

4th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MANAGEMENT, ECONOMICS & FINANCE

10-12 September, 2021

How can Qatar improve SME support?

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ABSTRACT

Qatar is a classic petrostate. Vast wealth has flowed into the small nation due to its huge natural gas deposits. As development increased, giant petroleum corporations and subsidiaries began representing the majority of Qatar's national income. For a variety of reasons, including social, political, and economic, entrepreneurial activity and the development of small and medium size enterprises (SME) have been stunted. The Qatari government has acknowledged this problem and has taken steps to support entrepreneurs in a conscious effort to diversify the economy through the Qatar National Vision 2030. Due to these efforts, Qatar has become a leader among Arab states in sustainability, in the recognition of the significance of women, and in government programs, policies, initiatives, and incentives to support the development of small and medium size businesses. This paper analyses the conditions in which SMEs are operating in Qatar, and also identifying the additional steps that are required to be taken.

Keywords: Macroeconomics; Qatar; SME; Qatar Vision 2030

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Introduction

Economists explain that the four factors involved in economic activity are land, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship.¹ To produce goods or a service, one must have space and a place to carry out the business (land), have someone to carry out the production (labor), the equipment to do so (capital), and someone willing to take the risk to start the business (entrepreneurship). As entrepreneurs begin to develop their ideas into a business, they start off as a small-sized business and then turn into a medium-size business. Some, the Henry Fords or Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos of the world, have created large businesses, producing products or providing services valued in the billions or even trillions of dollars. Most, though, will remain as small or medium-sized businesses.

Entrepreneurship and SMEs in turn are central to the success and growth of developing nations around the world. According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, SMEs comprise 99% of all businesses in the areas in which they operate.² The local Qatari newspaper, the *Gulf Times*, reports similar figures for Qatar with 96% of the 25,000 registered businesses in the nation falling into the SME category.³ SMEs are immensely important because they tend to be flexible and dynamic in their strategies and operations. This is a capability that no large corporation or government can match. Those characteristics enable entrepreneurs to rapidly build networks, partnerships, and collaborations, and to acquire and reorganize resources in order to meet the needs of the economies where they operate. Such abilities are enhanced when SMEs and entrepreneurs can access and apply vital mechanisms, including "client-supplier relationships, existing personal contacts, contacts acquired by chance, and contacts acquired through specific strategies"⁴.

For SME abilities and resulting performance outcomes to be effective, they must heavily rely on a supportive and effective environment within which entrepreneurship can take place. Indeed, evidence indicates that the level of innovation and economic contribution of entrepreneurs and SMEs is heavily linked to the ability of the environment to facilitate their operations and strategies.⁵ This research paper aims to critically evaluate the current SME and entrepreneurship conditions in Qatar and to suggest ways in which the government can increase their support to entrepreneurship and SMEs. To accomplish this, the conditions necessary to support entrepreneurship and SMEs were identified. Following that, a search was made for evidence of barriers that would hinder or limit these conditions. Finally, recommendations were formulated to address any problems identified.

¹ "Factors of Production: The Economic Lowdown Podcast Series," n.d.

² "Why Small Businesses Matter," 2021.

³ John, 2019.

⁴ Ciravegna et al, 2014, 916.

⁵ Leitner, 2015.

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Qatari Government Program

QNV and NDS2

The *Qatar National Vision 2030* (QNV) was produced in 2008 by the General Secretariat for Development Planning. The government laid out five challenges that it believed must be addressed in order for Qatar to move ahead. Although all five are interconnected, three of them more directly concern the growth of the economy: managed growth and uncontrolled expansion, the size and quality of the expat labor force, and economic and social development.

Qatar is aware of the need to diversify its economy. In support of that perceived need, the Ministry of Development, Planning, and Statistics released the Qatar Second National Development Strategy (NDS2), the framework document to support the goals within QNV 2030. The opening paragraph of NDS2 makes clear that Qatari leadership recognizes the need to reduce reliance on oil and natural gas. Indeed, in the words of the NDS2, the goal is “... ensuring high living standards for its people for generations to come by seeking to develop a diversified economy coupled with diminishing dependence on hydrocarbons, where investment is moving towards a knowledge-based economy and the private sector is growing in importance.”⁶ Much of the NDS2 is, effectively, a commitment to support and promote entrepreneurs and SMEs.

The first action item is “Diversifying the Production Base of the Economy.”⁷ The NDS2 specifically includes “.... supporting and developing SMEs and increasing their contribution to the diversification of the production base.”⁸ Several specific programs were directed at supporting SMEs and recognized the problems of licensing, permitting, and other bureaucratic delays. To attempt to resolve these issues, an action item for “Improving service delivery and e-government”⁹ was included to smooth the way to new business formation.

QBIC

To support entrepreneurs and the development of SMEs, the Qatar Business Incubation Center (QBIC) was established in 2014. To date, the QBIC has 529 LeanStartup program graduates, a management training program, received 6,000 applications, developed 189 businesses, occupied 85% of the space, invested nearly 6 million Qatari riyals (over \$1.5 million) in its businesses, and generated almost 80 million Qatari riyals (\$21 million) in income. This organization’s success in fostering and supporting new businesses shows the apparent gap and need for such organizations in Qatar to help develop SMEs and entrepreneurship. Additionally, there is no better indication of the progress that is being made by women in Qatari society than the fact that the Chief Executive Officer of the QBIC is a woman. In fact, she has been ranked

⁶ Al Thani, 2018, V.

⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

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among the “... 100 Most Powerful Arab Women by *CEO Middle East Magazine* and as the 32nd most influential Qatari by *Arabian Business Qatar*.”¹⁰

Has it Worked?

Plans, programs, evaluations, and good intentions are a good start. However, have they been implemented and, if so, have they been effective? The QDB undertook a study to answer these questions and recently published their report entitled ‘*The State of Small & Medium Enterprises (SMEs) 2020*’. To prepare this report, over 500 SMEs were surveyed regarding a variety of aspects. It was conducted in 2019, prior to the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is still considered a reasonable reflection of the condition of Qatar’s SME community as the world’s economy returns to pre-COVID levels. Key findings of their study are presented below.

Business Size and Industry

First, SMEs in Qatar are overwhelmingly *very* small. From the sample surveyed for the report, about half are in the “micro” range of 1-10 employees. Data from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry shows that nearly two-thirds of the surveyed SMEs fall into that category. In terms of the type of business in which SMEs are engaged in, data from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and the QDB survey are quite similar. A little over a third are merchants at the wholesale and retail level, while another third are in accommodation and food services. The remaining third is split among agriculture, forestry and fisheries, construction, and manufacturing, respectively.

The report additionally reviewed business sizes by industry. The sectors with the highest requirement in capital investment tended to have the lowest participation by the smallest SMEs. SMEs dominated in sectors where microbusiness could be opened and provide services with minor investment and capital, such as a personal finance consulting firm which requires only a small office and a personal computer. Industries, such as manufacturing, where relatively large capital and investments are needed, were dominated by the larger, albeit still “medium,” sized businesses.

The QDB survey asked the business owners and managers of their views in seven areas:

1. Financial outlook.
2. **Regulatory and business set-up issues;**
3. Business operations and market development;
4. **Access to finance;**
5. **Access to knowledge;**
6. Support for SMEs; and,
7. Future challenges.¹¹

The responses show a generally positive condition and optimistic view among SMEs. The following show the responses for items 2,4, and 5 above.

¹⁰ Q Life, 2021.

¹¹ Al Khalifa, 2021, 37.

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Regulatory and Business Set-up

SMEs were generally content with the regulatory environment which suggests that Qatar has made significant strides in this area. Some 60% of the SMEs listed the regulatory environment as a positive factor in their decision to operate in Qatar where 41% responded positively to the question regarding “ease of establishing a business” and 19% responded positively to the question about “ease of running a business”.¹² Against this generally favorable view, 18% did list “complex, costly and time-intensive procedures” as problematic. Other problem areas included access to physical facilities (17%), personnel costs (15%), and lack of an appropriate workforce (14%).¹³

Access to Finance

Personal savings were reported to be the primary source of startup business financing in 2020, whereas personal savings represented two-thirds of startup financing in 2016.¹⁴ Once the business has started, expansion is mostly from the reinvestment of profits (43%), supplemented by personal savings (21%), and bank financing (11 percent).¹⁵ Bank financing remains almost a “last resort” option due to high collateral requirements, the complexity of the process, and interest rates.¹⁶

Access to Knowledge

There have been declines throughout the SME sector in the access to knowledge and skilled personnel. The SMEs reported that the provision of basic training has declined, while worse still, those providing “no training” has increased. Only in the area of comprehensive training have more firms become engaged. However, the increase is from a significantly low level (8%) to only that of a slightly higher level (15%).¹⁷

Qatari businesses are getting more involved in the more general area of information. Almost 60% of SMEs have dedicated information technology specialists on their staff. This has increased from the reported 41% in 2016.¹⁸ 83% are using some type of technology in the running of their businesses, albeit if only basic applications such as Microsoft Office are used. About 12% self-identified as “advanced” users, with 3% of those stating that they were “highly advanced.”¹⁹ Surprisingly, less than half of the SMEs have a web presence. This is dramatically

¹² Ibid., 51.

¹³ Ibid., 52.

¹⁴ Ibid., 62.

¹⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁶ Ibid., 68.

¹⁷ Ibid., 72.

¹⁸ Ibid., 80.

¹⁹ Ibid., 82.

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lower than the 2016 figures which reported that nearly three-quarters of SMEs were present on the internet.²⁰

Background and Barriers

In general, academic literature indicates that legal and social barriers are among the key factors hindering the ability of entrepreneurship and SMEs to contribute to the economy of any given nation. Specifically, entrepreneurs and SMEs need to be able to access networks and resources which they can use to build or expand their business. However, these networks and resources are often controlled by large firms and are often regulated by government policies. This practice limits the amount of resources available to entrepreneurs to access and exploit, despite the potential level of value that SMEs could create and add to the economy if such resources were less privately-regulated and were made more readily available.

Entrepreneurs and SMEs are often limited in their ability to raise needed funds without depleting personal resources. In addition, SMEs are faced with the problem of proprietary information being expropriated.²¹ At the same time, developing nations often experience social constraints on entrepreneurship, including a disdain for entrepreneurs and a veneration of large and state-owned businesses. These obstacles are present in Qatar, with evidence indicating that the country has excessive bureaucratic requirements, restrictive and biased legal conditions, and negative social perceptions of entrepreneurship.²² As such, these represent clear barriers to the contributions of entrepreneurship and SMEs to the economy.

Another key issue is a lack of access to suitable sources of finance. This is because SMEs and new ventures tend to lack physical capital, as well as a strong track record of revenues and profits. This in turn means they can be in danger of being excluded from traditional financial services such as bank loans and corporate bond issues. As a result, despite entrepreneurs and SMEs often being better able to exploit opportunities, their ability to deliver this value is limited by the lack of finance with which to invest in their operations²³. This is particularly an issue for developing economies, where the bank lending systems have often been developed to favor larger firms, and thus even successful and profitable SMEs are excluded from the mainstream financial services industry²⁴. This is the case for Qatar, where the reliance of the economy on the oil and gas sector has meant that the financial services system in Qatar has broadly evolved to support this sector. As such, domestic investment is not favored, thus limiting the ability of SMEs to raise finance, and for domestic investors to support entrepreneurship²⁵.

Another barrier faced is a lack of relevant skills and capabilities. In particular, nascent entrepreneurs and new business owners in Qatar note that they often require guidance on how

²⁰ Ibid., 83.

²¹ OECD, 2010.

²² Mehrez, 2019.

²³ Le Roux and Bengesi, 2014.

²⁴ Lee and Drever, 2014.

²⁵ Song Loong, 2014.

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to manage their operations, including important issues of financial management and the ways to grow and develop their businesses sustainably. This is linked to a tendency for many business owners in Qatar, particularly younger entrepreneurs, to view SMEs as a way to earn money quickly, instead of taking a longer-term view. The result of this attitude and approach is a lack of capability in the day-to-day operational management of a business²⁶. Concurrently, the actions of the government have often failed to support the development of entrepreneurship in Qatar. This is because many government reform efforts in the past have focused on developing larger businesses and enhancing their capabilities, thus taking resources and focus away from efforts to improve the capabilities of SMEs in the country²⁷. This in turn contributes to a high level of SME failure risk in Qatar which discourages genuine entrepreneurs with a long-term vision from investing in their business. This particular problem has been addressed, at least in a preliminary way, with the development of the Qatar Business Incubation Center.

The final issue constraining the contributions of entrepreneurs and SMEs to the economy of Qatar is the lack of related and supporting industries. These relate to the wider business ecosystem of Qatar and the fact that the country's economy is still that of a rentier state: one which is driven by the extraction, processing, and sale of hydrocarbon resources.²⁸ Due to the undiversified economy, there are limited supporting industries in Qatar, such as technology, finance, and retail, in the business ecosystem to provide opportunities for SMEs outside this narrow sector.

Recommendations

Although it appears from the report's results that Qatar is heading in the right direction in terms of supporting and fostering entrepreneurship and the development of SMEs, there are some remaining areas in which Qatar can plan for and improve in. In general, to increase the contributions of entrepreneurship and SMEs to the economy of Qatar, it is necessary to address the problems identified above, as well as to provide additional supporting conditions to encourage entrepreneurship. At its core level, this requires the government and authorities of Qatar to ensure a higher level of political, legal, and social support for SMEs. For example, many SMEs are excluded from tendering for important government contracts in many areas due to excessive red tape and bureaucracy. Removing these barriers has been identified as one of the major potential methods to support SME growth²⁹. In addition to this, various barriers discourage Qatari SMEs from entering or expanding their export activities in international markets³⁰. As such, removing these barriers and providing additional support to SMEs would further enhance the potential value that entrepreneurship and SMEs could contribute to the economy.

²⁶ GWC, 2014.

²⁷ Anderson and Strutt, 2014.

²⁸ Hassen, 2020.

²⁹ McGinley, 2013.

³⁰ Safari and Saleh, 2019.

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With regards to the financial barriers, there has been some effort to address these in recent years, particularly through the Qatar Development Bank (QDB) which was established to promote companies and finance business ideas in the country. In particular, the QDB's financing strategy remains somewhat indistinct wherein it makes finance somewhat more available to SMEs, but it does not proactively support and encourage them in their endeavors. This requires a realignment of the financing strategy around clusters and industries in order to make the strategy more impactful and provide targeted financing for SMEs to meet more of their financial needs.³¹

There is a critical need to ensure that the government and educational institutions in Qatar invest in programs that provide entrepreneurs with the skills and capabilities to manage their operations. A key part of this will be to promote awareness of entrepreneurship, including its benefits and rewards, but also the needs and challenges in order to make potential entrepreneurs in Qatar realistically aware of the advantages and disadvantages that entrepreneurship offers.³² At the same time, targeted training and mentoring programs should be developed to help entrepreneurs in Qatar overcome identified skills gaps increasing their ability to manage and develop their businesses.³³

There is a need for continued significant investments by the Qatari government in its effort to diversify the economy. The creation of business ecosystems in significant sectors such as retail, financial services, and information technology, is not something that can be achieved overnight. In order to maximize the contributions of entrepreneurship and SMEs to the economy of Qatar, it is important to develop clusters of such industries. For example, developing strong and vibrant technology, finance, and retail sectors will boost local demand as well as providing a source of experienced management personnel as the sectors mature. This is reflected in the assertions of the European Commission that “clusters are groups of specialized enterprises – often SMEs – and other related supporting actors that cooperate closely together in a particular location. In working together, SMEs can be more innovative, create more jobs, and register more international trademarks and patents than they would alone”³⁴. The Qatari economy lacks these clusters which is an impediment to SME and the economy's overall rate of growth and success. There have been some improvements in this area, such as the creation of the Qatar Science and Technology Park, which provides support for technology-focused SMEs.³⁵ However, this effort needs to be expanded and replicated for other sectors to provide more support for SMEs and thus enable them to maximize their contributions to the economy of Qatar. It also requires greater levels of government investment in existing clusters, for example within the Qatar Science and Technology Park, along with the formation of new clusters in sectors such as retail and finance to support industries of entrepreneurial importance.

³¹ Mammadov, 2011.

³² GWC, 2014.

³³ Saleh et al, 2021.

³⁴ European Commission, 2014.

³⁵ “SMEs to spur diversification of the Qatari economy,” op cit.

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It is commendable for the government to create the NDS2 so that it can execute the goals set out in the QNV 2030. However, they could follow suit of one of the top three most competitive economies in the world: Singapore³⁶. With an economical history similar to that of Qatar, Singapore has acknowledged the value that SMEs contribute to their economy and so has molded their policies and goals to allow them to develop. One strategy which made them successful in this was creating the ‘*SME Master Plan*’³⁷. The plan highlighted the importance of boosting SMEs in Singapore to diversify and strengthen the economy. It made specific recommendations and action plans for the government to do so, including improving the business environment to one that allowed SMEs as well as multinational companies to flourish, improving physical and human infrastructure, providing financial incentives, and creating support and assistance mechanisms³⁸. Although many of these recommendations are also set out in Qatar’s NDS2, they tend to be broad challenges and goals. The Singaporean plan has targeted areas that should be addressed with associated resolutions. One issue that is highlighted in subsequent versions of the Master Plan is one that is shared by Qatari SMEs: access to knowledge and technology. Their proposed solution to this was the creation of two programs in which business owners, researchers, investors, and experts can physically come together to share their knowledge, experience, and support³⁹. Another reason why the Singapore SME plan was successful was due to the fact that it was created by several entities rather than solely by the Economic Committee. It was collectively created by experts from several fields including financial institutions, government agencies, trade industries, and SMEs. Creating a specific strategic plan targeted at developing SMEs could keep the Qatari government on track, as well as provide SMEs with a comprehensive document they can refer to for assistance.

Conclusion

This research paper has critically evaluated the conditions in which SMEs are operating in Qatar, the significance of entrepreneurs and SMEs in the Qatari economy, and various ways to increase the contributions of entrepreneurship and SMEs to the economy of Qatar. As part of this, the paper has identified four categories of factors in which the performance and contributions of entrepreneurship and SMEs in Qatar are being hindered. These are the political, legal, and social conditions around entrepreneurship; the availability of finance; the skills of entrepreneurs; and the presence of related and supporting industries. In order to increase the contributions of entrepreneurship and SMEs to the economy of Qatar, these barriers need to be removed as much as possible. This requires a political and legal shift to encourage the activities of SMEs and entrepreneurs and support their participation in the economy, as well as financing strategies that actively encourage and support SMEs in raising finance. Additionally, training and mentoring programs are needed to enhance entrepreneurship skills and awareness. Finally, to build the markets and conditions for SMEs

³⁶ Lee & Tan, 2002.

³⁷ Lee & Tan, 2002.

³⁸ Lee & Tan, 2002.

³⁹ Lee & Tan, 2002.

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to succeed in Qatar, investment is needed to build clusters of supporting industries and activities.

Efforts at addressing all of these issues have been initiated to some extent. As evident from this study, the Qatari government has made strides in supporting SMEs and entrepreneurship. Through the goals in QNV 2030 and implementation of the NDS, Qatar has put programs, policies, institutions, and initiatives into place. The QBIC, for example, offers fledgling businesses the much-needed training, access to financing and space in order for SMEs to develop. The QDB has specifically been established to provide financial assistance to entrepreneurs and SMEs. Moreover, the problem of related and supporting industries and services will become moot as the goals of diversification are met through the increased development of varied sectors and growth of natural relationships between these industries and sectors. All of these factors are facilitating the increase of contributions from entrepreneurship and SMEs to the economy of Qatar. As the influence of entrepreneurs and SMEs grows, it is likely that these new and flexible firms will in turn help to enhance the indirect impacts they can have on the overall performance of the economy, including boosting employment growth and supporting the economic transformation and diversification of Qatar.

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