.0%) had been in operation for 4–6 years. Businesses that had operated for 7–10 years accounted for 50 respondents (13.5%), whereas only 34 respondents (9.2%) had operated for more than 10 years. Thus, more than three-quarters of the businesses (77.4%) had been operating for six years or less. This suggests that the business population was dominated by relatively recent enterprises, which may reflect the growing emergence of small and developing businesses.

Regarding the current number of employees, the results reveal a strong concentration of businesses at the micro-enterprise level. As many as 290 respondents (78.2%) employed between 1 and 5 workers, while 58 respondents (15.6%) employed 6–10 workers. Only 9 respondents (2.4%) had 11–15 employees, 12 respondents (3.2%) had 16–20 employees, and just 2 respondents (0.5%) employed more than 20 workers. Overall, the findings indicate that the businesses were predominantly small-scale enterprises, with very few having a relatively large workforce. The combination of short years of operation and small employee size suggests that most of the businesses represented in the study were young and relatively small enterprises.

Table 2: Roles that enterprise support organizations (ESOS) play in supporting the growth and sustainability of MSMES in Nigeria

Roles of ESOs in Supporting MSME Growth and Sustainability	Mean	Std. Dev	Remarks
Participation in the ESO programme has strengthened my managerial capabilities	3.63	1.193	Accepted
Through the ESO, my business has gained better access to markets	3.40	1.104	Accepted
I have expanded my professional network through the ESO	3.47	1.154	Accepted
The support received from the ESO has encouraged innovation within my business	3.52	1.193	Accepted
The support provided by the ESO has strengthened the long-term sustainability of my business	3.44	1.183	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026. ***Decision mean*** $\bar{X} \geq 3.0$

Table 2 presents the roles played by Enterprise Support Organisations (ESOs) in supporting the growth and sustainability of MSMEs in Nigeria. The roles were measured using a five-point Likert scale, with a decision mean of 3.0. Thus, mean scores of 3.00 and above were accepted, while mean scores below 3.00 were rejected. The results show that all the identified roles recorded mean scores above the decision mean, ranging from 3.40 to 3.63, indicating that respondents generally agreed that ESOs contribute positively to the growth and sustainability of their businesses. The standard deviations, which ranged from 1.104 to 1.193, provide an indication of the extent to which respondents' opinions varied around the respective mean scores.

From Table 2, the statement that participation in ESO programmes has strengthened managerial capabilities recorded the highest mean score of 3.63, with a standard deviation of 1.193. The mean score, being 0.63 points above the decision mean of 3.0, indicates a strong level of agreement among respondents. This suggests that ESO programmes have helped entrepreneurs improve their ability to plan, organise, coordinate and control business activities. The standard deviation of 1.193 indicates a moderate degree of variation in responses, meaning that although respondents generally agreed that ESO participation improved their managerial capabilities, the strength of this perception differed among the businesses. Some respondents may have experienced substantial managerial improvement, while others may have experienced less benefit from the programmes.

The support received from ESOs has encouraged innovation within my business had the second-highest mean of 3.52, with a standard deviation of 1.193. The mean is above the 3.0 decision benchmark, leading to the acceptance of the statement. This indicates that ESO support is perceived to encourage businesses to introduce new ideas, improve products and services, adopt better production techniques and explore new approaches to business operations. The standard deviation of 1.193 again indicates moderate variability in respondents' opinions. Thus, while the general perception was positive, the extent to which ESO support stimulated innovation was not exactly the same across all businesses.

The result for expansion of professional networks through the ESO shows a mean score of 3.47 and standard deviation of 1.154. The statement was accepted because the mean exceeded the decision mean of 3.0. This finding indicates that ESOs provide entrepreneurs with opportunities to establish relationships with other business owners, customers, mentors, investors, financial institutions and other relevant stakeholders. Such networks can improve access to business information, partnerships, referrals and commercial opportunities. The standard deviation of 1.154 suggests moderate variation in the responses, implying that respondents generally agreed about the networking benefits of ESOs, although the extent of networking opportunities experienced varied among the respondents.

Similarly, the statement that support provided by the ESO has strengthened the long-term sustainability of the business recorded a mean of 3.44 and standard deviation of 1.183. The mean score is above the 3.0 benchmark and was therefore accepted. This finding suggests that respondents considered ESO support useful in helping their businesses remain operational and better prepared to deal with business challenges. The standard deviation of 1.183 indicates moderate dispersion around the mean, showing that respondents' experiences of ESO contributions to business sustainability were somewhat different. While many respondents perceived considerable sustainability benefits, others may have experienced more limited effects.

The statement that through the ESO, the business has gained better access to markets recorded the lowest mean score of 3.40, with a standard deviation of 1.104. Despite having the lowest mean, the statement was accepted because the score was 0.40 points above the decision mean of 3.0. This indicates that respondents generally agreed that ESOs facilitate improved market access. Such support may involve linking businesses with customers, providing market information, facilitating participation in trade fairs and exhibitions, or connecting entrepreneurs with potential buyers and business partners. The standard deviation of 1.104, which is the lowest among all the indicators, indicates the least variation in respondents' responses. This suggests that respondents had relatively more consistent views about the role of ESOs in improving market access compared with the other roles measured.

TEST OF HYPOTHESES

H_{01}: Enterprise Support Organisation (ESO) support has no significant effect on the growth and sustainability of MSMEs in Nigeria.

H_{11}: Enterprise Support Organisation (ESO) support has a significant effect on the growth and sustainability of MSMEs in Nigeria.

Table 3: Regression Analysis of the Effect of ESO Support on MSME Growth and Sustainability

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
Constant	1.120	0.084		13.33	<0.001
ESO Support Index	0.582	0.036	0.580	16.17	<0.001
Model statistics	**R = 0.654**	**R^2 = 0.428**	**Adjusted R^2 = 0.426**	**F= 261.45**	**<0.001**

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

Table 3 shows that ESO support has a positive and statistically significant effect on MSME growth and sustainability. The coefficient of ESO Support Index is 0.582, indicating that an increase in ESO support is associated with an increase in the MSME Growth and Sustainability Index. The standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.580$) further indicates a relatively strong positive relationship between ESO support and MSME growth and sustainability.

The t-value of 16.17 with a p-value of less than 0.001 indicates that the effect is statistically significant at the 5% level. The overall model is also statistically significant, as indicated by the F-statistic of 261.45 ($p < 0.001$). The R^2 of 0.428 indicates that ESO support explains approximately 42.8% of the variation in MSME growth and sustainability, while the remaining 57.2% is attributable to other factors not included in the model.

Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected, while the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, the study concludes that ESO support has a significant positive effect on the growth and sustainability of MSMEs in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study concludes that Enterprise Support Organisations (ESOs) play an important role in promoting the growth and sustainability of MSMEs in Nigeria. The findings show that respondents generally agreed that ESO interventions contribute positively to enterprise development, as all the identified roles recorded mean scores above the 3.0 decision benchmark. In particular, strengthening managerial capabilities recorded the highest mean score of 3.63, followed by encouragement of business innovation (3.52), expansion of professional networks (3.47), improvement in long-term business sustainability (3.44), and better access to markets (3.40). These findings indicate that ESO interventions provide MSMEs with valuable managerial, innovative, networking and market-related support.

The regression result further confirms that ESO support has a positive and statistically significant effect on MSME growth and sustainability, with a coefficient of 0.582 and a standardized coefficient of 0.580 ($p < 0.001$). The model explained 42.8% of the variation in MSME growth and sustainability, while the significant F-statistic of 261.45 ($p < 0.001$) confirms the overall significance of the model. The study therefore rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that stronger ESO support is associated with improved growth and sustainability of MSMEs in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. ESOs should strengthen managerial training and mentorship programmes. Since managerial capability recorded the highest mean score (3.63), greater emphasis should be placed on financial management, business planning, record keeping, marketing, strategic decision-making and leadership development to improve the capacity of MSMEs to grow and remain sustainable.
2. ESOs should expand market-linkage, networking and innovation support. Although these roles were positively assessed, market access recorded the lowest mean (3.40). ESOs should therefore increase opportunities for MSMEs to connect with buyers, suppliers, investors and other businesses, while also supporting digital adoption, product development and process innovation.
3. Government and ESO providers should improve the coordination and continuity of enterprise-support programmes. Since ESO support significantly influences MSME growth and sustainability, support programmes should be better coordinated, regularly monitored and designed around the specific needs of different sectors and enterprise sizes. This will help ensure that ESO interventions translate into sustained improvements in business performance rather than short-term benefits.

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