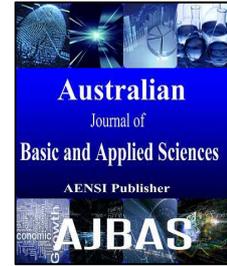




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# Entrepreneurial Initiatives Influences on Rural Entrepreneurs Business Performance: A Conceptual Framework

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Rural entrepreneurs face various challenges in running their business ventures despite being recognized as important players to the Malaysian economy. Some of the challenges faced by rural entrepreneurs include low productivity levels, inconsistent supply of raw materials, low and inefficient production levels, and poor quality of food products. Despite various assistance and support programs given by the Malaysian government to rural entrepreneurs, the question that arises is to what extent such support is translated into good business performance. **Objective:** The aim of this paper is to review related empirical literatures and highlight the need to investigate the influences of government entrepreneurial initiatives on business performance of rural entrepreneurs. **Results:** toward the end of the paper, a conceptual framework will be offered. **Conclusion:** Based on discussion on related empirical review, the government entrepreneurial intervention is proposed to have significant influences on business performance or rural entrepreneurs in Malaysia.

### INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, rural areas are defined as areas with a population of less than 10,000, located outside the governance of the local government and comprising small towns, villages and scattered dwellings (Musdiana and Noor Zahirah, 2011; Zumilah, 2012). Rural business or micro enterprises are typically defined as business entities that are very small, informally run, and involved in activities other than crop production. In Malaysia, rural entrepreneurs are always micro in size, employing less than five employees. In addition, the business activities happen to be created in rural regions or the unique endowments in rural regions that do not exist in metropolitan areas, occurs in economically depressed areas with inadequate infrastructure, low level of education, unskilled workers, limited income and moderate conducive business environment (Paul, Azimi, Bahaman, Ismi and Jeffrey, 2014).

Like many other business owners, rural entrepreneurs face various challenges in running their business ventures despite being recognized as important players to the Malaysian economy. According to Norhaziah and Mohd Noor (2011), some of the challenges faced by rural entrepreneurs include low productivity levels, inconsistent supply of raw materials, low and inefficient production levels, out-dated processing methodologies and equipment, poor quality of food products and product packaging, poor hygiene and sanitary practices, lack of product development and marketing know-how. In addition, they also generally face constraints in obtaining financial support ("Status and performance of Small and Medium Enterprises", 2006).

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Realizing the challenges and constraints faced by rural entrepreneurs, the Malaysian government under the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development has taken several initiatives to provide a supportive and conducive business environment for them. One of the initiatives is the Rural Economy Funding Scheme or *Skim Pembiayaan Ekonomi Desa* (SPED), which helps rural entrepreneurs not only to purchase machines, equipment, or raw materials but also to renovate or upgrade the business premises. As this is a collateral-free funding scheme with a low instalment rate, it is hoped that such support will make the entrepreneurs become more dynamic, competitive and resilient. Other initiatives include assisting Bumiputera rural entrepreneurs in introducing their products to foreign hypermarkets as well as developing strong business networking with them. A Rural Transformation Centre (RTC) is specifically designed to develop rural entrepreneurs and is implemented in eight phases/initiatives led by relevant ministries. For instance, in the execution of Initiative 4, i.e. the processing of agro-food products, the entrepreneurs are supported in the development of their products through branding, labelling, packaging and certification with the help of various agencies, including the Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority (FAMA), MARDI and Department of Health.

Despite various assistance and support programs given by the Malaysian government to rural entrepreneurs, the question that arises is to what extent such support is translated into good business performance. Indeed, such question is pertinent to be asked because literatures on rural entrepreneurship seem to neglect this important issue. Most research works tended to discuss descriptively the opportunities and constraints faced by micro entrepreneurs (Abd. Razak, Mohd Hassan, Kamariah and Wan Fauziah, 2012; Mohd Noor and Mohd Rafi, 2010; Hoe, Filzah, Hin, Norashidah, Jasmani and Haim, 2012; Nurbani, Susan, Jian and Noor Ashikin, 2011; Radiah, Mohd Rosli and Azid, 2009). We intended to fill this gap in the literatures on rural development in Malaysia by investigating the effects of government initiatives on business performance of rural entrepreneurs. In particular, we focused on specific types of government initiatives, i.e. entrepreneurship training, business support, marketing support, financial support, and business networking, and examined how they influence rural business performance. By engaging in such a study we hope to offer practical recommendations to policy makers on what needs to be done to effectively assist and facilitate rural entrepreneurs in their business ventures so that they can become successful both nationally and internationally.

#### **Literature Review:**

##### **Marketing Support and Rural Business Performance:**

Marketing is crucial for business sustainability. Implicit in this contention is the role of marketing in enhancing a firm's performance by positioning and placing business products in a competitive marketplace (Mastura, 2012; Morgan, 2012). Poor marketing has always been recognized as a problem faced by many small businesses (Mastura, 2012). Realizing the crucial role marketing plays in assisting rural entrepreneurs and hence enhanced business performance, the Malaysian government has provided much marketing support toward this end (Hoe *et al.*, 2012). Marketing accessibility is one of the aspects in marketing support which is crucial for rural entrepreneur's success. This is represented by good networks with supermarkets, accessibility of products in supermarkets and tourist centres, establishing good networks with wholesalers and retailers, offering comparable quality of products, penetrating niche market, and grabbing market opportunities (Pech and Cameron, 2006).

Previous studies have shown the positive role marketing support and business performance (Adu, Fyall and Singh, 2001; Jakkala, Moller, Parvinen, Evanschitzky, and Muhlbacher 2010; Tang, Wang and Zhang, 2007). For instance, Tang *et al.*, (2007 examined the association between a number of variables pertaining to marketing strategy and business performance of small construction firms in Tianjin, China. They found that long-term differentiation marketing strategy is found to be positively associated with a small firm's business performance. Their findings have shown that small Chinese firms have an alternative approach for enhancing business performance by adopting a long-term differentiation strategy. This marketing approach is vital for small firms to adapt to the increasingly competitive business environment in China. Similarly, Adu, Fyall and Singh (2001) examined the link between effective marketing practices and business performance in the financial services industry in UK. Their results show that marketing information and integrated marketing are significantly and positively associated with business performance. However, Jakkala *et al.*, (2010) found that market orientation has low impact on financial performance in engineering business context, which is not assumed, as several previous studies propose the link to be strongly positive (Morgan, 2012; Pulendran, Speed and Widing II, 2003).

Based on above discussion, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1** Marketing support has a positive influence on business performance.

##### **Business Networking and Rural Business Performance:**

Business networking is another kind of support the government gives to assist rural entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Networking means developing connections between entrepreneurs and government officers in charge of business assistance in addition to establishing networks with financial institutions and other business associations (Pech and Cameron, 2006). Networking encapsulates an entrepreneur's communicating activities

with people, attending relevant trade events, gathering information regarding business activities in order to do business plan and performing marketing activities (Gilmore *et al.*, 2006). Developing business links allows rural entrepreneurs to have opportunities on how to grow their business, gain visibility and achieve competitiveness (Florin, Lubatkin, and Schulze, 2003). Stathopoulou *et al.* (2004) argued that one of the greatest challenges is to gain market access and build networks for distribution of product and services.

Most rural entrepreneurs face an uphill battle to position their products/services in a large market due to their small sizes and budget constraint. As a result, they rely mostly on the demand of the local market while at the same time seeking government aids to penetrate a larger market. In this context, assistance from the government in developing business linkages to expand their expertise and knowledge is useful (Gilmore *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, Reijonen (2010) stressed that the simple structure of small firms allow them to have frequent contacts with customers (Reijonen, 2010). Because of this, developing good networking abilities helps enhance their business performance (Zhao and Aram, 1995).

Networking helps attain better business performance in a cost-efficient way. According to Gilmore *et al.* (2006), even though networking is an activity that can be informal, it can help rural entrepreneurs utilize their limited resources and compete more effectively with their powerful competitors. Florin *et al.* (2003) argued that networking can provide values to members by allowing them to access to the social resources embedded within a network. That is, networking provides the means by which rural entrepreneurs can tap the needed resources that are 'external' to the firm (Jarillo, 1989). Julien (1993) observed that this form of cooperation can facilitate the achievement of economies of scale in rural entrepreneurs without producing the diseconomies caused by large size. Using networks can potentially lower a firm's risk of 'failure' and increase its chances of successes in the future. Indeed, Munoz *et al.*, (2014) argued that because rural enterprises tend to have many resource limitations, developing networking can be used to address those constraints.

According to Singh (2000), rural entrepreneurs can thrive when they have access to business networks or social networks. Through social networking, entrepreneurs can have access to relevant information, technology, financial and non-financial resources and also to business contacts which are vital for entrepreneurial success and sustainability (Burt, 1997; Granovetter, 1992; Neergard *et al.*, 2005). Van de Ven *et al.* (1984) found that high performing entrepreneurs tended to be more extremely oriented and maintained a broad and complex network of ongoing relationship with people both inside and outside of the firm. Previous research (e.g., Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986; Ostgaard and Birley, 1996) revealed a positive relationship between an entrepreneur's networking and venture's performance. So, based on the above discussion, we hypothesised the following:

**Hypothesis 2** Business networking has positive influence on business performance.

### ***Entrepreneurship Training and Rural Business Performance :***

Entrepreneurship education and training has been associated with rural entrepreneurs' performance (Reijonen, 2010; Kuene, 2008; Smith and Perks, 2006). Training for small business is primarily and internally focused and imparts generic management skills such as marketing, finance, record-keeping, human relations, as well as industrial relations (Reijonen, 2010; Kuene, 2008). These entrepreneurial skills and business skills are crucial for the upkeep of the business (Reijonen, 2010), which leads to business success (Kuene, 2008), sustainability and profitability (Smith & Perks, 2006).

In Malaysia, entrepreneurship education and training is one of the government support given to rural entrepreneurs on the realization that such assistance will enable them to be more competitive and resilient. Many training programs are being implemented such as Skills Upgrading Program, and Industrial Linkage Program (ILP). For instance, the Skills Upgrading Program is aimed at enhancing the skills and capabilities of employees of SMEs in the technical and managerial levels, particularly in critical areas such as the electrical and electronics, information technology, industrial design and engineering fields (<http://www.smeCorp.gov.my/vn2/node/55>). Currently SME Corp. Malaysia has appointed 40 training centres to undertake technical and soft skills training for SMEs such as Agensi Nuklear Malaysia, AJA EQS Certification (M) Sdn. Bhd., German-Malaysian Institute (GMI), Halal Industry Development Corporation Sdn. Bhd (HDC), and Institute of Marketing Malaysia (IMM).

The general assumption is that those businesses that pay more attention on training and development will be more successful in the long run (Jayawarna, Macpherson, Wilson, 2007; Lean, 1998; Sandhu, Hussain and Matlay; 2012). A large body of the SME training literature has attempted to address this issue by empirically testing the relationship between training investments – both in terms of resources and time – and firm performance through individual and firm level data (Jayawarna, Macpherson, Wilson, 2007). SME training research often considers the provision of training at individual level with staff/employee education and training receiving attention over management training and development (Jayawarna, Macpherson, Wilson, 2007).

Basically, training programs that emphasizing on entrepreneurship education has positive effect on business growth. This is consistent with fundamental assumption that entrepreneurship's competency education has a positive effect on the perceived feasibility of entrepreneurship, or on entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Hytti, 2008;

Julien, 1993). For example, Sandhu, Hussain and Matlay (2012) investigated the entrepreneurship education and training (EET) needs of small family businesses operating in the agricultural sector of the Indian economy. Results from 122 agricultural family firms show that owner/managers of small family businesses have low levels of EET and hence higher needs. Low awareness about the availability of training is the most significant challenges for these family firms in accessing financial education and training. On the other hand, training design and training adequacy are also crucial. Lean (1998) shows interesting findings on the influence of training adequacy and development support provision for young micro firms Devon and Cornwall, UK. He found that perceived level of training and development support adequacy at startup is low in relation to business performance. Furthermore, he also demonstrated that internal financial management managing cash-flow and debt management appears to be a more important area of support and training need than obtaining external funding. Apparently, the adequacy of existing start-up and post start-up training and support in addressing business growth and development needs is crucial for sustaining business growth. Thus, based on above discussion, the following hypothesis was proposed:

**Hypothesis 3** Entrepreneurship training has a positive influence on business performance.

#### ***Business Support and Rural Business Performance :***

Providing business supports for entrepreneurship is very crucial in enhancing business success of rural entrepreneurs. There are several major areas of government support programs for SMEs in Malaysia, among which are, technical and training assistance, extension and advisory services, marketing and market research, and infrastructure supports (Skuras, Caldas, Meccheri, Psaltopoulos, and Viladomiu, 2003). For instance, Skuras *et al.* (2003) mentioned that government could influence the market mechanisms and make them function efficiently by removing conditions that create market imperfections and administrative rigidities. They can also create an "enterprise culture" that enables firms to take reasonable risks and seek profits. In many cases, dealing with legal aspects has forced SMEs to allocate significant amount of financial resources due to bribery practices. Legal aspect is also often used in selection operation decision in order to ensure future business success (Kean *et al.*, 1998).

In addition, government's procurement programs and subsidies for research and development are also important business support for entrepreneurs (Frazier and Niehm, 2004). Consequently, government has a central role in supporting ventures whose success potential is not necessarily visible in the short term, but may have a significant contribution to the economic development. Indeed research has shown that provision of management and entrepreneurship training programs, various forms of start-up incentives (e.g., exemption of custom duty, tax concession) and provision of consulting services enables a person to start a business (Jones and Parry, 2011). Based on above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 4** Business support has a positive influence on business performance.

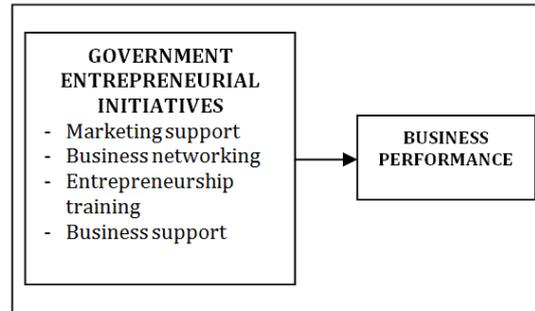
#### ***Conceptual Framework:***

##### ***Organizational Support Theory and Its Relationship with Entrepreneurial Initiatives:***

Organizational support theory (OST) holds that in order to meet socioemotional needs and to assess the benefits of increased work effort, employees form a general perception concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, & Sowa, 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In addition, according to OST, the development of perceived organizational support is encouraged by employees' tendency to assign the organization humanlike characteristics (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). This personification of the organization is abetted by the organization's legal, moral, and financial responsibility for the actions of its agents; by rules, norms, and policies that provide continuity and prescribe role behaviors; and by the power the organization exerts over individual employees. In this regard, the government entrepreneurial initiatives would be used as fundamental characteristics in order to understand how rural entrepreneurs form a general perception concerning the extent to which the government appreciates values and cares about their needs and well-being. This perception is crucial because such perceived organizational support would increase rural entrepreneurs' felt obligation to help the government reach its objectives especially in embarking rural entrepreneurs' business performance.

Moreover, perceived organizational support is assumed to be a global belief that employees form concerning their valuation by the organization. Based on this underlying premise, the government entrepreneurial initiatives also play a significant role in creating conducive business environment. The government efforts in providing and implementing appropriate training programs, developing good business network and providing enough fund are good indicators for rural entrepreneurs to develop positive perceptions towards government entrepreneurial support. According to Gouldner (1960), favorable treatment would convey positive regard to the extent that the individual receiving the treatment considered the act to be discretionary. From this perspective, rural entrepreneurs would infer higher regard from favorable treatment if the treatment appeared discretionary rather than the result of such external constraints as government regulations (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). Thus, the government's discretion is important for determining the extent to which different

treatments most impact perceived organizational support. Favorable treatments that governments provide to rural entrepreneurs must be perceived as voluntary if they are to influence feelings of support. To the extent that the government effectively conveys favorable treatment as discretionary, perceived organizational support will be enhanced. Correspondingly, unfavorable treatment that is perceived to be beyond the government's control will have a less negative effect on perceived organizational support. Thus, based on OST and related literature above, conceptual framework for examining the influences of entrepreneurial initiatives on business performance of rural entrepreneurs was developed as shown in figure 1 below.



**Fig. 1:** Proposed Conceptual Framework.

### Conclusion:

The present study considered four types of government initiatives for rural entrepreneurs in Malaysia: marketing support, entrepreneurship training, business support, and business networking. Based on discussion on OST and discussion on empirical review, these forms of government intervention were proposed to have significant influences on business performance or rural entrepreneurs in Malaysia.

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