

Innovations

Cultivating Success: Exploring Community Support and Collaboration in Igbo Apprenticeship Systems for Sociocultural Sustainability of Igbo SMEs in Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract: *The study examined Community Support and Collaboration in Igbo Apprenticeship Systems for Sociocultural Sustainability of Igbo SMEs in Southeast Nigeria. The study adopted a survey research design. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for sample size determination in survey research, resulting in a sample of 305 participants: 100 SME owners, 150 apprentices, and 55 community leaders. Regression analysis was used for data analysis at 5% level of significance. Findings revealed that Community support and collaborative efforts within the Igbo apprenticeship system positively and significantly influence the success and sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria. The study recommended that communities should establish and support community investment programs that pool resources to provide financial backing for new entrepreneurs emerging from the IAS. This can involve community savings schemes or cooperatives that offer low-interest loans or grants to apprentices who are ready to start their businesses.*

Keywords: *Community Support; Collaboration; Igbo Apprenticeship Systems; Sociocultural Sustainability; Igbo SMEs.*

1.0 Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a pivotal role in the economic landscape of many developing regions, offering employment, fostering innovation, and driving economic growth (Emeali, et al, 2023). In Southeast Nigeria, the Igbo apprenticeship system (IAS) stands out as a unique model contributing significantly to the success

and sustainability of SMEs. This traditional system, deeply embedded in Igbo culture, emphasizes mentorship, community support, and collaboration, providing a robust framework for socio-economic development and cultural preservation (Emeali, et al, 2023). This research study aims to explore the intricate dynamics of the Igbo apprenticeship system, particularly focusing on how community support and collaborative efforts underpin the success and sustainability of Igbo SMEs in Southeast Nigeria.

The Igbo apprenticeship system, locally known as "Igba-boi," is a longstanding tradition that has been instrumental in fostering entrepreneurship within the Igbo community. This system involves a young apprentice, often referred to as a "boy," who enters into an agreement with an experienced business owner, the "master," to learn the intricacies of a trade over a specified period. This arrangement goes beyond mere economic transactions, encapsulating sociocultural values such as trust, loyalty, and a strong sense of communal responsibility (Antwi& Obeng, 2021). During the apprenticeship period, which typically lasts several years, the apprentice works under the guidance of the master, gaining practical knowledge and skills essential for running a successful business (Agama & Ohajionu, 2022; Agbionu, Emeka & Ogbemudia, 2018; Alike & Orjiako-Umunze, 2019; Amaechi, Iwara, Njoku, Raselekoane & Thobejane, 2021). The culmination of this period is marked by a practice known as "settling," where the master provides the apprentice with initial capital and goods to establish their own business (Agbionu, Emeka & Ogbemudia, 2018; Ekejiuba, 2021). This act of settling not only empowers the apprentice to become an independent business owner but also reinforces the communal ethos of support and mutual growth (Amaechi, Iwara, Njoku, Raselekoane & Thobejane, 2021). The IAS has been widely recognized for its effectiveness in nurturing a generation of successful entrepreneurs and contributing to the economic resilience of Southeast Nigeria (Anoke, Osita, Okafor & Agagbo, 2022). The system thrives on strong community networks where the success of each individual is seen as a collective achievement (Igwe, 2021; Igwe, Madichie & Amoncar, 2020; Igwe, Newbery, Amoncar, white and Madichie, 2018; Iwara, Amaechi and Netshandama, 2019). This communal approach fosters a supportive environment that mitigates the risks and challenges of entrepreneurship, enabling SMEs to flourish despite the absence of formal institutional backing (Igwe, 2021; Anigbogu, Onwuteaka & Okoli, 2019; Anoke, Osita, Okafor & Agagbo, 2022; Antwi & Obeng, 2021).

However, the sustainability of the Igbo apprenticeship system faces significant challenges in the modern economic landscape (Nnonyelu & Onyeizugbe, 2020). The pressures of globalization, shifting societal values, and the erosion of traditional cultural practices threaten the continued viability of this system (Obi-Ani, 2020). Additionally, there is a notable gap in empirical research that critically examines

how community support and collaboration within the IAS contribute to the sustainability of Igbo SMEs.

Despite the demonstrated success of the Igbo apprenticeship system in fostering entrepreneurship and economic development, its sustainability is increasingly uncertain. Key issues include the erosion of traditional values that underpin the system (Emejulu, Idigo & Onyekwelu, 2020), inadequate adaptation to contemporary business practices (Nnonyelu & Onyeizugbe, 2020), and a weakening sense of communal responsibility among the younger generations (Nwagbara, 2022). These challenges are compounded by the lack of empirical studies that explore the specific mechanisms of community support and collaboration within the IAS and their impact on the sustainability of SMEs.

This study seeks to bridge this gap by investigating the role of community support and collaborative efforts in the success and sustainability of SMEs within the Igbo apprenticeship system. It will delve into the mentor-apprentice relationships, the importance of community networks, and the evolving challenges faced by this traditional model in a rapidly changing economic context. By providing a comprehensive analysis of these factors, the research aims to inform policies and practices that can enhance the sustainability of the IAS, ensuring its continued contribution to the socio-economic fabric of the Igbo community.

Community support is a cornerstone of the Igbo apprenticeship system, providing a robust safety net that enables both mentors and apprentices to navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship (Igwe, 2021; Igwe, Madichie & Amoncar, 2020; Igwe, Newbery, Amoncar, white and Madichie, 2018). This support manifests in various forms, including financial assistance, emotional encouragement, and social capital (Igwe, 2021; Igwe, Madichie & Amoncar, 2020; Igwe, Newbery, Amoncar, white and Madichie, 2018). The community's involvement begins at the inception of the apprenticeship, where family members and community leaders often play a role in selecting and endorsing the apprentice (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017; Ekesiobi & Dimnwobi, 2021; Eneh, Chris-Nnamchi & Otiji, 2020).

Financial support from the community is crucial, especially during the "settling" phase. Community members often contribute to the initial capital required to establish the new business, ensuring that the apprentice has a solid foundation to build upon. This collective financial backing reduces the burden on individual masters and spreads the risk, making it more feasible for them to mentor and settle multiple apprentices over time (Ekejiuba, 2021).

Emotional and moral support from the community also plays a significant role (Igwe, 2021; Igwe, Madichie & Amoncar, 2020; Igwe, Newbery, Amoncar, white and Madichie, 2018). The encouragement and guidance provided by family members, friends, and community leaders help apprentices stay motivated and resilient in the face of challenges (Igwe, 2021). This support system fosters a sense of belonging and

accountability, as apprentices are aware that their success is a reflection of the community's collective effort and reputation (Igwe, 2021; Igwe, Madichie&Amoncar, 2020; Igwe, Newbery, Amoncar, white and Madichie, 2018; Onyeji, 2019).

Social capital, defined as the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, is another critical aspect of community support (Eze, Muogbo&Obananya, 2021; Ezeajughu, 2021, Ezenwakwelu, Egbosionu&Okwo, 2019). In the Igbo apprenticeship system, social capital is built through trust and reciprocity within the community (Ezeajughu, 2021, Ezenwakwelu, Egbosionu&Okwo, 2019). The established networks facilitate access to resources, information, and opportunities that are essential for business success (Ezenwakwelu, Egbosionu&Okwo, 2019). These networks also provide a platform for apprentices to gain recognition and credibility, which are vital for business growth and sustainability (Eze, Muogbo&Obananya, 2021; Ezeajughu, 2021, Ezenwakwelu, Egbosionu&Okwo, 2019). Collaboration is intrinsic to the Igbo apprenticeship system, encompassing both formal and informal partnerships between various stakeholders. This collaborative spirit is evident in the relationships between masters and apprentices, among apprentices themselves, and between the businesses and the broader community (Ezeajughu, 2021, Ezenwakwelu, Egbosionu&Okwo, 2019).

The mentor-apprentice relationship is the most fundamental form of collaboration within the IAS (Farayibi, 2021; Ifeanyi, Onwuchekwa &Dimgba, 2020; Ifechukwu-Jacobs, 2022). Masters invest time, knowledge, and resources into training their apprentices, ensuring that they acquire the skills and expertise needed to run successful businesses (Iwara, Amaechi and Netshandama, 2019; Iwueke, Alhassan and Oparaku, 2020; Kanu, 2019; Kanu, 2022). This relationship is built on mutual respect and a shared commitment to the apprentice's development and eventual success (Mbanefo and Eboka, 2018; Nnoyelu&Onyeizugbe, 2020, Ugochukwu, 2020). The success of this collaboration is evidenced by the high rate of business establishment and sustainability among former apprentices (Farayibi, 2021; Ifeanyi, Onwuchekwa &Dimgba, 2020; Ifechukwu-Jacobs, 2022; Iwara, Amaechi and Netshandama, 2019; Iwueke, Alhassan and Oparaku, 2020; Kanu, 2019; Kanu, 2022; Mbanefo and Eboka, 2018; Nnoyelu&Onyeizugbe, 2020)

Collaboration among apprentices is another vital aspect of the IAS (Nwanegbo-Ben &Ozoigbo, 2021; Nwanna& Osakwe, 2021; Nzereogu, 2022). Apprentices often work together, sharing knowledge and resources, and supporting each other through the challenges of their training (Obaji, Olaolu and Jumbo, 2019; Obi, 2021). This peer support network enhances learning and fosters a spirit of camaraderie and mutual assistance (Onyeji, 2019).. These relationships often extend beyond the apprenticeship period, forming the basis for future business partnerships and

collaborations (Nwanegbo-Ben & Ozoigbo, 2021; Nwanna & Osakwe, 2021; Nzereogu, 2022; Obaji, Olaolu and Jumbo, 2019; Obi, 2021; Ogbujah, 2022; Onyeji, 2019).

The relationship between the businesses and the broader community further underscores the collaborative nature of the IAS (Okeke & Osang, 2021). Local communities actively support businesses run by former apprentices, recognizing them as products of their collective effort (Okeke & Osang, 2021; Obi-Ani, 2020). This support can take the form of patronage, referrals, and advocacy, which are crucial for the growth and sustainability of these businesses (Okeke & Osang, 2021; Obi-Ani, 2020).

Thus, as highlighted earlier, sustainability of the Igbo apprenticeship system is being tested by various contemporary challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the erosion of traditional values that have historically underpinned the system. Modernization and globalization have introduced new cultural and economic paradigms that often conflict with the traditional practices and communal ethos of the IAS (Nwagbara, 2022).

The younger generation, in particular, is increasingly influenced by global trends and modern lifestyles, leading to a diminishing sense of communal responsibility and a shift towards individualism. This shift poses a significant threat to the collaborative and supportive nature of the IAS, which relies heavily on communal values and collective efforts (Obi-Ani, 2020).

Another challenge is the inadequate adaptation of the IAS to contemporary business practices. While the system has been effective in traditional business environments, it faces difficulties in integrating modern business techniques and technologies. This gap can hinder the competitiveness of businesses established through the IAS, particularly in an increasingly digital and globalized economy (Ekejiuba, 2021).

Moreover, the lack of formal institutional support for the IAS presents another significant challenge. Unlike other entrepreneurial systems that benefit from government policies, financial institutions, and educational programs, the IAS operates largely within informal community structures. This absence of formal support limits the system's capacity to scale and adapt to changing economic conditions (Onyeji, 2019).

The Igbo apprenticeship system represents a unique and culturally significant model of entrepreneurship that has played a crucial role in the socio-economic development of Southeast Nigeria. Through its emphasis on mentorship, community support, and collaboration, the IAS has fostered a generation of successful entrepreneurs and contributed to the region's economic resilience. However, the sustainability of this system is increasingly threatened by modern economic pressures, changing societal values, and the impacts of globalization.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes preserving traditional values, integrating modern business practices, and enhancing

formal institutional support for the IAS. By doing so, the Igbo community can ensure that this culturally significant system continues to thrive and contribute to the socio-economic fabric of Southeast Nigeria.

This research study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of community support and collaboration within the Igbo apprenticeship system and their impact on the sustainability of SMEs. By shedding light on these critical factors, the study seeks to inform policies and practices that can enhance the sustainability of the IAS, ensuring its continued relevance and effectiveness in a rapidly changing economic landscape. This study is therefore aimed to address one research question:

How do community support/ collaborative efforts within the Igbo apprenticeship system contribute to the success and sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria?

By addressing the research question above, the study aims to investigate the mechanisms through which community support and collaboration within the Igbo apprenticeship system contribute to the success and sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria by analyzing the dynamics of mentor-apprentice relationships and their impact on entrepreneurial outcomes, examining the role of community networks and social capital in supporting SME development and sustainability, and identifying the challenges faced by the Igbo apprenticeship system in the context of modern economic pressures and globalization. It contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical data on how community support and collaborative efforts impact SME success within the Igbo apprenticeship system, enhancing the understanding of traditional apprenticeship systems and their relevance in contemporary economic environments, emphasizing the cultural significance of the Igbo apprenticeship system and its role in socio-economic development, informing policymakers and stakeholders on the importance of preserving and integrating traditional practices with modern business strategies to support SME growth and sustainability, and offering a framework for understanding and leveraging community-based entrepreneurial models that can be adapted and applied in other cultural and economic contexts. By achieving these aims and contributions, the study will offer valuable insights into the interplay between traditional cultural practices and modern economic development, highlighting the potential for integrating community support systems with contemporary business models to enhance SME sustainability and success. To this end, the following hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis (Ha): Community support/ collaborative efforts within the Igbo apprenticeship system positively and significantly influence the success and sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria.

2.0 Literature Review

The Igbo apprenticeship system, renowned for its efficacy in entrepreneurial development and socio-economic sustainability, is deeply rooted in community support and collaboration. This review synthesizes relevant studies that highlight the system's role in sustaining Igbo SMEs in Southeast Nigeria, focusing on community involvement and collaborative mechanisms. Agbionu, Emeka, and Ogbemudia (2018) explored the relationship between apprenticeship orientation and micro-business performance in Anambra State. Their study emphasized the importance of employer-employee mentorship and the educational qualifications of apprentices, both of which significantly enhanced firm sustainability and service quality. This underscores the role of community-based mentoring in fostering business success and sustainability.

Alike and Orjiako-Umunze (2019) investigated the effects of apprenticeship and social capital on new business creation among Igbo entrepreneurs. They found that while apprenticeship was crucial during the pre-founding phase of a business, social capital became vital post-establishment. Community support, manifested through ethnic-based unions, provided essential insurance services and access to information, facilitating long-term business stability and growth. Amaechi et al. (2021) analyzed the influence of indigenous practices embedded in the Igbo traditional business school (ITBS) on entrepreneurial success among Igbo SMEs in South Africa. Their findings revealed that these practices significantly impacted key elements of business success, such as revenue increase, new business openings, and sustainability. This study highlights the importance of maintaining traditional practices and community support systems in ensuring business longevity and success.

Anigbogu, Onwuteaka, and Okoli (2019) examined the motivations and challenges of the Igbo apprenticeship system using PCA and OLS regression. They identified start-up capital infusion and risk tolerance as primary motivators, while theft by apprentices posed significant challenges. These findings point to the need for community vigilance and support in mitigating risks and enhancing the apprenticeship system's effectiveness. Anoke et al. (2022) focused on business mentoring as a strategy for entrepreneurship growth in Abia State. They found that psychological support and knowledge transmission had strong positive effects on entrepreneurship development, emphasizing the role of community mentors in providing essential support and guidance to budding entrepreneurs. Ekesiobi and Dimnwobi (2021) conducted an economic assessment of the Igbo entrepreneurship model (IEM) in Anambra State. They found that participants in the IEM had higher business survival and growth rates, largely due to the community-driven nature of

the model, which facilitates access to trade and informal credit. This study underscores the importance of community networks in supporting business ventures and ensuring their sustainability.

In their study "Igbo Entrepreneurship: The Igba-boi Apprenticeship System in Nigeria," Alam and Nwankwo (2019) aimed to explore the sociocultural values underpinning the Igbo apprenticeship system and its impact on business success. They adopted a qualitative methodology, involving in-depth interviews with masters and apprentices to uncover the intricacies of this traditional system. The study found that trust, loyalty, and communal responsibility are crucial to the IAS's success, fostering strong mentor-apprentice relationships. These relationships, built on mutual respect and a deep-seated cultural understanding, were shown to be instrumental in sustaining business ventures. The authors concluded that the IAS significantly contributes to sustainable entrepreneurship and recommended integrating these values into broader entrepreneurial education programs to enhance business resilience and success.

Ekejiuba (2021), in "The Practice of 'Settling' in the Igbo Apprenticeship System: Economic and Cultural Implications," aimed to investigate the economic and cultural significance of the settling phase in the IAS. This phase involves the financial settlement provided by the master to the apprentice upon completion of their training. Using a mixed-methods approach that combined surveys and interviews, the study revealed that community contributions during the settling phase are vital for the successful establishment of new businesses. This communal financial support reduces individual risk and enhances business sustainability. The study concluded that this practice not only aids in business establishment but also reinforces community bonds and mutual support systems. Ekejiuba recommended policies that encourage community-based financial support systems to bolster this traditional practice.

Nwagbara (2022), in "Modernization and Its Impact on Traditional Apprenticeship Systems: The Igbo Example," aimed to investigate the effects of modernization on the IAS. Using qualitative methods, including focus group discussions and interviews, the study found a diminishing sense of communal responsibility among younger generations, influenced by modern values and lifestyle changes. This shift poses a threat to the traditional apprenticeship system, which heavily relies on community support and collective effort. The study concluded that modernization poses significant challenges to the sustainability of the IAS and recommended integrating modern business practices into the traditional system. This approach

would ensure that the IAS remains relevant and effective in the contemporary economic landscape, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity.

Obi-Ani (2020), in "Globalization and Cultural Shifts in Southeast Nigeria: The Case of the Igbo Apprenticeship System," aimed to examine the impact of globalization on the IAS. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to capture the broad spectrum of globalization's effects. It found that modernization and shifting cultural values pose significant threats to the sustainability of the IAS. The influx of global cultural norms and economic practices has led to a gradual erosion of traditional values that underpin the IAS. The study concluded that there is a need to balance traditional practices with modern economic demands. Obi-Ani recommended cultural preservation programs and policies that support the integration of traditional values with contemporary business practices, ensuring the IAS adapts without losing its core principles.

In "Socio-economic Contributions of the Igbo Apprenticeship System to Nigerian Development," Okoro (2018) aimed to understand the broader economic impact of the IAS. Using quantitative methods, including surveys and economic analysis, the study found that businesses established through the IAS are more resilient and contribute significantly to local economies. The IAS not only provides a steady supply of skilled entrepreneurs but also fosters economic resilience through community-based support systems. The study concluded that the IAS is a vital tool for economic development, providing a model that could be scaled and adapted for broader application. Okoro recommended integrating the IAS into national economic strategies to harness its potential for reducing unemployment and promoting sustainable development.

Onyeji (2019) in "Community Networks and SME Success: Insights from the Igbo Apprenticeship System," aimed to analyze the role of community networks in supporting SME development. Employing a case study approach, the research found that social capital, built through trust and reciprocity within the community, facilitates access to resources and opportunities. The dense network of relationships within the Igbo community provides a robust support system for SMEs, enhancing their ability to thrive in competitive markets. The study concluded that strong community networks are critical for business success. Onyeji recommended fostering such networks through community-building initiatives and policies that strengthen social capital, thus enhancing the overall business environment.

Ugochukwu (2020) conducted a study titled "Trust and Loyalty in the Igbo Apprenticeship System: A Cultural Perspective," aiming to examine the cultural

dimensions of trust and loyalty within the IAS. Utilizing ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviews, the study found that emotional and moral support from the community fosters a sense of belonging and accountability among apprentices. These cultural elements are foundational to the IAS, ensuring that apprentices are not only skilled but also deeply integrated into the community's social fabric. The study concluded that trust and loyalty are essential for the system's success. Ugochukwu recommended promoting these values to strengthen community ties and enhance the efficacy of the IAS.

Emejulu, Idigo, and Onyekwelu (2020) examined the declining apprenticeship culture in Southeast Nigeria and its potential economic implications. They advocated for reviving the apprenticeship system through public-private partnerships and modern apprenticeship centers, aligning with the need for community and governmental collaboration in addressing unemployment and fostering economic growth. Eneh, Chris-Nnamchi, and Otiji (2020) explored the effectiveness of the Igbo apprenticeship system in achieving sustainable business education. Their study found significant relationships between the system and successful business start-ups, networking, and initial capital raising. The results highlight the community's role in providing comprehensive business education and support, essential for sustaining business ventures. Eze, Muogbo, and Obananya (2021) investigated business mentoring's impact on entrepreneurship development in Anambra State. They emphasized the importance of mentorship in acquiring entrepreneurial skills and knowledge, despite obstacles faced during the learning process. Their recommendations for aspiring entrepreneurs to seek mentorship and established businesses to support new entrepreneurs further stress the role of community collaboration. The reviewed literature consistently underscores the critical role of community support and collaboration in the Igbo apprenticeship system. This system, through its emphasis on mentorship, social capital, and traditional practices, provides a robust framework for sustaining Igbo SMEs in Southeast Nigeria. By leveraging community networks and fostering collaborative efforts, the Igbo apprenticeship model not only enhances entrepreneurial success but also ensures the sociocultural sustainability of business practices within the region.

Ezenwakwelu, Egbosionu, and Okwo (2019) found that apprentices in Nigeria acquire significant technical and entrepreneurial skills, suggesting the necessity for government support to enhance this training model. Similarly, Fajobi et al. (2017) emphasized that apprenticeship training is vital for addressing youth unemployment, urging financial backing for skill acquisition programs. Farayibi (2021) highlighted the Igbo Apprenticeship System's (IAS) effectiveness in fostering informal sector growth through its capital sharing model, proposing a policy

framework to support this indigenous financing method. Ifeanyi, Onwuchekwa, and Dimgba (2020) demonstrated the apprenticeship scheme's impact on employment generation post-civil war, recommending legal frameworks to ensure effective contracts and educational opportunities for apprentices. Ifechukwu-Jacobs (2022) corroborated these findings, showing significant unemployment reduction due to skill acquisition in Onitsha, advocating for traditional business training and timely support for apprentices.

Igwe (2021) explored the broader concept of indigenous entrepreneurship, identifying the Igbo's unique entrepreneurial behaviors influenced by their clan, community, and family structures. The research by Igwe, Madichie, and Amoncar (2020) on transgenerational business legacies underscored the role of familial and cultural factors in sustaining Igbo entrepreneurial traditions, highlighting the importance of extended family support and informal apprenticeship systems. Igwe et al. (2018) further reinforced these themes, showing that Igbo families provide a robust entrepreneurial leadership platform, fostering risk-taking, creativity, and innovation among youths. Additionally, Igwe, Ochinanwata, and Emeordi (2023) examined the interplay between religiosity and entrepreneurship, revealing how spiritual beliefs shape entrepreneurial persistence and community-based business practices. Iwara, Amaechi, and Netshandama (2019) detailed the Igba-boi scheme's stages, recommending its integration into government entrepreneurship programs to enhance capacity building. Iwueke, Alhassan, and Oparaku (2020) linked educational qualifications of apprentices to their trade comprehension, suggesting that literacy and effective mentorship are crucial for business sustainability.

Kanu (2019, 2022) explored the philosophical underpinnings of the Igbo apprenticeship system, advocating for government investment in this model to spur wealth creation and tackle unemployment. Nnoyelu and Onyeizugbe (2020) identified declining interest in traditional apprenticeship among Igbo youths, proposing a hybrid model to modernize the system and retain youth engagement. Nwanegbo-Ben and Ozoigbo (2021) reviewed the "Cubana Principle," a contemporary variant of Igbo entrepreneurship, highlighting its potential for national development if supported by sustainable programs. Lastly, Nwanna and Osakwe (2021) examined the combined impact of apprenticeship, venture capital, and mentorship on SME financing, recommending government interventions to support skill training and provide low-interest loans to SMEs. Collectively, these studies underscore the Igbo apprenticeship system's effectiveness in fostering entrepreneurial skills, promoting business growth, and sustaining socio-economic development, advocating for enhanced support and modernization to maximize its potential.

Focusing on the skill development aspect of IAS, Obaji, Olaolu, and Jumbo (2019) and Okoli&Udogu (2023) identify the critical role of entrepreneurial and managerial skills in the success of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). While Obaji et al. (2019) employ a quantitative approach to demonstrate the positive impact of creativity and communication on SME performance, Okoli&Udogu (2023) highlight the importance of soft skills acquired through IAS. They recommend the integration of the IAS model into the education sector to enhance employability and entrepreneurial prospects. Onu (2021) and Okwuowulu (2022) discuss the economic impact of IAS on MSMEs. Onu (2021) contrasts the high failure rates of modern MSME startups with the relative success of traditional apprenticeship-based enterprises, suggesting that IAS is a viable model for business sustainability. Okwuowulu (2022) further substantiates this by showing how the IAS has significantly contributed to the development of the auto spare parts market in Nnewi, Anambra State. Both studies advocate for the formalization of IAS to enhance its regulatory framework and ensure its continued effectiveness.

Several studies, including Okeke &Osang (2021) and Okeke (2023), address the contemporary challenges facing IAS. Okeke &Osang (2021) observe a perceived decline in the system's potency due to factors such as young men's reluctance to engage in family businesses and the prevalence of dishonest practices among apprentices. Okeke (2023) attributes the decline to materialism and a get-rich-quick mentality among the youth, which undermines traditional values like communalism and mentorship. Both studies call for a reorientation towards these traditional values and the incorporation of IAS principles into educational and community programs to counteract these trends.

Providing socio-cultural and legal perspectives on IAS, Ogbujah (2022) and Olewu (2023) offer distinct insights. Ogbujah (2022) emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between values and economic growth, advocating for the adoption of IAS by other ethnic groups to foster inclusive growth and peace. Olewu (2023), on the other hand, examines the legal implications of IAS concerning children's rights, identifying potential abuses within the system. The study recommends legal reforms to protect the rights of child apprentices and ensure ethical practices in apprenticeship arrangements.

Several studies offer practical recommendations for enhancing IAS. Nzereogu (2022) and Onu (2021) suggest formalizing and institutionalizing the apprenticeship system to provide clear terms and conditions, thereby protecting both masters and apprentices. Okeke (2023) and Obi (2021) advocate for the promotion and preservation of IAS through educational curricula and community engagement

initiatives. Okoli & Udogu (2023) recommend adopting IAS models in schools and enterprises to enhance employability and entrepreneurial prospects.

The reviewed extant literature underscores the significant role of the Igbo Apprenticeship System in fostering socio-economic development and sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive survey design to explore the role of community support and collaboration in the Igbo apprenticeship system and its impact on the socio-cultural sustainability of Igbo SMEs in Southeast Nigeria. This design is appropriate for obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the current state of the Igbo apprenticeship system and its socio-economic impacts, as it allows for the collection of detailed information from a large sample of participants.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of SME owners, apprentices, and community leaders involved in the Igbo apprenticeship system in Southeast Nigeria. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure that various subgroups within the population were adequately represented. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for sample size determination in survey research, resulting in a sample of 305 participants: 100 SME owners, 150 apprentices, and 55 community leaders.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to gather information on participants' perceptions of community support, collaboration, and the socio-cultural sustainability of the Igbo apprenticeship system. The questionnaire was divided into sections covering demographic information, aspects of community support, collaboration within the apprenticeship system, and outcomes related to socio-cultural sustainability. The instrument was pre-tested with a small sample of respondents to ensure clarity and reliability, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process involved administering the questionnaire to the selected participants through face-to-face interactions and, where necessary, through email to accommodate participants who preferred digital communication. Trained research assistants were employed to facilitate the distribution and collection of the questionnaires, ensuring that respondents understood the questions and provided accurate responses.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using regression analysis to examine the relationship between community support and collaboration (independent variables) and the socio-cultural sustainability of SMEs (dependent variable) within the Igbo apprenticeship system.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before participation. They were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time.

3.7 Limitations

The study acknowledged potential limitations, including the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study limited the ability to infer causality between the variables. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating longitudinal designs and triangulating self-reported data with other data sources.

4.0 Data Analysis, Results/ Implication and Discussion

4.1 Data Analysis

Ha: Community support/ collaborative efforts within the Igbo apprenticeship system positively and significantly influence the success and sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria.

Table 4.1.1 Model Summary for Community Support /Collaborative Efforts and Success / Sustainability of SMEs

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.791 ^a	.625	.624	3.253

a. Predictors: (Constant), Community Support/ Collaborative Efforts

Table 4.1.2 ANOVA^a for Community Support / Collaborative Efforts and Success / Sustainability of SMEs

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5345.395	1	5345.395	505.128	.000 ^b
	Residual	3206.422	303	10.582		
	Total	8551.816	304			

a. Dependent Variable: Success / Sustainability of SMEs
 b. Predictors: (Constant), Community Support/ Collaborative Efforts

Table 4.1.3 Coefficients^a for Community Support / Collaborative Efforts and Success / Sustainability of SMEs

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	5.519	.651		8.478	.000
	Community Support/ Collaborative Efforts	.754	.034	.791	22.475	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Success / Sustainability of SMEs

In the Model Summary table, the "R" column shows the linear correlation coefficient, which indicates the quality of the prediction. An R value of 0.791 suggests a strong prediction. The "R-Square" column, representing the coefficient of determination, shows that 62.5% of the variance in the dependent variable (Success/Sustainability of SMEs) is explained by the independent variable (Community Support/Collaborative Efforts). This leaves 37.5% of the variation due to other factors. In the ANOVA table, the F-value (Mean Square Regression divided by Mean Square Residual) has an associated p-value of 0.000, which is much smaller than the typical alpha level of 0.05. This indicates that the independent variable reliably predicts the dependent variable. The Coefficient Table provides the Standardized Coefficients (Beta), showing the contribution of each predictor variable. A beta weight of 0.791 indicates that Community Support/Collaborative Efforts significantly explain the Success/Sustainability of SMEs. The T and Sig. columns give the t-value and p-value for testing the hypothesis that the coefficient is zero. Here, the p-value is 0.000, which is less than the alpha level of 0.05, confirming statistical significance.

Decision: Since the model is statistically significant, the alternative hypothesis is therefore accepted and we conclude that Community support/ collaborative efforts

within the Igbo apprenticeship system positively and significantly influence the success / sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria.

4.2 Results and Implication

4.2.1 Result:

The result of the study showed that Community support and collaborative efforts within the Igbo apprenticeship system positively and significantly influence the success and sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria ($\beta = 0.791$); ($p < 0.05$).

4.2.2 Implications of the Result:

The finding that community support and collaborative efforts within the Igbo apprenticeship system (IAS) significantly influence the success and sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria has several important implications:

1. **Enhanced SME Resilience and Economic Stability:** The resilience of SMEs fostered by the IAS indicates that businesses supported by strong community networks are better equipped to withstand economic challenges. This resilience can lead to more stable local economies, reducing the rate of business failures and contributing to overall economic stability in Southeast Nigeria.
2. **Policy Formulation and Support:** Policymakers should recognize the value of the IAS and develop supportive policies that bolster community-based support systems. This could include financial incentives for community contributions during the settling phase, support for cooperative business models, and initiatives that promote communal investment in new businesses. Such policies would enhance the sustainability and success of SMEs, driving economic development in the region.
3. **Educational Integration and Entrepreneurial Training:** Integrating the principles of the IAS into formal entrepreneurial education can help cultivate a new generation of business leaders who value collaboration and community support. Educational programs that emphasize trust, loyalty, and communal responsibility can enhance the entrepreneurial ecosystem, ensuring that future entrepreneurs are well-equipped to leverage community support for business success.

4. **Strengthening Community Bonds and Cultural Preservation:** The IAS's reliance on community support and collaboration underscores the importance of preserving traditional sociocultural practices. By reinforcing these bonds, communities can maintain social stability and cultural continuity in the face of modernization and globalization. Efforts to promote cultural preservation programs and policies that integrate traditional values with contemporary business practices are essential.
5. **Promotion of Collaborative Business Models and Networks:** The success of the IAS highlights the importance of collaborative business models. Encouraging the formation of business networks and cooperatives can replicate the collaborative environment of the IAS, helping businesses access resources, share knowledge, and reduce operational risks. Development agencies and business support organizations should design programs that leverage community support structures, providing platforms for mentorship, community funding, and collaborative ventures.

4.3 Discussion of Findings

The study "Cultivating Success: Exploring Community Support and Collaboration in Igbo Apprenticeship Systems for Sociocultural Sustainability of Igbo SMEs in Southeast Nigeria" found that community support and collaborative efforts significantly influence the success and sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria. This aligns closely with previous studies reviewed, such as those by Agbionu, Emeka, and Ogbemudia (2018), who emphasized the importance of mentorship within the community in enhancing firm sustainability and service quality. Similarly, Alike and Orjiako-Umunze (2019) highlighted the critical role of ethnic-based unions in providing essential services and facilitating business stability. Amaechi et al. (2021) demonstrated the impact of maintaining indigenous practices within the apprenticeship system, underscoring their importance for business success and cultural cohesion. Moreover, the decline in traditional mentoring models noted by Osita, Akam, and Dike (2022) further emphasizes the need for policy interventions to preserve community support structures. Alam and Nwankwo (2019) highlighted how trust, loyalty, and communal responsibility underpin the IAS, fostering strong mentor-apprentice relationships that are vital for business resilience. Ekejiuba (2021) emphasized the economic and cultural importance of community contributions during the settling phase, which helps reduce individual risks and enhances business sustainability, reinforcing communal bonds. Nwagbara (2022) and Obi-Ani (2020) both noted the challenges posed by modernization and globalization, finding that shifts in cultural values threaten the IAS's sustainability. However, they recommended integrating modern business practices with traditional

communal values to maintain relevance. Okoro (2018) demonstrated that businesses established through the IAS are more resilient and contribute significantly to local economies, advocating for the integration of the IAS into national economic strategies to promote sustainable development. Onyeji (2019) found that social capital and strong community networks are essential for SME success, providing access to resources and opportunities through trust and reciprocity. Lastly, Ugochukwu (2020) highlighted the foundational role of trust and loyalty, fostered by community support, in ensuring the IAS's effectiveness. Collectively, these studies illustrate a comprehensive picture of the IAS's strengths and challenges, emphasizing the indispensable role of community support and collaboration in sustaining SMEs, and offering actionable insights for integrating traditional values with contemporary economic practices to enhance socio-cultural and economic sustainability in Southeast Nigeria. Collectively, these studies underscore the integral role of community networks, traditional practices, and collaborative efforts in driving the sustainability and growth of Igbo SMEs, reinforcing the findings of the current study.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

The study delved into the significant role of community support and collaboration within the Igbo apprenticeship system (IAS) and its profound implications for the success and sustainability of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria. Through an examination of existing literature and empirical findings, it has become evident that the IAS serves as a robust framework that nurtures entrepreneurial ventures, fosters economic resilience, and preserves cultural values. The findings underscore the importance of community-based financial systems, educational integration of IAS principles, adaptation of traditional practices to modern contexts, enhancement of community networks and social capital, and promotion of cultural preservation initiatives. These recommendations offer actionable strategies for policymakers, educators, businesses, and community leaders to strengthen the IAS and leverage its inherent strengths in navigating contemporary economic challenges while preserving cultural heritage. Overall, the study highlights the enduring relevance of indigenous apprenticeship systems in driving economic development and fostering cultural sustainability. By recognizing and supporting the IAS, stakeholders can contribute to the growth and prosperity of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria while honoring and preserving traditional values and practices for future generations. Moving forward, continued research, policy support, and community engagement will be essential in harnessing the full potential of the IAS for sustainable development and inclusive growth in the region.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and their implications, the following five recommendations are proposed to enhance the success and sustainability of SMEs through community support and collaborative efforts within the Igbo apprenticeship system (IAS):

- i. **Strengthening Community-Based Financial Systems:** Establish and support community investment programs that pool resources to provide financial backing for new entrepreneurs emerging from the IAS. This can involve community savings schemes or cooperatives that offer low-interest loans or grants to apprentices who are ready to start their businesses. Implement government incentives, such as tax benefits or matching grants, for communities that actively participate in funding and supporting apprentices' transitions to business ownership. These incentives will encourage more robust community involvement and investment in local economic development.
- ii. **Educational Integration of IAS Principles:** Integrate IAS principles such as trust, loyalty, and communal responsibility into business and entrepreneurship curricula at educational institutions. This would prepare students to understand and apply these values in their future business endeavors, fostering a new generation of entrepreneurs who value community support. Develop training programs that combine traditional IAS practices with modern entrepreneurial skills. These programs should include mentorship from experienced IAS mentors and practical business training, blending traditional wisdom with contemporary knowledge.
- iii. **Adapting Traditional Practices to Modern Contexts:** Provide training for IAS participants on modern business practices, including digital marketing, financial management, and global market trends. This will help apprentices and masters alike to adapt to the evolving economic landscape while maintaining the core values of the IAS. Encourage the development of hybrid business models that integrate the collaborative and community-focused aspects of the IAS with modern business strategies. This can help traditional businesses remain competitive and sustainable in the modern economy.
- iv. **Enhancing Community Networks and Social Capital:** Promote initiatives that strengthen community networks and social capital, such as local business associations, networking events, and collaborative workshops. These initiatives can help businesses share resources, knowledge, and

opportunities, fostering a supportive business environment. Facilitate the creation of cooperative ventures and business alliances that enable small businesses to collaborate, share risks, and access larger markets. These cooperatives can replicate the collaborative spirit of the IAS, enhancing business resilience and success.

- v. **Cultural Preservation and Promotion:** Implement cultural education programs that raise awareness about the importance of the IAS and its values. These programs should target both the younger generation and the broader community, promoting an appreciation for the cultural heritage and economic benefits of the IAS. Provide support for traditional IAS practices through grants, recognition programs, and policy measures that protect and promote these practices. This can include financial support for businesses that adhere to IAS principles and public recognition of successful IAS entrepreneurs who embody these values.

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