An Analysis of the Impact of Survival Entrepreneurship on Economic Development: A Case Study of the Informal Sector in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

High unemployment in Zimbabwe has led to the rise of survivalist entrepreneurs. This research examines the impact of survival entrepreneurs on economic development in Zimbabwe. A Dynamic Linear Regression Model is employed to analyse the relationship between self-employment data, serving as a proxy for survivalist entrepreneurship, and GDP per capita, which is regarded as a core measure of economic development. The findings reveal that self-employment has a statistically insignificant relationship with GDP per capita, despite the growing significance of the informal sector within Zimbabwe's economy. While survivalist entrepreneurship contributes positively by creating jobs and supporting livelihoods, its overall influence on GDP per capita growth remains marginal. To boost the productivity of survivalist entrepreneurs and promote their participation in formal economic activities, the government should streamline business registration processes, reducing bureaucratic barriers and offering tax incentives to encourage formalization. Furthermore, collaboration with private sector entities is essential to provide mentorship, funding, and networking opportunities. Additionally, enacting laws to safeguard the rights of informal entrepreneurs, while extending social benefits, can ensure their gradual integration into the formal economy, unlocking their full potential for extensive economic growth.

Keywords: Survivalist entrepreneurs, self-employment, economic development, informal sector, GDP per capita.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Developing nations have seen the informal sector emerge as a vital economic force, offering support to millions of unemployed individuals and easing their financial challenges (International Labour Organization, 2018). Over the past two decades, Zimbabwe's informal economy has expanded significantly due to prolonged economic instability, rising unemployment, and shrinking formal job markets (Charmes, 2019). Survivalist entrepreneurs, driven by necessity, play a key role in sustaining local economic activity (Ligthelm, 2008). However, limited research exists on how these entrepreneurs influence broader economic outcomes, particularly within Zimbabwe's economic context.

The informal sector has emerged as a defining feature of economies in developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (International Labour Organization, 2018). Across the globe, informal enterprises account for approximately 90% of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and employ nearly 60% of the workforce (Etim & Daramola, 2020). In Zimbabwe, the informal sector is an integral part of the economic framework, shaping key national dynamics. Historical shifts in socio-economic and political conditions have fueled its expansion, contributing approximately 60% to GDP and 50% of total employment in 2000 (Mpofu, 2021). Its growth calls attention to its economic relevance while raising questions about its wider influence on development. Zimbabwe’s formal economy has struggled to recover from prolonged periods of decline, worsened by political instability, governance challenges, and external sanctions (World Bank, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated Zimbabwe’s economic struggles, leading to widespread job losses Ndiweni & Verhoeven (2013). Mlambo (2017) notes that ineffective monetary policies, the devaluation of the

Zimbabwean dollar, and the adoption of the US dollar accelerated informal activities. This accelerated the growth of survivalist entrepreneurship as a means to avert economic challenges.

Although the informal sector provides employment and sustains livelihoods for many, it poses significant challenges to formal economic progress. Many informal enterprises operate outside regulatory and tax systems, limiting their growth potential and eroding government revenue (Nyoni, Musisinyani, and Nyoni, 2017). Moreover, as Mujeyi and Sadomba (2019) emphasize, informal entrepreneurs face significant hurdles, such as limited access to capital, markets, and technology. According to ZIMSTAT (2022) the growing population and rising costs associated with formal businesses have pushed more individuals into informal enterprises, with 2.8 million people engaged in informal activities compared to 495,000 in the formal sector. Despite its growing importance, survivalist entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe remain insufficiently studied in terms of its overall impact on economic development. Existing research primarily focuses on poverty alleviation and employment creation, with limited attention to macroeconomic effects (Charmes, 2019; Ligthelm, 2008). GDP per capita is identified by the World Bank (2020) as a widely accepted measure of economic progress, reflecting the average economic output distributed among the population. While prior research notes a connection between survivalist entrepreneurship and GDP per capita, it remains underexplored (Gerxhani, 2004). This study seeks to fill this gap by analysing survivalist entrepreneurship's role in driving Zimbabwe's economic progress.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

This study uses Baumol's Entrepreneurial Theory, Push and Pull theory as well as Institutional Theory to provide understanding of survivalist entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe.

Baumol's Entrepreneurial Theory provides useful lens for examining the impact of survivalist entrepreneurship on Zimbabwe's economic development. Baumol (1996) identifies three types of entrepreneurship: productive, unproductive, and destructive. In Zimbabwe, survivalist entrepreneurship largely aligns with productive entrepreneurship, as it supports local economies by providing essential goods and services in areas where formal businesses are absent (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). However, survivalist entrepreneurs often operate in informal spaces, relying on alternative mechanisms such as social networks and informal credit systems to adapt to the challenging economic environment (Ndiweni & Verhoeven (2013). The adaptability of entrepreneurs within informal institutions is essential, particularly in light of Zimbabwe's weak formal institutions, characterized by systemic issues such as hyperinflation and high unemployment (Hupile & Siambombe, 2024). Despite its applicability, Baumol's theory does not adequately address the transition from subsistence entrepreneurship to scalable enterprises in countries like Zimbabwe, where institutions are fragile. Furthermore, it underplays the gender dynamics at play, as many survivalist entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe are women navigating multiple systemic constraints.

The Push and Pull Theory offers another perspective for understanding survivalist entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe. This theory posits that individuals are either "pushed" into entrepreneurship by necessity or "pulled" toward it by opportunities (Bygrave & Hofer, 1991). In Zimbabwe, push factors such as economic hardships, high unemployment, and limited formal job opportunities dominate. Many survivalist entrepreneurs are compelled to engage in informal trade as a means of escaping poverty. While pull factors exist, they are relatively scarce, given the constrained market opportunities and limited access to capital Martínez-Cañas et al (2023). One example of a pull factor is the involvement of survivalist entrepreneurs in informal cross-border trade, which creates marginal opportunities for growth. However, the theory tends to oversimplify the interplay between push and pull factors, failing to account for structural issues, such as currency instability and challenges accessing global markets (Akinyemi & Adejumo, 2018). Moreover, it does not sufficiently explore how survivalist entrepreneurs can transition from necessity-driven ventures to innovation-led enterprises.

Institutional Theory sheds light on the influence of both formal and informal institutions on entrepreneurial behaviour. In Zimbabwe, weak formal institutions, manifested through a lack of supportive policies and financial exclusion hinder the growth potential of survivalist entrepreneurs (North, 1991). Survivalist entrepreneurs, therefore, turn to informal institutions to navigate these challenges. Informal systems such as community-based savings groups and trust-based transactions play a pivotal role in sustaining their businesses. However, Institutional Theory pays insufficient attention to the role of cultural norms and social capital, which

are particularly critical in fostering entrepreneurship in fragile economic environments like Zimbabwe (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

These theories capture the Zimbabwean scenario but leave gaps, particularly in addressing transitions to scalable entrepreneurship, systemic gender dynamics, and the role of informal institutions and cultural norms in supporting entrepreneurial activity.

Empirical Literature review

Survivalist entrepreneurship arises as a necessity-driven approach, offering employment opportunities and helping to reduce poverty in developing regions like South Africa and across Sub-Saharan Africa (Fields, 2019). According to the International Labour Organization (2019), this form of entrepreneurship has been effective in improving family incomes and lowering poverty levels in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, these enterprises often operate at a subsistence level, which limits their contribution to national GDP growth. Medina & Schneider (2018) observe that the informal sector, accounting for roughly 30% of GDP in low-income countries, faces significant growth constraints due to inefficiencies and limited integration with formal economic activities. In South Africa, ventures like hawkers and spaza shops play a significant role in reducing unemployment by providing livelihood options (Ligthelm, 2006). Similarly, a study of flea market dealers in Northern California demonstrates how survivalist entrepreneurship supports those driven into such ventures by poverty or unemployment (Williams, 2010). Despite its importance in addressing poverty and unemployment, survivalist entrepreneurship in South Africa, as noted by Ranyane (2015), remains focused on subsistence and does not substantially contribute to broader economic growth. This points to a need for strategies to enable these ventures to achieve sustainable development and stronger economic impacts.

The informal sector is a critical driver of employment in Zimbabwe, with survivalist entrepreneurs serving as its cornerstone (World Bank, 2018). Evaluating their contributions requires an analysis of poverty alleviation, employment trends, and broader economic indicators. Research by the African Development Bank (2019) stresses the role of urban informal sector entrepreneurs in sustaining household financial stability during economic crises. Small-scale businesses, often rooted in survivalist entrepreneurship, foster job creation, income redistribution, and economic growth in developing countries (World Bank, 2018). Similarly, the International Labour Organization (2019) highlights the significance of SMEs in South Africa for employment generation and economic advancement. Grimm et al. (2012) associate survivalist entrepreneurship with job creation, while Fajnzylber et al. (2009) identify its role in boosting incomes across developing economies. Webb et al. (2013) further illustrate the ability of survivalist entrepreneurs to adapt to market fluctuations, enhancing their economic contribution. Despite their resilience and contribution, survivalist enterprises often remain limited in scope and impact, highlighting gaps in fostering sustainable growth within informal economies.

Despite the significant contributions of survivalist entrepreneurship, low productivity remains a persistent challenge. The World Bank (2018) notes that while self-employment represents a substantial portion of total employment in many developing countries, including Nigeria, its impact on GDP is often constrained by barriers such as limited access to credit, inadequate training, and lack of formalization. In Zimbabwe, systemic issues like corruption, poor infrastructure, and government negligence further hinder the economic growth potential of the informal sector (African Development Bank, 2019). Similarly, the International Labour Organization (2019) reports that in South Africa, self-employment often serves as a "last resort" for the unemployed rather than a pathway to economic empowerment. The findings by Iwu & Opute (2019) indicate that survivalist entrepreneurs can contribute to the socioeconomic development of an economy when supported through government programs or collaborative public-private growth initiatives. Iwu & Opute (2019) noted that survivalist entrepreneurs face significant obstacles, including limited access to capital, inadequate business management skills, and a lack of formalization, which hinder their ability to achieve substantial impact.

Empirical evidence points out the importance of public administration efforts in boosting the productivity and performance of survivalist entrepreneurs. According to the World Bank (2018), government investment in infrastructure, such as transportation, marketplaces, and energy supply, significantly enhances the productivity of survivalist enterprises. In Zimbabwe, government programs and policies play a pivotal role in supporting

survivalist entrepreneurs, facilitating their access to formal financial systems, vocational training, and market opportunities (International Labour Organization, 2019). Examples from Latin America, specifically in Peru and Bolivia, illustrate how initiatives providing formal finance and training to informal entrepreneurs can lead to improved economic outcomes (Canton, 2021).

Most studies on survivalist entrepreneurship rely heavily on qualitative methods, with limited research measuring its specific impact on GDP. However, certain gaps in the literature remain evident. Firstly, while there is considerable emphasis on infrastructure and financial access, there is a lack of focus on promoting innovation and skills development, which could help transform survivalist enterprises into growth-oriented businesses. Secondly, much of the research has concentrated on small-scale interventions, without addressing how broader structural reforms, such as reducing corruption and improving governance, could enhance the informal sector's economic potential. Thirdly, the integration of digital technologies into survivalist enterprises has not been adequately explored, despite their potential to formalize operations and expand access to markets. Lastly, the role of gender dynamics within survivalist entrepreneurship has received insufficient attention, even though women are prominent in this sector. Policies specifically meant to address the unique challenges faced by women could significantly improve the outcomes of survivalist enterprises. This would not only enhance the productivity and sustainability of survivalist entrepreneurship but also bridge the divide between the informal and formal economies, fostering inclusive and long-term economic development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research design, anchored in positivism, was employed. Using time series data from the World Bank spanning 2005 to 2023, GDP per capita (GDPC) serves as the dependent variable to represent economic development. The analysis incorporates self-employment as a measure of survivalist entrepreneurship and utilizes public administration quality data derived from government spending on public administration and fixed capital formation investments. To capture evolving relationships between variables, a time-lagged GDPC variable is included.

A Dynamic Linear Regression Model (DLRM) is applied to assess the influence of self-employment on GDPC, while public administration and fixed capital formation are used as control variables. The model is specified in the following way:

$$Economic\ Development\ (GDPC_t) = \beta 0 + \beta 1\ Survivalist\ Entrepreneurs_t\ (self\text{-}employment) + \beta 2\ administration_t + \beta 3 Fixed\ capital\ formation_t + \varepsilon_t$$

Where:

$\beta 0$ = *Constant term*

$\beta 1, \beta 2$ *and* $\beta 3$ = *Coefficients to be estimated representing the impact of each variable on GDP per capita*

ε_t = *Error term at time t*

The regression findings were validated through several diagnostic tests that assessed:

- The Durbin-Watson statistic helped detect autocorrelation that occurred in the error term of the model.
- The method used for detecting heteroscedasticity was the Breusch-Pagan test.
- Shapiro-Wilk test was used for checking the distribution of residuals.
- Multicollinearity test was used to identify highly correlated independent variables.

FINDINGS

Fig. 1 depicts the trajectory of GDP per capita in Zimbabwe over the specified timeframe.

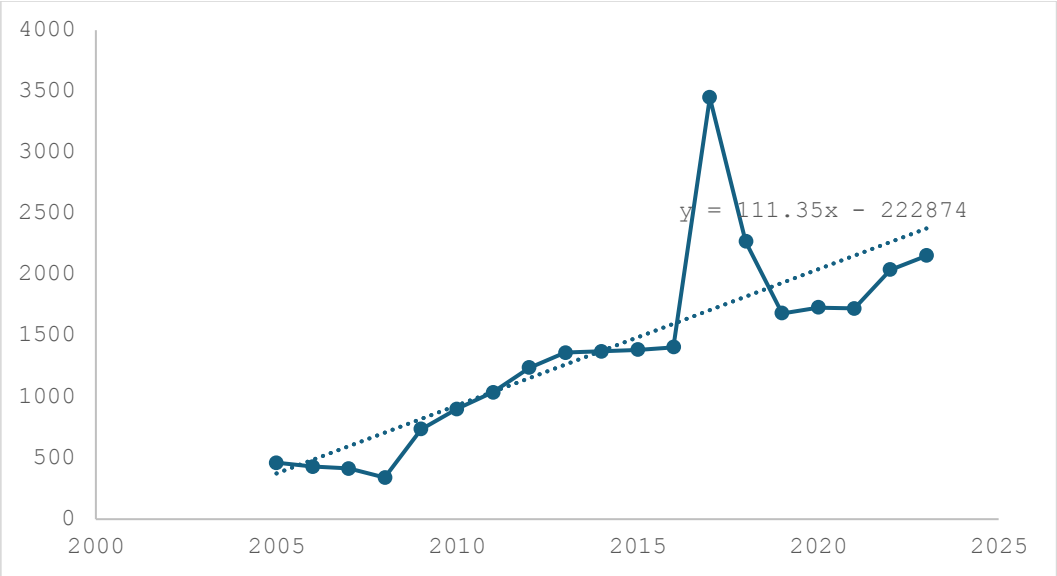

Fig. 1: Zimbabwe GDP Per Capita over time

Source: World Bank

Between 2005 and 2023, Zimbabwe's GDP per capita exhibited significant fluctuations. As shown in Fig. 1, it dropped sharply from $461 in 2005 to $340 in 2008, a decline of 26.2% over four years. This was followed by a strong recovery between 2009 and 2014, with GDP per capita rising by 86.5%, from $735 in 2009 to $1,372 in 2014. From 2015 to 2019, the GDP per capita experienced instability, oscillating between $1,386 and $1,684. In more recent years, GDP per capita has decreased from $1,730 in 2020 to $2,156 in 2023, with stability observed between 2022 and 2023. These patterns reflect notable cycles and volatility in Zimbabwe's economic performance over the two decades.

Fig. 2 illustrates the trend in self-employment rates throughout Zimbabwe's economic landscape.

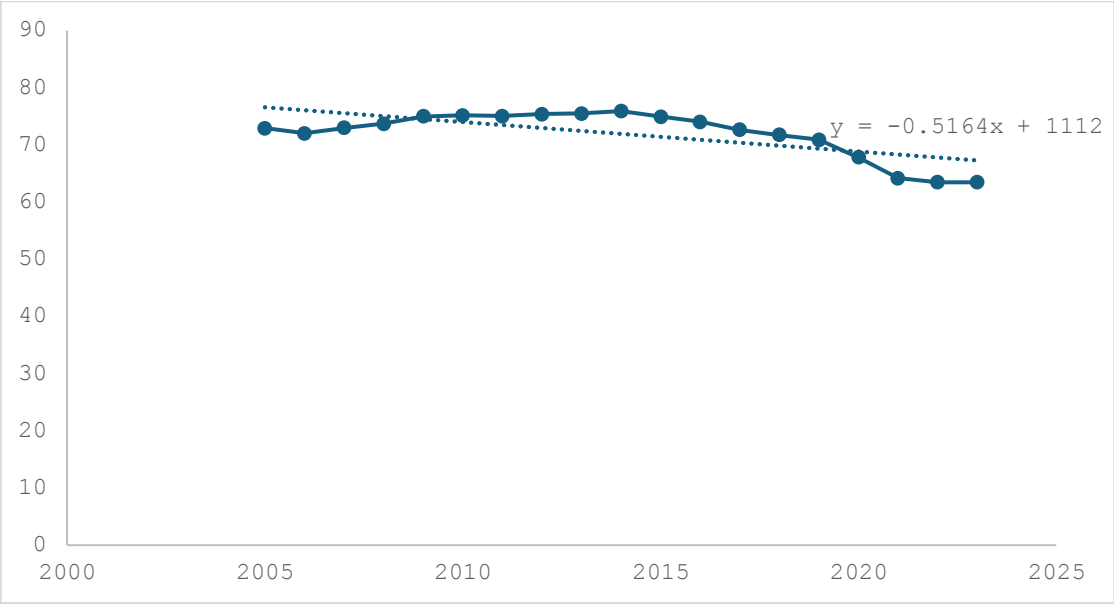

Fig. 2: Zimbabwe Self-Employment over time

Source: World Bank

Between 2005 and 2023, the self-employment rate in Zimbabwe followed a consistent trend, as depicted in Fig. 2. It ranged from a low of 71.74% in 2005 to a peak of 75.92% in 2014. However, from 2015 onwards, the rate steadily declined, reaching 63.46% in 2022, where it remained throughout 2023. Over the eight years of decline from 2015 to 2023, the self-employment rate dropped by 16.2%. Despite this decrease, self-employment maintained levels above 70% for much of the analysed period, underscoring its critical role in Zimbabwe's employment landscape.

Diagnostic Test 1

A series of diagnostic tests on the regression model yielded results that appear in Table 1 to analyse the relationship between self-employment and GDP per capita in Zimbabwe.

Table 1: Impact of Self-Employment on GDP per Capita

	Estimate	**Std. Error**	**t value**	**p value**
Intercept	1.076e+00	2.128e+00	0.506	0.62035
Self-Employment	4.312e-02	2.531e-02	1.703	0.10911
Public Admin	7.277e-01	2.254e-01	3.228	0.00563 **
Fixed Capital	4.843e-11	1.888e-11	2.565	0.02153 *

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Adjusted R-squared: 0.7355; F-statistic: 17.68 on 3 and 15 DF; p-value: 3.457e-05

The annual values of GDP per capita in Zimbabwe that are displayed in Fig. 1 span from 2005 through 2023. GDP per capita in Zimbabwe lacks statistical significance when self-employment is analysed (p-value = 0.10911) since the value exceeds the critical 0.05 threshold, thus showing the insignificance of this coefficient.

Model Fit

Model data reveals GDP per capita can explain 73.55% of its variations based on the Adjusted R-squared value of 0.7355. The model validity emerges from an F-statistic alongside a p-value which support the overall results.

F-statistic = 17.68

p-value = 3.457e-05

This indicates strong model validity.

Diagnostic Test 2

Table 2: Assumptions of the Classical Linear Regression Model (CLRM)

Diagnostic Test 2		**Statistics**	**p-value**
Normality	**Shapiro-Wilk normality test**	W = 0.93228	0.1907
Heteroscedasticity	**Breusch-Pagan test**	BP = 0.71631 df = 3	0.8694
Autocorrelation	**Durbin Watson test**	Autocorrelation = 0.09714908 D-W Statistic = 1.698823	0.172
Multicollinearity	**Multicollinearity test**	VIF: selfemployment = 1.774039 publicadmin = 2.799289 fixedcapital = 2.135174	

Source: Author Computation

The Shapiro-Wilk normality test p-value exceeds 0.05 which proves that the residuals match normality assumptions leading to valid regression results. The analysis confirms non-existent heteroscedasticity through the Breusch-Pagan test whereas the Durbin-Watson statistic indicates no significant autocorrelation. Additional tests regarding multicollinearity demonstrate that the selected variables remain independent of each other.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis presented in DLRM examines how self-employment interacts with public administration, fixed capital, and GDP per capita structures in Zimbabwe, revealing important economic consequences. The self-employment variable shows a positive effect on GDP per capita, as indicated by the 0.04312 coefficient value. However, the 0.10911 p-value confirms that this relationship does not reach statistical significance at the 5% level. This confirms the findings by Gindling & Newhouse (2014) that survivalist entrepreneurs provide income to millions, but their low productivity restricts their ability to increase GDP. In Zimbabwe, survivalist entrepreneurs operate under conditions aimed at mere survival, without the means to expand their work or enhance national economic performance. Fox & Sohnesen (2016) also note that self-employment raises household incomes in Sub-Saharan Africa, yet its impact on national GDP remains marginal. This is because survivalist businesses are typically confined to small-scale operations. This is also augmented by Ranyane (2015), who emphasized that survivalist entrepreneurship has minimal impact on GDP growth due to its focus on subsistence, highlighting the need for strategies to enhance its economic role.

Building on these findings, global research further supports the performance barriers faced by survivalist entrepreneurs. Gunther & Launov (2012) observe that individuals engaged in informal activities exhibit low productivity, limiting their contribution to national economic growth. In Zimbabwe's informal sector, these challenges are exacerbated by restricted access to markets, capital, and infrastructure, further curbing productivity. Researchers, however, acknowledge that survivalist entrepreneurs contribute to economic growth through non-traditional means that are often excluded from standard economic metrics. Charman, Petersen & Piper (2013) note that these entrepreneurs play a vital role in mitigating poverty and fostering social stability in marginalized communities, even though their impact remains unaccounted for in GDP measurements. Similarly, Brixiova & Kangoye (2016) highlight the resilience and innovation within this group, pointing out the inadequacies of traditional indicators in capturing their economic significance.

The positive and statistically significant relationship between public administration and GDP per capita, indicated by a coefficient of 0.7277 (p-value = 0.00563), shows how effective governance contributes to economic growth. This finding is supported by research emphasizing the importance of institutional frameworks in fostering development. Acemoglu & Robinson (2019) explain that the progress of developing economies over time relies heavily on inclusive institutions and reliable governance systems. In Zimbabwe, the connection between public administration and GDP per capita reveals the potential for growth through enhanced institutional practices. Sendra-Pons, Comeig & Mas-Tur (2022) propose that well-functioning public institutions create favourable conditions for both formal and informal businesses to succeed. However, Zimbabwe's informal sector struggles with inefficiencies and limited institutional support, as stated by Ndiweni & Verhoeven (2013). Addressing these challenges through targeted policies could help unlock the full potential of informal entrepreneurs.

The research demonstrates that fixed capital investment has a statistically significant positive relationship with GDP per capita, indicated by a 4.843e-11 coefficient significance level (p-value = 0.02153). These findings align with classical economic growth theories, such as the Solow growth model (1956), which emphasize capital accumulation as a key driver of economic progress. However, the small coefficient value reflects the limited impact of fixed capital investment on Zimbabwe's GDP per capita. This outcome appears to stem from inefficient capital allocation and unproductive activities prevalent in the informal sector. Similarly, studies from other Sub-Saharan African nations indicate that resource constraints in the informal sector hinder its potential to foster economic growth, as noted by Bhorat et al. (2017).

CONCLUSION

Under the informal business operations framework, the research assessed how survivalist entrepreneurship impacts Zimbabwean economic development. The study examined correlations between self-employment and

public administration interactions by analyzing them with fixed capital and GDP per capita using econometric methods. The study delivers an in-depth knowledge about survivalist entrepreneurs while creating significant considerations for both scholars and policymakers in Zimbabwe's economy.

The experimental data points to self-employment having a positive relationship to GDP per capita but its statistical significance (p-value = 0.109110) was not affirmed. This indicates that, although survivalist entrepreneurs contribute to economic activity, they do not significantly propel GDP growth in Zimbabwe. This observation is consistent with the perspectives of Gunther & Launov (2012), who contend that activities in the informal sector typically operate at subsistence levels and lack the capacity for scalability to affect broader macroeconomic indicators. According to Charman, Petersen & Piper (2013), the important indirect impacts survivalist entrepreneurs make through poverty relief and social stability maintenance continue to be crucial factors.

The model presents a satisfactory result based on its adjusted R-squared value of 0.7355 yet the study stresses that GDP per capita alone does not accurately measure economic development. The essential tasks of survivalist entrepreneurs for sustaining livable income along with job creation and poverty reduction and social order improvement lead to permanent development for the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings of this study emphasize the need for targeted measures to improve the productivity of survivalist entrepreneurs. Policymakers should address critical barriers by increasing access to microfinance, training programs, and infrastructure, thereby enabling these entrepreneurs to move beyond subsistence operations and make meaningful contributions to GDP growth. Recognizing their contributions to poverty reduction and community stability, governments and NGOs should establish community-based business hubs. These hubs would provide mentorship and shared resources to enhance productivity. Furthermore, organizing workshops focused on business management and innovation will equip entrepreneurs with the essential skills required to improve and expand their ventures effectively. Institutional reforms should prioritize streamlining regulatory processes to simplify business registration and licensing, enhancing resource allocation to underserved areas, and fostering public-private partnerships to deliver financial services and mentorship. Local support systems, such as municipal-level advisory centres, could further assist entrepreneurs by providing access to funding and market opportunities.

Limitations and Future Research

The study acknowledges its limitations through its dependency on GDP per capita measurements. To address the limitations of GDP as an economic measure, alternative metrics should be developed to capture the extensive social and economic contributions of survivalist entrepreneurs. Detailed studies and surveys could assess the role of survivalist entrepreneurship in poverty alleviation, community stability, and regional development

This study focused on Zimbabwe as the primary research which could limit its generalizability across different contexts. Future research could investigate institutional frameworks across Sub-Saharan Africa to evaluate their influence on the informal sector’s scalability and explore strategies to integrate these entrepreneurs into formal economies without undermining their social role. Survivalist entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa would gain useful insights about its growth factors through comparative analysis across nations. Additionally, future research should conduct extended period monitoring to disclose the prolonged economic consequences that informal sector operations produce.

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