DRIVERS OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND BUSINESS PERFORMANCE: EVIDENCE FROM A DEVELOPING COUNTRY

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Abstract
Many studies on supply chain collaboration (SCC) have wholly focused attention on developed countries and rarely considered the significance in 3rd world nations. Although SCC has been well researched, this research attempts to shift the attention to Nigeria, a developing nation with the largest economy in Africa. This paper examines the significance of supply chain collaborative activities and relationship quality in Nigerian beverage manufacturing industry, particularly for superior business performance. Results were collected from a total of 269 wholesalers of the largest beverage manufacturing firms in Nigeria. We examined the effects of collaborative activities and relationship quality between wholesalers and manufactures on the wholesalers' business performance. Specific collaborative activities and relationship quality measures that impact wholesalers' performance were revealed through regression analyses. Manufacturers and service providers in Nigeria continually seek knowledge on gaining competitive advantage and improving their organizational performance due to the highly unpredictable business environment that they operate in. Our study offers insights for practitioners both in Africa and the global environment regarding the value of collaborative activities and relationship quality between supply chain members as mechanisms for achieving outstanding business performance
Keywords: Nigeria, Supply chain management, Relationship quality, Business performance

1   INTRODUCTION

Supply chain management (SCM) in Nigeria is too complicated, with numerous manufacturers, retailers, suppliers and third-party providers responding to the demand of a population close to 200 million people in a developing economy. The commercial environment in Nigeria has also grown in the past decade to become highly uncertain for businesses to operate [6]. Many factors such as corruption, bad roads and transportation links, distorted electricity supply, security and safety concerns, condensed government support etc also make it difficult for businesses to perform excellently in Nigeria. In an effort to develop sustained superior performance and competitive advantage, Nigerian firms are seeking opportunities to minimise operating costs, improving product and service quality, and developing continuous relationships with supply chain partners as mechanisms to remain competitive. Whilst the potential for achieving an outstanding business performance is highly influenced, elements such as collaboration and relationship quality between supply chain partners are factors that could influence individual firm's survival and competitiveness in this highly uncertain business environment.

Firms today are now increasingly building collaborative relationships with their partners in order to attain flexibility, efficiencies and a competitive advantage as competition is gradually becoming between supply chains [20]. Supply chain partners now seeking long-term relationships to secure valued resources and technologies, harness chain partner skills and strengths, and gain quality and process improvements [13]. However, in spite of the benefits highlighted, firms still struggle to achieve the expected rewards of such relationships. Till date, many supply chain relationships still fall short and have not lived up to expectations [11]. Relationship quality in supply chain relationships is increasingly becoming important from a theoretical and managerial viewpoint to understand and monitor [11]. The quality of relationship between supply chain partners determines how the relationship will develop, what the likelihood of its ending is and what revenues, costs and profitability it incurs [10]. In the literature, there is a general consensus that such a relationship engenders a strong loyal customer base, which in turn leads to a sustainable competitive advantage in the market place with significant implications for the profitability and firm survival and performance.

Despite years of process breakthroughs and elegant technology solutions, an agile, adaptive supply chain characterised with high level of trust, satisfaction and commitment remains an elusive goal for building supply chain relationships [16]. As firms strive to develop a sustainable competitive advantage, the quality of relationships formed among supply chain parties become a critical consideration [10]. The literature has revealed the importance of collaborative supply chain activities as drivers of outstanding relationship quality, firm performance, partnership success, and relationship continuity [19]. However, there still remains some critical gaps in SCM literature that warrant critical attention.

There are a few motivations to this study. First, there is a scarcity of studies on SCM in Africa, in general and Nigeria in particular. There is an unclear understanding of the significance of supply chain collaboration and relationship quality in developing country's context, such as Nigeria. We argue that the results from past studies may be different to many developing nations classified as 3rd world countries such as Nigeria due to the several structural and non-structural challenges business encounter in this region. Our emphasis on Nigeria is significant especially because Nigeria is the most populated country (nearly 200 million) and one of the three largest economies in Africa. Therefore, the prospects of meeting the needs of consumers in such a vast population through provision of services and goods is extremely vital with possible impacts on other African nations and foreign investors in Nigeria. The contributions to the literature include a better understanding of the importance of supply chain collaborative activities for managing inter-firm relationships in developing economies.

The next section presents a review of literature and a brief industrial background to the Nigerian setting, followed by the methodology section, and findings and conclusion section.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Nigerian context

Manufacturers sell their final products to only businesses (wholesalers), who sell to other actors along the supply chain such as, retailers, transporters/distributors, and end consumers. The wholesalers are referred to as "middle men", who stand in the gap between manufacturers and end consumers. They also carryout unique functions such as reporting back to manufacturers regarding customer needs and concerns about the products, acting as representatives or agents for the manufacturers within the supply chain, integrating the manufacturers with other supply chain members, and acting as a two-way voice mechanism for both the manufacturers and other supply chain members on the right hand side of the chain. Due to the unique functions of wholesalers in the supply chain, collaboration and relationship quality can be valuable.

2.2 Supply chain collaborative activities

In the literature, collaborative activities represent each party's willingness to give and take in the relationship and this allows the relationship to adapt over time and creates an avenue for on-going administration of the exchange. The literature stated that these activities promote cooperative behavior, and increase the potential value of the exchange relationship.

In this research, three types of collaborative activities are examined: information sharing, joint relationship effort, and dedicated investment as they represent value-adding relational norms. *Information sharing* refers to the extent that critical information is conveyed to a party's relationship partners. *Joint relationship effort* consisting of joint decision-making and joint-problem-solving are perceived as a natural extension and largely dependent upon of information sharing between supply chain partners. *Dedicated investments* refer to investments made that are dedicated to a relationship by supply chain partners.

2.3 Relationship quality

Relationship quality has been identified as a key determinant for long lasting and profitable supply chain relationships [18]. The concept of relationship quality arises from theory and research in the field of relationship marketing [7], in which the ultimate goal is to strengthen already strong relationships and convert weak ones to strong ones. Supply chain relationship quality is the overall assessment of the strength of a relationship and the degree to which the needs and desires of the supply chain members are met to a satisfactory level [16]. It is concerned with the degree to which parties are engaged in an active, long-term working relationship characterized with different indicators [9]. Although the indicators vary depending on each study's specific context, researchers typically conceptualise relationship quality as a high-order construct composed of trust, commitment and satisfaction. In accordance with these previous studies, this article focuses on trust, commitment, and satisfaction as the key features of relationship quality.

Morgan and Hunt in a study conceptualize *trust* to exist when one party has absolute confidence in a partner's reliability and integrity. *Commitment* is defined as "an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship endures indefinitely", and commitment is central to all the relational exchanges between the firm and its various patterns. Satisfaction is defined as "a positive affective state resulting from the appraisal of all aspects of a firm's working relationship with another firm" [2].

2.4 Business performance

Performance is a persistent subject in management research, and remains the interest of many practitioners and academics today. The narrowest conception of business performance is based on the utilisation of simple outcome based financial indicators which are expected to reveal the achievement of the economic objectives of the business, referred to as the financial performance [17]. This approach would examine indicators such as sales growth, profitability (revealed by ratios such as return on investment, return on sales, and return on equity), earnings per share etc.

Business performance refers to how well a firm achieves its market-oriented goals as well as its financial goals [17]. In line with previous studies, the measures identified above are adopted, particularly most stakeholder have recognised them as their benchmarks [8].

3 HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Past studies recognized the benefits of collaborative activities between supply chain partners to include risk sharing, cost reduction, enhanced rapid learning capacity, knowledge transfer, and sustainable competitive advantage [12]. Dedicated investments offer tangible evidence of a partner's commitment to a relationship, which will in turn increase the level of trust and greater satisfaction in the relationship [2]. Kwon and Suh in a study stated that information sharing and inter-firm communication are essential in trust-building process since sharing of critical information and communication allows businesses to develop a mutual understanding of each other's routines and develop mechanisms for resolving conflicts, which indicates that the partner is trustable. [2] also found that higher information sharing minimizes uncertainty resulting in improved level of trust and commitment between supply chain partners in a relationship. Several studies suggest that joint relationship effort enables partners to co-align their operations and processes, make joint decisions, which enhances the relationship by building trust [13], commitment to the relationship, and relationship satisfaction [18]. In this research, the respondent firm's level of collaborative activities are examined, and hence, the following hypothesis is developed:

Hypothesis 1: Collaborative activities between supply chain partners have a positive association with relationship quality.

There has been a lot of emphasis in the literature regarding the significance of high relationship quality between supply chain partners [9]. A good relationship quality is based on mutual trust, commitment and satisfaction, and a crucial precursor of any stable relationships which ensures the relationship continuity. The quality of relationship between supply chain partners has been identified as a key driver of performance. Supply chain relationships characterized by trust, commitment and satisfaction enable the evading of traditional expensive governance mechanisms [16]. A good relationship quality between supply chain partners enables both parties to achieve competitive priorities. When the relationship between supply chain partners is based on trust, effective communication, and high satisfaction, it becomes easier to understand each other's targets, in could lead to high level of firm performance [13]. The literature also mentioned that relationships between supply chain partners characterized by trust, commitment

and satisfaction have consequences such as, such as cost reductions and financial performance [9]. Hence, the following hypothesis is developed:

Hypothesis 2: The quality of relationship between supply chain partners will positively significant positive impact on business performance.

Besides the benefits that collaborative activities offer to relationships between supply chain partners, collaborative activities also have significant advantages for the individual firm's performance [3]. Collaborative practices between supply chain partners are also expected to yield organization-specific benefits and have a positive influence on a firm's market share, return on investment, and advance overall competitive position: [3] [4] [12] [15]. Scholars argue that members of the supply chain are constantly looking for collaborative relationships with other firms as a means improving their own performance [12]. Profitability, high sales, great returns, reduced purchasing costs, and increased technical cooperation can be obtained from investing in collaborative activities between supply chain partners. A study by Stanford University and Accenture reveals that firms who reported high profits were firms that had an engaged highly in collaborative activities. Based on the above, this study develops the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Collaborative activities between supply chain partners have a significant positive impact on business performance.

Therefore, the SCM framework developed in this study proposes that collaborative activities between supply chain partners have a direct impact on their relationship quality and business performance. The framework also proposes that relationship quality between supply chain partners have an impact on business performance.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Unit of analysis

Collaborative activities and relationship quality focus on the joint relationship and interactives between supply chain partners. As a result, the theoretical constructs identified in this study are conceptualized to study the relationship between manufacturers and their vital/primary buyers. Our focus is on the collaborative activities between the Nigerian beverage manufacturers and their wholesalers (buyers). The unit of analysis is therefore viewed from a focal wholesaler's perspective who are also classified as business customer. Data was collected from the wholesalers, evaluating their relationship with the manufacturers (suppliers) in the beverage manufacturing industry. Based on the unique functions of the wholesalers in the supply chain, it is crucial to determine the quality of their relationship with the manufacturers. It is also critical to examine how the collaboration and relationship nature impacts their performance from a focal firm's view point. Moreover, this is also important due to the complex nature of the supply chain and business environment that they operate in.

4.2 Data collection

The sample of respondents were expected to have knowledge and experience in purchasing and supply chain management. The target respondents were CEOs, directors, purchasing and supply chain managers, or executives in the wholesaling firms across Nigeria. We focused the survey on a senior executive/manager per company as the key informant to ensure accuracy and completeness of responses. The data was collected in a way rather different arrangement than the conventional

data collection techniques previously used in the relevant literature. We collected the data by contacting the manufacturers through visits to their plants and offices to personally introduce the purpose of our study and to obtain their consent to participate in the survey. Due to the scope and focus of the relationship in this study, we wholly selected the primary wholesalers of the manufactures. We were able to contact them through the manufacturers themselves by asking them to name all their main (chief) wholesalers. After this stage, we asked them to assist us with the distribution of the questionnaires to the wholesalers they specified. The manufacturers in this case served as the gatekeeper in contacting their wholesalers which helped the study with potential constraints that could have transpired. This way, the manufactures were informed about the purpose of our study and the benefits of the results for both parties even though the responses were from the wholesalers' perspective. A total of 269 companies were identified and were sent the questionnaires by the manufacturers. To improve the response rate, phone calls were made to the pool of contacts collated during the visit. We received back a total of 269 usable responses from the manufacturers who also chased up their wholesalers on our behalf resulting. This resulted in a response rate of 100 percent. The participating firms varied in terms of length of existence and number of employees reflecting the structure of the Nigerian manufacturing sector (Table 1).

	Frequency	%
Respondent titles		
Administration & Management	14	5.2
Procurement/Purchasing Manager	170	63.2
General Manager	28	10.4
CEO/Managing Director	57	21.2
Total	269	100.0
Number of employees		
1-250	235	87.4
251-500	17	6.3
501-750	9	3.3
751-1,000	5	1.9
1,000-	3	1.1
Total	269	100.0

The main justifications behind focusing on the Nigerian beverage manufacturing sector are threefold. First, Nigeria's position as a significant contributor to Africa's economy and a key player to the main manufacturers in the continent. But the beverage industry in particular due to its contribution to the manufacturing industry and the Nigerian economy. Second, the nature of the supply chain in this industry is very unique in comparison to the conventional supply chain and the functions of wholesalers in the chain. Third, the current economic and business market issues have increased the need for many companies in supply chains to look for alternative sources of cost reduction, efficiency and effectiveness for their supply chain relations and individual performance.

4.3 Instrument development and measures

The survey instrument was developed based on an extensive review of the literature. The first draft of the questionnaire was made based on existing scales found in

past research studies. All variables in the questionnaire were measured on a five-point Likert scale, asking respondents to evaluate the extent to which they agree or disagree with respect to their business using ranging from (5 being – strongly agree and 1 – strongly disagree). The first part of the questionnaire addressed the issues related to the general information of the respondent. A set of questions included respondent's position, number of employees and the length of existence of the firm. Collaborative activities scales were based on those used by [13]. Relationship quality measures were adopted based on those utilised by [21]. Business performance measures were derived from those used by [12]. All these items were included because they are in line with the framework of this study. The questionnaire was pretested to 5 persons from two groups of experts, i.e. academics and practitioners (in Nigeria), examining whether the questionnaire objectives of the questionnaire were realised and to prevent the inclusion of some obvious questions that might reveal avoidable ignorance of the investigator in accordance with Dillman's study.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Reliability and validity

All measurement items were adopted from previous research. They were examined by experts in the purchasing field in Nigeria to check the content validity. Second order factors are latent constructs used to explain the covariance between two or more first-order factors.

Our study conceptualises supply chain collaborative as a second-order factor due to the expected correlations among information sharing, joint relationship effort, and dedicated investment based on previous studies [13]. We also conceptualise relationship quality as a second-order factor due to expected correlations among trust, commitment and satisfaction [16]. Besides the conceptual advantages of using second-order factors, another significant benefit is that the individual first-order factors can capture more homogenous and narrowly defined content domains as suggested in Handley and Benton' study.

Reliability is the consistency among the scales in their measurement for a latent construct. Scales that are highly reliable are strongly inter-correlated, and indicate that they are measuring the same latent concept. In this study, reliability was tested through calculating the Cronbach's α values of the proposed variables. The test was performed for all the variables except the demographic variables. A total item of 30 (total number of statements) were assessed. The analysis shows that the items adopted from the literature have Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.967 or greater, which indicates that the items were reliable.

5.2 Relationship between variables

The research questions of this study attempt to identify the extent to which supply chain collaborative activities and relationship quality between supply chain partners impact business performance.

Our analysis dealt with the examination of relationships between continuous variables; (i) collaborative activities and business performance, (ii) relationship quality and business performance, (iii) collaboration activities and relationship quality on business performance, using correlation between these constructs. Hypothesized relationships were tested using regression analysis. All the variables tested were standardized to conform to a standard nominal distribution, following the regression analysis requirements stated in Heise's study.

The Pearson correlation is often used to describe the relationship between two characterizes. A set of Pearson correlation was conducted to identify relationships between the independent variables (collaborative activities and relationship quality) and the dependent variable (business performance). The correlation coefficients are significant at the 99 Percent level. The correlation between all the collaborative activities and business performance variables ranged from .723 to .889. From the independent variables, information sharing and joint relationship effort revealed an average correlation with business performance. However, dedicated investment revealed a low correlation to the five measures of business performance ranging from .110 to .341. The correlation between all the relationship quality and business performance variables ranged from .455 to .854. From the independent variables, satisfaction revealed a high correlation with business performance. Trust revealed a high correlation with business performance, while commitment revealed a high correlation to business performance. Commitment as a measure of relationship quality revealed a higher correlation to the business performance measures. From the collaborative activities' measures, information sharing proved to have a higher correlation to the business performance measures.

Based on the nature of the relationships, relationship quality has a stronger correlation with business performance than collaborative activities. This examination preliminary support of the model, with the exception of the relationship between collaborative activities and business performance which is slightly weaker.

5.3 Hypothesis testing

Multiple regression analysis was used to estimate the impact of collaborative activities and relationship quality dimensions on business performance. We added information sharing, joint relationship effort, and dedicated investment as independent variables for collaborative activities. We also added trust, commitment, and satisfaction as independent variables of relationship quality. Business performance was used as the dependent variable. Table 3 presents the results of the regression analysis with standardised regression coefficients (betas) and coefficients of determination (R^2).

The main purpose of this study was to determine how collaborative activities and relationship quality between supply chain partners impact business performance. The first hypotheses proposed that collaborative activities between supply chain partners have a positive association with relationship quality. Results proved that collaborative activities have a significantly high relationship with each other.

It was also proposed in our hypothesis that collaborative activities between supply chain partners have a significant positive impact on business performance. Initial results in Table 3 indicate that collaborative activities have a weak influence business performance. For example, information sharing indicated a poor effect on business performance (β = -343; $p < 0.01$), joint relationship effort (β = -.705; $p < 0.01$), dedicated investment 2 (β = -.943; $p < 0.01$). This finding contrasts with the findings of the existing literature where collaborative activities such as information sharing, joint decision making and planning, incentive alignment have proven to impact performance.

Finally, it was proposed in that relationship quality between supply chain partners has a significant positive impact on business performance. Results indicate that relationship quality has a stronger influence on business

performance with trust revealing a strong effect (β = .940; p < 0.01), satisfaction 4 (β = .838; p < 0.01), commitment 2 (β = .305; p < 0.01). It should be noted that some relationship quality variables had a negative influence on business performance. For example, trust revealed a strong negative effect (β = -.793; p < 0.01), and commitment 4 (β = -.7.26; p < 0.01). Though relationship quality variables proved to have a stronger impact on business performance than collaborative activities, the impact is also rather low compared to the findings of the existing literature where strong significant positive impacts were found.

Overall, the effects of the independent variables (collaborative activities and relationship quality) on business performance did not significantly support the hypotheses as expected, even though relationship quality proved to have a stronger impact on business performance. There are a few factors that could impact these contrasts in findings which will be highlighted in the next section.

Table 2. Inter-factor correlations.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
INF (1)	1					
JRE (2)	.723**	1				
DI (3)	.574**	.791**	1			
SAT (4)	.600**	.758**	.626**	1		
TRU (5)	.523**	.747**	.502**	.610**	1	
COMT (6)	.663**	.639**	.477**	-.690**	.889**	1

Notes: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis.

Independent variables		Std. Beta	*t*-value	Sig.	Std. Error
Collaborative activities	We share sensitive information (e.g. financial, production etc) (infom1)	.041	2.433	.016	.020
	Our suppliers are provided with any information that might help them (inf2)	-.164	-7.533	.000	.032
	Exchange of information takes place frequently (inf3)	-.073	-1.395	.164	.054
	We keep each other informed about events or changes (inf4)	.521	21.266	.000	.030
	We keep frequent face-to-face planning/communication (inf5)	-.343	-7.701	.000	.043
	We have joint teams with this supplier (jre1)	.141	4.387	.000	.035
	We conduct joint planning to anticipate and resolve problems (jre2)	-.705	-13.900	.000	.051
	We make joint decisions about ways to improve overall cost efficiency (jre3)	.602	13.208	.000	.035
	We have invested to personnel dedicated to this relationship (di1)	.321	6.486	.000	.034
	We have provided proprietary expertise to the relationship (di2)	-.943	-16.712	.000	.040
	We have dedicated significant investments (e.g. support systems) (di3)	.372	5.841	.000	.055
Relationship quality	We are very satisfied with the performance of this supplier (stf1)	.048	1.228	.221	.043
	All in all, we are very satisfied with this supplier (stf2)	.180	6.829	.000	.041
	Our company is not completely satisfied with supplier's performance (stf3)	-.188	-7.619	.000	.030
	With reference to our expectations, we are very satisfied (stf4)	.838	14.470	.000	.067
	This supplier is concerned about our welfare (tru1)	.274	15.591	.000	.028
	We can rely on the supplier handling critical information (tru2)	-.583	-8.591	.000	.072
	We can depend on the supplier's support (tru3)	-.793	-25.042	.000	.043
	We are convinced that this supplier performs its tasks professionally (tru4)	.824	17.611	.000	.046
	We can count on the supplier's promises made to our firm (tru5)	.940	10.120	.000	.109
	We focus on long-term goals in this relationship (cmt1)	-.262	-10.240	.000	.045
	We are willing to invest time and other resources to the relationship (cmt2)	.305	4.768	.000	.081
	We put the long-term cooperation before our short-term profit (cmt3)	-1.050	-22.034	.000	.049
	We will expand our business with this supplier in the future (cmt4)	-.7.26	-23.931	.000	.038
	We will defend this supplier when an outsider criticizes them (cmt5)	.020	.411	.682	.053

a. Dependent Variable: Business performance

Table 4. Coefficients of determination

Dependent variable	Independent variable(s)	R^2
Business performance 1	Collaborative activities and relationship quality	.996
Business performance 2	Collaborative activities and relationship quality	.993
Business performance 3	Collaborative activities and relationship quality	.991
Business performance 4	Collaborative activities and relationship quality	.991
Business performance 5	Collaborative activities and relationship quality	.976

6 CONCLUSION

The findings of this paper are somewhat unanticipated because the supply chain collaboration and relationship quality metrics that were examined have been well researched in different developed settings with positive results, thus the stress from the literature of their significance in inter-organizational and channel relationships. However, the results may be unsurprising too due to several odd elements present in the Nigerian beverage supply chain which if critically put into consideration, the antecedents to why such findings revealed in this study could be justified.

In the Nigerian beverage supply chain, economic considerations and the capacity to perform efficiently are often jettisoned in deciding who to appoint as a supply

chain partner. High relationship quality between supply chain partners may be difficult to achieve in such a circumstance as supply chain members hoard critical intelligence from one another in order to gain advantage over their supply chain partners which they see as competitors rather than as partners. As a result of the weak corporate supply chain governance, many of these wholesaling firms in the supply chain are also owned by top employees in the manufacturing firms initiating a fragmented market to compete in. This creates the basis for insider abuse and corruption with the possible attendant undermining of the professional practice of supply chain management. Initial interactions with some purchasing and procurement managers indicated that while some of them have applied collaborative practices to the management of their supply chains with significant results for performance, some others provided poor feedback on the quality of their supply chain relationship. These are some of the many structural bottlenecks that are present within the industry which have a negative impact on transparency, and the potential to achieve industry standards which link relation to a motivation of this study.

More so, Nigeria being a 3rd world nation with several fundamental issues affecting commercial institutions may also influence the derived results. For instance, poor collaboration between chain members such as inadequate information sharing, insufficient joint relationship effort and minimal dedicate investment between supply chain partners also influence supply chain relationships. Likewise, heavy vehicular traffic, accidents and breakdowns on several intra and inter-city highways result in a lot of delays which affect lead times and product deliveries, and in turn increasing costs of operations and minimizing efficiency and product delivery and service levels.

This study adds to the literature at the interface of supply chain collaboration and buyer-supplier relationship quality. It is also one of the first studies to incorporate the supply chain collaboration and relationship quality model in the Nigerian context. Previous studies, while examining these themes, have not considered the examination in the sub-Saharan Africa, and Nigeria- the largest economy in Africa. The results do confirm our argument that there is a need to extend SCM research on this subject to other locations and test these constructs in diverse settings. Most studies on relationship quality have been performed in Western countries that are predominantly individualistic. The results from past studies are different to that of our study from a developing nation due to the several structural and non-structural challenges business encounter in this region.

7 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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