

Harnessing Disruptive Innovation to Combat Corruption in Small and Medium Enterprises in Harare, Zimbabwe: Strategies for Sustainable Development

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Abstract: Sustainable development is compromised by corruption in small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). The operational realities of SME were overlooked by current anti-corruption initiatives, which concentrate on extensive corporate governance and public sector reforms. Due to their restricted budget, lack of internal controls, and intimate ties to local authorities, these emerging companies, which were essential drivers of economic growth and job creation, were disproportionately vulnerable to petty bribery, extortion and procurement fraud. The goal of the research was to scrutinise disruptive technologies, new business models, and creative governance practices that SMEs may use to get around the drawbacks of conventional anti-corruption tactics. The methodology of the mixed approach was used. Probability and non-probability sampling methods were used in the investigation. SMEs were left susceptible and unable to contribute to long-term development objectives like good governance, and decreased inequality, due to a lack of easily accessible, reasonably priced, and user-friendly anti-corruption technologies that were suited to their particular requirements. The study fills an information vacuum about creative strategies that can enable SMEs to reduce the dangers of corruption, enhance transparency, and encourage moral corporate conduct. According to the study's findings, disruptive innovation was seen as a catalyst for anti-corruption efforts. In order to promote holistic development in SMEs, the study suggested utilizing technology and systemic change.

Key Words: Disruptive Innovation, Corruption, Small and Medium Enterprises, Sustainable Development

I. Background of the Study

It is often accepted that small and medium-sized businesses are the primary engine driving the growth of modern economies. This is because, in developing nations, they employ a higher percentage of the population than larger firms (Abdullahi et al, 2015). These SMEs benefit from hiring so many people, but they boost a country's GDP because they provide larger companies with inputs and act as a market for their goods. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper insight into the forms of bribery and the effectiveness of the current institutional structure and keeping the industry free from corruption. Corrupt practices, which might include bribery, extortion, fraud, and regulatory capture, impair the expansion, competitiveness, and financial access of SMEs.

II. Introduction

Conventional anti-bribery efforts, such as enhanced enforcement and reinforced regulatory frameworks, usually overlooked the underlying systemic issues and behavioral patterns that support corruption in SMEs. Disruptive innovation offers a good alternative by promoting accountability and openness. Blockchain technology, for instance, can increase supply chain transparency. Nevertheless, there is a lack of comprehensive research on effectiveness and feasibility of disruptive innovation's scalability in the context of SME anti-corruption.

Statement of the Problem

Corruption in SMEs is a significant obstacle to sustainable growth, innovation, and capacity to improve society. The behavioural and systemic roots of corrupt activities in SMEs are often ignored by traditional anti-corruption measures, despite their relative success, particularly in developing countries with weak institutional frameworks. The research currently in publication lacks a comprehensive knowledge of how disruptive innovation may be leveraged to successfully fight bribery in SMEs 2017 study by Rambe and Ndofirepi found that nepotism and corruption cause SMEs in the retail sector to behave unethically.

Key Research Questions

This study was guided by the following key questions:

How can some disruptive technologies be successfully modified and implemented to improve accountability and transparency in SME operations?

What are the main obstacles preventing SMEs in underdeveloped nations from implementing innovative anti-corruption technologies?

How do the attitudes of SME owners change when disruptive anti-corruption technologies are implemented in SMEs?

What ethical issues or unforeseen repercussions might arise from employing disruptive technology to combat corruption in SMEs?

How can cross-sectoral cooperation be successfully fostered?

Significance of the Study

The government would benefit from the study's findings since they would allow it to create easily comprehensible legislation that would effectively fight corruption in the SMEs sector. The government will also continue to fund other subsidiary organizations that fight corruption based on some of the proposals made by the research. The administration will remain current on the need to periodically review anti-corruption laws in order to continue meeting the demands and interests of the ever-changing socioeconomic and political trends. The findings of this study will assist Non-Governmental Organizations in comprehending the significance of collaborating with the government to combat corruption in the SMEs sector. The report will also provide a basis for further research. The study will evaluate the significance of implementing disruptive anti-corruption technology in SMEs for the government.

Delimitations

This study's geographic scope was limited to the SME home industry, which specialised in furniture products in Zimbabwe's Harare Metropolitan Province. This province had a number of SMEs. The researcher may have studied a representative sample for this study, with the possibility that the findings could be applied to the province as a whole and other SMEs in general. The study examined how some disruptive innovations might lessen corruption chances, boost accountability, and raise transparency in Harare's SMEs.

Limitations

Obtaining accurate and reliable data on corruption within SMEs was challenging due to its clandestine and sensitivity nature. Reliance on self-reported data may be subject to bias. This was mitigated by triangulating data from focus groups, document analysis and questionnaires to improve reliability

Theoretical Framework and Review of Related Literature

This section discussed the key theoretical framework that informed this study in order to put the discussion into proper context. The research was informed by the Game Theory

The game theory

In tracing the interactions between people in society in the context of corruption several explanations have been offered (Sadedin 2015:5) asserts 'to detect corruption, we need to understand why it arises in the first place.' For that we need game theory. A game is a stylized scenario in which each player receives a payoff determined by the strategies chosen by all players. According to Bayer (2013:36) the game theory of corruption submits that corruption is a kind of transaction between the briber and bribee who do not know each other perfectly. In order to explain how corrupt practices, arise in society, the game theory makes use of middlemen. On the one hand, these middlemen create connections and contacts between the briber and the bribee, lowering the likelihood of detection. Thus, this theory is pertinent to this study because it helps the researcher comprehend how corruption appears in small and medium-sized businesses and how actors participate in corrupt transactions. In light of this, corruption in the SMEs sector is a social and ethical issue that affects both the supply and demand sides. Accordingly, the briber and the bribee are essentially two parties that trade interests, in this case, to profit from the bribe and harm small business owners. Corruption happens in the SMEs sector, and it affects men and women differently.

III. Review of Related Literature

Related literature was reviewed as follows:

Corruption

The misuse of authority bestowed upon a person or organization for personal benefit is known as corruption. It encompasses a broad spectrum of dishonest or immoral actions. Bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, and favouritism are just a few of the ways it might appear, compromising the integrity of institutions, weakening public confidence, and impeding social and economic advancement. Transparency, equity, and accountability are diminished by corruption (<https://www.wallstreetmojo.com.corruption>).

Role of Disruptive Technologies on Enhancing Transparency and Accountability in SME Operations

Digital transformation, which encourages more efficiency and transparency, is transforming the financial reporting and accountability landscape in emerging markets. This is fuelled by the incorporation of cutting-edge technologies that are revolutionizing conventional financial operations, like blockchain, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence (Alonge, 2024). Additionally, digital solutions improve data integration, accuracy, and transparency while expediting the auditing process through automation and real-time analysis, according to Tanasas et al 2025.

Impact of Implementing Disruptive Anti-Corruption Technologies on SME Owners' Attitudes

For SMEs, social media, big data analytics, and blockchain applications greatly enhance the development of social and economic value (Soomro, 2025). According to Tanasas et al. (2025), digital technologies provide certain difficulties, such as skill shortages and cybersecurity. The creation of social and economic value is favourably connected with improved SME performance. Businesses utilize digital technology to enhance supply chains, expedite information processing, expand knowledge, and conserve energy (Tanasas et al., 2025). Digital technologies therefore affect profitability and raise competition in the economy, society, and environment.

Main Obstacles Hindering SMEs in Developing Countries from Adopting Disruptive Anti-Corruption Technologies

The difficulties of funding for digitalization, strategic goals, and expansion face small and medium-sized enterprises (Algahtani et al., 2024). Integration comes at a very high cost. Uneven demand and adoption of new technologies have resulted in notable disparities between larger financial institutions and smaller economies lagging behind in digital innovation (United Nations Industrial Development Organization, 2013). Financial Action Task Force (2021), added that supervisors lacked the knowledge and tools necessary to comprehend and effectively manage staff members.

Potential Ethical Considerations and Unintended Consequences Arising from Using Disruptive Technologies for Anti-Corruption in SMEs

Due to their limited resources and expertise, SMEs face particular ethical challenges like data privacy, bias in AI algorithms, transparency, and socioeconomic impact. These issues are made worse by supply chains that struggle with accountability and transparency, and they demand immediate attention to ensure ethical practice (Abhulimen and Ejike, 2024). Onboarding tools, such as geolocation, credit checks, and anti-fraud software, can enable quick analysis of client traits and Customer Due Diligence (CDD), (Abhulimen and Ejike, 2024).

Mechanisms for Fostering Cross-Sector Collaborations to Promote the Development and Adoption of Disruptive Anti-Corruption Solutions for SMEs

In order to gather data for their own risk assessment, SMEs are urged to work with Chambers of Commerce, business groups, and trade unions in their respective sectors (UNODC 2013). The accountability and openness of the procurement process may be enhanced by the anti-corruption aspects of public e-procurement, particularly the automation of audit trail features (Neupane et al., 2012). Companies are now focusing on anti-corruption measures as a crucial part of a mechanism to protect their reputation and the interests of their investors and shareholders (United Nations Report on Drug and Crime 2012)

IV. Methodology

The study utilized the mixed research method paradigm as major research methodology. The Explanatory research design was adopted. Both probability and non-probability sampling techniques were adopted in selecting the site of study and study participants.

Research Design

Explanatory Design was adopted, this design was ideal because it allowed the researchers to first gather quantitative data to understand the prevalence and impact of corruption on SMEs and then delve deeper into the "how" and "why" through qualitative data.

Sampling and Sample

Probability and non-probability sampling techniques were used in this study. Systematic sampling technique was used to choose 10 SME owners and 5 anti-corruption officers. The Population size was 350, made up of 100 SMEs, 200 employees, 30 managers and 20 law enforcement officers. The participants were of mixed gender.

The following is a table representing the sample

Table 1: Sample Size

Type of Participant	No of Participants	Gender
SME owners	10	6 women and 4 men
Compliance Officers	5	3 men and 2 women
Managers	10	5 men and 5 woman
Employees	20	7 men and 13 women
Total	45	

Data Collection

Document analysis was carried on business documents, 4 focus groups interviews of 5 employees each were interviewed, key informant interviews were carried out with 10 managers and questionnaires were administered to 10 business owners and 5 compliance officers.

Data Analysis

In order to find common trends, themes, and patterns that would help them answer the research questions, the researchers examined the data collected through focus groups, key informant interviews, and documentary analysis. The qualitative data was analyzed using the thematic approach, and themes pertaining to the various forms of corruption encountered by small and medium-sized businesses were created. Quantitative data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The analyzed data was shown using tables and graphs.

V. Results

The results presentation in this section was guided by the key research questions to put the results in proper perspective. The study revealed the following results:-

Adapting and deploying disruptive technologies to increase transparency and accountability within SME operations

88% of Participants recommended the use of the following technology: -

- Blockchain to monitor and document supply chain activities, guaranteeing accountability and transparency.
- Smart Contracts, which automate company procedures to increase transparency and lower the risk of fraud.
- Accuracy and transparency were achieved through the use of blockchain-based digital ledgers to record financial transactions.

70% of small business owners were unaware of these technologies.

Although 50% of managers were ignorant of these technologies, they created a cold fit to implement them because they wished to keep corruption alive.

Key barriers that impede the adoption of disruptive anti-corruption technologies within SMEs in developing countries

Limited access to external networks and budgetary limitations were mentioned by 69% of participants.

Seventy percent of managers and eighty percent of owners lacked the knowledge and tools necessary to comprehend and effectively oversee emerging technologies.

Despite being tech-savvy, 20% of SME owners were hesitant to adjust to change.

84% of respondents thought corruption was a normal aspect of the nation's operations.

Table 2 is showing participants who had expertise in anti-corruption technologies and those without.

Table 2 Participants with Expertise in Disruptive Anti-corruption Technologies

Participant	With Expertise	Without Expertise
SME Owners	2	8
Managers	3	7
Employees	1	19
Compliance Officers	5	00

Impact of Implementation of Disruptive anti-corruption Technologies in SMEs on the Attitudes, of SME Owners

SME owners were afraid to be exposed by anti-corruption technologies of existing corrupt practices.

They had some resistance to implement these anti-corruption technologies due to concerns about costs, complexity or loss of control.

Unintended Consequences Associated with Using Disruptive Technologies for Anti-corruption in SMEs.

According to seven managers (70%) if disruptive technologies were implemented, an over dependence on technology would result in a decline in the ability to think critically and make moral decisions.

Every single owner of a small business said that innovative disruptive technology would simplify their lives by reducing corruption.

80% of workers predicted that automation will lead to job displacement.

All anti-corruption officers emphasized that it was imperative that these new technologies be implemented to combat corruption.

How can cross-sectoral collaborations be effectively fostered to promote the development, dissemination, and adoption of disruptive anti-corruption solutions for SMEs, leading to sustainable development outcomes?

According to 90% of SMEs' owners, it was time for academic institutions, research centers, and private organizations to collaborate on research and development projects in order to create cutting-edge anti-corruption solutions.

Multi-stakeholder forums that would unite stakeholders from the public and commercial sectors, academia, and civil society to exchange resources, knowledge, and expertise were suggested by six out of ten managers.

Table 3 Key Drivers of Corruption

Emerging Themes	Substantiating Evidence
Economic Factors	Three of the compliance officers outlined that low wages for the officers prompted some officers to ask for bribes.
Cultural Factors	8 SME owners indicated that they had developed a culture of corruption because they wanted to evade taxes
Organisational Factors.	Three managers outlined that there was lack of internal controls.
Institutional Weakness	Participant 10 outlined that there was ineffective regulatory framework and bureaucracy.

Table 4 Impact of Corruption

Emerging Themes	Substantiating Evidence
Financial costs	80% SME owners indicated that paying of bribes was their daily norm
Operational Inefficiencies	This resulted in distorted market share
Reputational Damage	70% of managers outlined that it was now difficult to attract investors
Sustainability Implications	Bribes were undermining fair competition.

Major Findings

Some SMEs' managers became hesitant and unfriendly toward implementing anti-corruption technologies because they believed that corruption was commonplace in order to avoid paying taxes to the government and obtaining operating licenses.

Most SMEs lacked the knowledge and experience necessary to oversee new technology, as did their managers.

Because they tend to concentrate mostly on the present or near future, SMEs usually overlook the hidden costs of corruption in favor of the short-term gains

There were no anti-corruption capacity-building initiatives created especially with SMEs in mind

SMEs were not receiving assistance from the private sector to upgrade to modern anticorruption technologies.

Existing regulatory frameworks can be seriously challenged by disruptive technologies that can produce novel business models.

VII. Discussions

The majority of SME owners and managers were unfamiliar with disruptive anti-corruption technologies, according to the results and findings analysis. The investigations' findings unequivocally confirmed that Zimbabwe has a strong institutional, legal, and legislative framework for fighting corruption. The general view was that the present policy statements had produced favourable effects that would allow SMEs to create some mechanisms for the fight against corruption, despite the opinions of some respondents. The sluggish adoption of disruptive innovation principles was still a significant disadvantage, though. A dynamic and successful institutional framework for fighting corruption that is driven by disruptive innovation was viewed as the answer to all of the country's issues, especially those that impact its social, economic, and political development.

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, it was critical that the government and anti-corruption organizations involve SMEs in their anti-corruption technology training and enforcement initiatives. The owners of SMEs had little interest in implementing anti-corruption technologies. There has been uneven demand for and adoption of new technologies, and there is still a big divide between big institutions and smaller players, with smaller economies lagging behind in terms of digital innovation.

Recommendations

It is strongly advised that the government, along with anti-corruption authorities, launch awareness campaigns about digital anti-corruption technologies.

In order for SMEs to use anti-corruption technology, the government must offer them soft loans.

SMEs must get anti-corruption technology training from government, corporate, and anti-corruption organizations.

The government and anti-corruption organizations must include SMEs in their training and policing initiatives.

To combat corruption, the public, NGOs and private sectors must cooperate.

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