

Integrated Social Work Empowerment Model for Strengthening SMEs in South Africa

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Abstract

This community service program aimed to strengthen small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa through an integrated social work empowerment model embedded within public-private partnership initiatives. Preliminary assessment identified three dominant challenges: psychosocial stress among entrepreneurs, weak internal organizational cohesion, and limited community trust within SME ecosystems. The intervention applied participatory empowerment strategies including psychosocial support sessions, peer-group facilitation, conflict mediation, and community trust-building forums. The program involved 30 SME owners from township and rural contexts. Evaluation indicated a 34% increase in reported entrepreneurial resilience, 29% improvement in internal organizational cohesion, and strengthened community engagement networks. The innovation integrates strengths-based social work practice and capability-oriented development approaches into SME support frameworks. The model aligns with inclusive development goals and enhances SME sustainability by addressing psychosocial and relational barriers often overlooked in conventional business support models.

Keywords: SME empowerment; Social work; Public-private partnership; Community development; South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa are recognized as drivers of employment and local economic development. However, high failure rates persist despite financial and technical support mechanisms. Evidence suggests that psychosocial stress, relational conflict, and weak social capital undermine enterprise sustainability. Existing support models emphasize finance and regulation, while neglecting human and community-centered dimensions. This program addresses this gap by integrating social work empowerment approaches into SME development initiatives.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNITY, PROBLEMS, AND TARGET SOLUTIONS

Location: Township and rural SME communities in South Africa.

Target beneficiaries include SME owners operating within high socio-economic vulnerability contexts.

Table 1. Target Description

No	Name of Target	Characteristics	Amount	General Problem
1	SME Owners	Township & rural entrepreneurs	30	Psychosocial stress & weak social capital

Table 2. Problem and Solution Framework

No	Problem	Solution	Indicators
1	Entrepreneurial stress	Psychosocial counseling sessions	Increase resilience score
2	Internal conflict	Peer support & mediation	Improve cohesion index
3	Low community trust	Community dialogue forums	Strengthened stakeholder networks

METHOD

The program implemented a participatory empowerment approach grounded in the strength perspective and capability approach. Activities included needs assessment, psychosocial group sessions, mediation workshops, and community trust-building forums. Pre- and post-intervention surveys were used to measure entrepreneurial resilience, organizational cohesion, and community engagement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3. SME Resilience Indicators Before and After Intervention

Indicator	Before	After
Entrepreneurial Resilience	49%	83%
Organizational Cohesion	52%	81%
Community Engagement	46%	78%

Findings demonstrate that embedding social work practice within SME support significantly improves psychosocial well-being, internal organizational stability, and community trust. Addressing relational and human dimensions enhances economic sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The integrated social work empowerment model strengthens SME sustainability by addressing psychosocial and relational barriers often neglected in conventional business support systems. Embedding social workers within SME and PPP initiatives enhances resilience, community trust, and inclusive development outcomes. Policymakers should institutionalize psychosocial support components within SME development frameworks.