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Challenges in Researching SMEs in Developing Countries: Two Fieldwork Experiences from Libya and Morocco

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Abstract. The increasing recognition of SMEs' role in economic growth necessitates the need for academic research into understanding this sector. However, academic work on how to research SMEs, especially in developing countries, is scarce. This has limited the further development of literature in this area. This paper reflects on the experiences of two doctoral students engaged in SME research in developing countries, namely Libya and Morocco. The paper presents the authors' experiences with special focus on the fieldwork stage from which some lessons and practical guidance are shared. Drawing on their experiences, the authors promote a more informal, casual approach when going in the field, and recruiting firms through snowball sampling. Moreover, to achieve high response rates, researchers should use a drop and collect method that allows personal interaction with participants to distribute the questionnaire. Working as a team with well-trained assistants would also be a wise decision. It is hoped that the content of the paper will provide students and researchers embarking on SME research in developing contexts with beneficial guidance on the execution of their fieldwork. Researchers in this field are encouraged to share their experiences for more comprehensive understanding of this unique research arena in similar contexts and beyond.

Keywords: SME research, fieldwork, developing countries, Libya, Morocco.

1. Introduction

Worldwide, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) contribute a great deal to the economies of all countries. In both emerging and industrialised economies, the SME sector plays a fundamental role in promoting economic prosperity through its significant contributions to income creation, the absorption of labour, and the alleviation of poverty (Storey 1994; Bloch and Bhattacharya 2016; Maksimova *et al*. 2017). In addition, SMEs create exporting opportunities (Abor *et al.* 2014; Singh and Kaur 2015), increase possibilities for generating innovation

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(Lasagni 2012; Naranjo-Valencia *et al*. 2018) and foster entrepreneurship (Liñán *et al*. 2020).

The recognition of the significant economic contributions of SMEs has resulted in increased attention to this sector. Accordingly, over the past few decades, topics concerning SMEs have dominated the agenda of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in both developing and developed countries alike. This is evident by the increasing number of journals, articles, publications, books, dissertations, conferences, research centres, etc. that are dedicated to topics pertaining to this field of research (Storey 1994; Blackburn and Kovalainen 2009). SMEs and entrepreneurship education and training programs are now offered in high schools and universities (Faghih and Zali 2018) as well as a variety of doctoral and postdoctoral activities (Blackburn *et al*. 2017).

In this "young field of research" several studies and expansive literature have been devoted to exploring and understanding various aspects of SMEs. However, more emphasis is usually placed on the dissemination of research findings rather than discussing the methodological elements as "findings" in themselves. That is to say, existing literature does not pay enough attention to capturing the essence of doing research in this field (Najmaei 2016).

One of the key challenges of doing research in this arena that discourages rather than encourages cumulative developments in knowledge is the lack of methodological texts written specifically for the sector (Curran and Blackburn 2001). One aspect to tackle this is that researchers need to share their experiences in working in the SME sector so that lessons can be taken from individual research projects, and decisions on how best to apply these lessons to future studies can be made (Lewis *et al*. 2007). This is especially called for in the context of developing countries where the existing literature has so far been found to be largely lacking.

Researching SMEs and entrepreneurship is not only a scientific phenomenon but also a societal phenomenon (Welter and Lasch 2008). Despite some arguments for the move toward reaching a consensus on agreed research standards as the entrepreneurship discipline becomes mature and stabilized (Koza and Thoenig 1995; Fagerberg *et al.* 2012), contextual forces from the broader cultural and social environment, including religious beliefs, industries, social concerns and academic systems, will have an influence on entrepreneurship research (Zahra 2007). Loucks (1988) argues that entrepreneurship and SMEs' activities are cultural-bound and researching them is therefore cultural-specific. Due to differences in culture, economic development, and political institutions, developing economies are different from developed ones and, therefore, any examination of SMEs and entrepreneurship within these environments can help modify existing theories and create new ideas for research and theory development (Alon and Rottig 2013). In order to account for the unique characteristics of these countries, Alon and Rottig (2013) recommend that researchers doing SME research in emerging markets should develop methodologies and theories that are indigenous to these markets.

In practice, in studying context-specific entrepreneurial phenomena, researchers in each region still tend to use methods differently in order to generate a deeper and more contextualized understanding of the topic under investigation (Jing *et al.* 2015). A case in point is that in most developing countries, the majority of SMEs operate in the informal sector. As such, relying on government registries and data bases in developing countries, if they exist, would lead to an incomplete picture. Likewise, researchers should be mindful of the level of technology adoption among SMEs before making the decision on using online surveys. Therefore, one should be aware of the application of the research methods taking into account the research context. Indeed, understanding the nature and dynamics of their research contexts, SME researchers can offer deeper and more insightful explanations of the issues under investigation, giving birth to independent or new ventures (Zahra 2007).

Chandra (2018) concludes that studies on SMEs in developing countries as a context remain marginalised in mainstream SMEs/entrepreneurship research. The author argues that "context is king" in future SMEs and entrepreneurship research calling for more studies to enrich and extend SMEs and entrepreneurship methodologies and theories. Lewis *et al.* (2007) believe that there is an opportunity to amplify the experiences from SME research projects to gain lessons about methodologies, methods, and research practices from different contexts.

The significant economic and political changes that have taken place in many emerging economies, especially those in transition, have provided unique and dynamic settings for studying SMEs in new contexts (Kiss *et al.* 2012). Although academic interest in SMEs in emerging economies has grown in the last decade and several reviews of methodological and empirical works in the area exist, they typically focus on limited geographical regions (e.g. China and Eastern Europe) (Kiss *et al.* 2012), and the knowledge about how SME research developed in other regions is limited (Jing *et al.* 2015). The MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region remains underrepresented in the field of SME and entrepreneurship research (Berbegal-Mirabent *et al.* 2018). In fact, it was not till 2008 that a growing pattern in this field of research could be observed in the region. Berbegal-Mirabent *et al.* (2018) promote the MENA region as a fertile empirical setting *per se* for SME and entrepreneurship research that provides enough cultural and political diversity to serve as a good basis for comparison with other contexts.

In line with the above argument, this paper presents two research experiences on SMEs/entrepreneurship research from two developing countries namely Libya and Morocco. The current study owing to its timing is relevant as SME and entrepreneurship research is increasing in popularity in the region, especially among PhD candidates and early-career researchers. A trend that is fuelled by a transition from overwhelmingly state-centred economies to competitive markets with the objective of building diversified resilient economies. The paper also aligns with the view of Davidsson (2003) and Hine and Carson (2007) that the research frontier in this field is still wide and can be served by encouraging research designs and methodologies as diverse as the contexts to be covered to develop an ability to understand any implications of socioeconomic, demographic and institutional changes.

The idea of producing a paper detailing how an academic research was done is not a new one (Lee *et al*. 2013). In doing so this paper adopts a storytelling approach. Appropriateness rather than orthodoxy was fundamental in choosing this methodological approach for this paper (Nwankwo *et al*. 2004). This approach was one of the emerging topics in the field of SMEs/entrepreneurship research that was identified by Chandra (2018) and was used by Lee *et al*. (2013), Spiro *et al*. (2015), and Hohaia (2017). Moreover, it is among the attributes characterizing "interesting" entrepreneurship research (Landström and Harirchi 2019). This type of creative "storytelling" can be utilized to strengthen the researcher to uncover clearer truths (Fillis 2006).

It is worth mentioning here that terms such as "doing research, conducting research and researching" have been interchangeably used by many prominent researchers in this field (e.g. Curran and Blackburn 2001; Lewis *et al*. 2007; Davidsson 2016). In general, they refer to all the aspects and stages of conducting a research project starting from topic selection to the final presentation of results and everything in between, including data analysis and working in the field. This paper adopts this term in a similar fashion; however, the emphasis is more on the experiences of the fieldwork studies from which some practical reflections and lessons can be shared. This is justified as the main audience targeted are PhD students and early-career researchers who would be arguably more interested in how the research is done rather than discussing its results. These reflections and lessons are mostly pertinent to research projects that are quantitative in nature although some can also be relevant to qualitative investigations.

This paper contributes towards filling the gap in the existing literature regarding the experiences of doing research in the field of SMEs and entrepreneurship in general and particularly in developing countries, by presenting reflections and insights from the perspectives of the two authors on their doctoral experiences. It is hoped that the illustration in this paper can benefit other researchers, scholars, and particularly PhD candidates in developing countries who are planning to do research in this area. The illustration may provide them with an insight that would enable them to further their own research efforts with SMEs, contributing to more meaningful SME and entrepreneurship theory, which fairly reflects actual practices in their respective environments.

This paper is not meant to be a self-help manual but rather, as Lee *et al*. (2013, p. 2) put it "an attempt to lifting the lid on student researchers' experiences to stimulate debate around the process of doing research". The authors hope that it would provide PhD students and early-career researchers in this field, especially in developing countries, with some reflections on some methodological and logistical constraints that they may face so that they might be prepared. It is only through the sharing of such experiences that important issues can be highlighted and discussed for the benefit of other researchers in order to contribute to the advancement of knowledge regarding researching this multi- and interdisciplinary field.

The rest of the paper first presents the contexts of the two research experiences. The paper then proceeds with a brief description of the two research designs. Some relevant aspects and experiences from the field studies are presented in the following section. The discussion section follows while the final section concludes.

2. The Contexts of the Two Research Experiences

As a part of the requirements to obtain their doctoral degrees, the two authors had undertaken research in SME and entrepreneurship areas, namely bank finance for SMEs in Benghazi (Libya) and factors for success in SMEs in Tangier (Morocco).

In the Libyan case, the research sought to enhance understanding of Libyan SMEs' experiences with bank finance and identify factors that facilitate or impair SMEs accessing bank finance. Libyan SMEs' attitudes towards and perceptions of Islamic methods of finance as an alternative source to raise funding were also examined in the research. The investigation was of a quantitative nature based on questionnaire responses from a sample of SMEs that employ up to 50 employees and operating within the city of Benghazi across three business sectors: trade, services, and manufacturing. The thesis also contained a supply-side investigation that focused on Libyan banks' involvement with SMEs as a finance provider. However, the researcher's experience regarding that side of the investigation is beyond the scope of this paper as only the experience with researching SMEs is presented and shared in the present paper.

With regards to the Moroccan case, the research aimed to develop a clear understanding of the factors that influence the success of SMEs in the city of Tangier as perceived by local owner-managers. A two-stage design, which incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches, was employed in the research. The two approaches were employed in succession with the findings from the quantitative phase informing the qualitative phase. The survey in the quantitative phase was used in order to validate the initial conceptual framework and gain some insights on owner-managers' perceptions of the factors influencing the performance of SMEs. The qualitative phase that followed employed face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected owner-managers with the aim to explore their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes with respect to the drivers of SMEs' success in the city of Tangier.

3. Research Design

Choosing the research design entails deciding on the practical procedures for accessing the subjects of the research (SMEs' owners, employees, customers, etc.) and the methods to be used to collect data (surveys, interviews, case studies, etc.) (Curran and Blackburn 2001). Taking into account the nature of the research questions and objectives and its popular and wide use in collecting data in SME research, and similar to recent studies relevant to SMEs in the region (e.g. El Kabbani and Kalhoefer 2011; Hamad and Karoui 2011; AlHyari *et al.* 2012; Almoawi and Mahmood 2012) and particularly in the Libyan context (e.g. Al-Badri 2006; Al-Rubaie 2008; Farhat 2008), it was decided that a questionnaire would be the primary instrument to use in the research for data collection for the study in the Libyan research, by targeting the population of SMEs in the city of Benghazi. This was further underpinned by discussion with the supervision team as it was concluded that a questionnaire would achieve maximum participation in comparison to other methods considering the research time and financial constraints. Due to practical considerations (poor post services and limited use of information technology among Libyan SMEs), it was decided that the personally administered questionnaire method (drop and collect) would be used. In addition to being the best way to gain the greatest possible number of respondents, that is to maximise the response rate (Hussey and Hussey 1997), this method also gave the research team the opportunity to interact with participants and offer a briefing on the study when that was required.

In the Moroccan case, the study started with an initial research framework which emanated from a systematic literature review. This was then empirically investigated using a two-stage design, which incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches to avoid common-method bias. The researcher and his supervision team believed that the two methodological approaches would not only compensate for the limitations of one method with the strengths of another but would also provide integrated evidence that can lend confidence to the results. The quantitative approach encompassed a paper and online questionnaire administered to the population of SMEs in the city of Tangier. The population of interest was recruited based on the official definition of SMEs in Morocco and was drawn primarily from the official website of the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and New Technologies.

In order to illuminate the findings from the quantitative phase and to enhance the understanding of the salient factors of success in Tangier, a second phase of qualitative investigation was employed. The aim was to explore perceptions and views of business success in relation to the experiences of owner-managers of

SMEs in Tangier. Such an approach would enable a higher likelihood of significant discovery of unknown variables and constructs (Lowder and Williams 2012). To achieve this, a number of face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with local SME owner-managers. The participants were selected based on a judgmental selection to meet the research objectives.

4. The Fieldwork

Fieldwork constitutes an important milestone in SME research. Researchers undertaking fieldwork studies have the potential to make significant contributions to the field of SME research. Field research offers researchers the opportunity to attain first-hand knowledge of practices, understandings, and beliefs of the population being investigated in its natural context. Important objectives for fieldwork research include: overcoming lack of data concerning the study of a given topic in a given place; enabling the researcher to understand the research setting; and enabling the researcher to improve the accuracy and quality of data collected (Reyes-García and Sunderlin 2011).

To collect the data required to answer their research questions, both researchers had to embark on a field study and had approached SME populations in their respective research settings for that purpose. For the first author's investigation of SMEs' experiences with banks as a finance provider and their perceptions of Islamic finance as an alternative source of finance in the Libyan context, a fieldwork study took place in the city of Benghazi for a period of four months from May to August 2013. The second author investigated factors of SMEs' success in Morocco and had undertaken his fieldwork in the city of Tangier for a period of four months for the quantitative stage from November 2010 to February 2011 (one month for the personally administered questionnaire and three months for the online survey). The qualitative investigation had been conducted over three months from September to November 2011.

4.1. Pilot Study

Pilot study refers to testing the data collection tool on a small sample of respondents to identify and eliminate any unanticipated problems or interpretational difficulties (Simon 2006) and also to ascertain how it works and what changes are necessary prior to commencing the study. When using a questionnaire, a small pilot survey should be undertaken (Simon 2006). This is important to ensure that the final version contains questions that are specific, understandable, and capable of obtaining responses from those answering the questionnaire.

In the Libyan research the pre-testing process commenced by subjecting the first questionnaire draft to a discussion with the principal supervisor to ensure that its design was convenient for the research's objectives and suiting the nature and the circumstances of the Libyan business environment. The questionnaire was initially constructed in English. However, since all the targeted participants were Arabic native speakers who are believed not to be proficient in either spoken or written English, the questionnaire had to be translated into Arabic. It was firstly translated by the researcher himself. Subsequently, the translated version was discussed with a bilingual Arabic/English professional and fellow Libyan PhD students. This step resulted in some positive comments which led to the revision of the translated version.

A sub-sample of ten respondents was handed the questionnaire which explained the aims of the study and all relevant issues. Later on, when completed questionnaires were collected, there was a discussion with each respondent to obtain feedback on any unclear instructions, ambiguous wording, confusing questions, and the length of the questions and their ability to answer them. Valuable feedback was obtained resulting in some alternations to the questionnaire most notably omitting the question querying about the amount of investment in the firm as it was deemed "sensitive". In addition, respondents indicated that the length of the questionnaire was suitable and not onerous. Consequently, the final questionnaire version was developed for the field study involving the study sample.

Likewise, in the Moroccan research, pre-testing was performed prior to carrying out the main survey. This started with translating the questionnaire which was originally designed in English. Given that Arabic is the official language in Morocco and French is the business language, the questionnaire was translated into these two languages to allow participants to respond to the questionnaire in the language that they are most comfortable with. Thus, the questionnaire was translated by the researcher and then back-translated independently by a professional certified translator to ensure that the meaning of each question was as consistent as possible with the original English version.

Two broad categories of testing were used: pre-testing and field testing. The preliminary version was given to fifteen people who did not form part of the research sample for pre-testing. They were asked to complete the questionnaire and comment on its questions and instructions. Following their comments, some formatting changes were made to make the task easy for the participants. For example, replacing numerical labels which participants found very confusing with verbal ones and allow the participants to tick the box of the appropriate label. Moreover, some other minor wording issues were identified and addressed.

As for the field testing, a pilot study of the questionnaire involving a sample of 25 SMEs in Tangier was conducted. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and comment on any ambiguous statements or instructions and identify any difficulties they may had faced during the process. They were also asked to indicate the time taken to complete the survey. All comments were taken into account in the final version of the questionnaire that was later used in the actual collection of data. It is worth mentioning that it was not necessary to undertake any pilot study for the interview guide used in the second phase of the research investigation since the topics in the qualitative phase were developed from the survey questionnaire.

4.2. Identifying SMEs

One of the primary issues when embarking on SME research is the issue of identifying the criteria of the population of the study, that is the definition of SMEs. Definitions of SMEs vary between countries and sometimes within the same country. Fortunately for the first author, at the time of conducting the study there was only one official definition for SMEs in Libya. The definition of SMEs used in the Libyan study is the one set by Libya's General People's Committee in 2006.[2] The definition does not distinguish between SMEs according to the business sector in which they operate. Accordingly, small enterprises have been defined as those employing up to 25 employees with an invested capital of maximum of 2.5 million Dinars, whereas medium enterprises are those employing 26-50 employees and have an invested capital not exceeding 5 million Dinars. However, after the pilot study, it was decided to exclude the question asking to declare the amount of invested capital in the firm. The reason was twofold. First, to avoid discouraging the target population responding to the questionnaire as respondents in the pilot study expressed inconvenience in answering this question. Second, the purpose of illustrating the size of the business could be achieved by using the employment as a proxy of size without compromising on the research objectives.

The study population was that of SMEs operating within the city of Benghazi. In the last official census available at the time of the study this population was estimated at 1097 based on the definition mentioned above. With the absence of any statistics agency or government body with reliable data on SMEs that can be accessed online, this figure was obtained during a personal visit by the researcher to the premises of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Benghazi in April 2013 for this particular purpose. Accordingly, following Krejcie and Morgan (1970) the sample size was determined to be 278. Unfortunately, it was not possible to obtain a reliable detailed list of SMEs' names and addresses from which SME firms could be recruited for the study.

In Morocco, there is no single legal definition of SMEs, rather several operational definitions which have evolved from various policies and laws. One example is the definition of the General Confederation of Enterprises of

2. The definition was outlined in the Committee's Decision # 109/2006.

Morocco[3] which defines SMEs as enterprises that employ less than 200 employees and have an annual turnover of no more than 75 million Dirhams. In line with the argument of Child (1973), endorsing employment as an adequate criterion for the measurement of the size of a business, the researcher had decided to use the number of employees as the definitional criterion for businesses to be included in the study. Therefore, the study considered enterprises with a headcount between 10 and 200 employees as SMEs that fit the purpose of the research without the need to use any additional criteria.

SMEs operating in the city of Tangier formed the study population. The researcher was able to initially generate a list of SME firms to include in the study from an official source which was The Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and New Technologies (MICNT 2007). In order to refine the list and arrive at more up-to-date information, the researcher further incorporated data from other datasets; the directory of the Association of the Industrial Zone of Tangier (AZIT 2010) and the website of the Tangier Free Zone (TFZ n.d.). By doing that, a final, up-to-date SME list, comprising 365 enterprises representing potential participants, was created. Consequently, for the second phase of the investigation (interviews), a judgemental sample strategy was employed to recruit fifteen firms from those who responded to the questionnaire in the initial stage taking into account three factors (business activity, location, and gender) to ensure that the sample is as representative as possible.

4.3. Access to SMEs

The statement of Van Maanen and Kolb (1982) that gaining access is not a simple task as it requires some combination of planning, hard work and luck, can be related to the Libyan research experience. The inability to obtain a reliable detailed list of SMEs' names and addresses coupled with unreliable post services and a low level of information technology among SMEs in Libya meant that a well-thought plan had to be in place to overcome these challenges. Therefore, it was decided to use a snowball sampling technique applied through personally administering the questionnaire to access potential participants. This task was undertaken by the researcher and two field assistants. As such, as a starting point, a number of SMEs that were known to the fieldwork team to fit the definition were approached to participate in the study. In this regard, the previous experience of one member of the fieldwork team in researching this population proved to be of great help. After briefing the participants on the research project, they were asked to fill in the questionnaire. Further, they were asked for help to identify other businesses that match the definition (in terms of the number of employees) or if they could pass copies of the questionnaire to them. In the

3. See http://www.cgem.ma/

majority of cases their response was positive. A great deal of planning and care was taken in order for the sample to include both small and medium enterprises operating in trade, services, as well as manufacturing.

In the Moroccan case, following the generation of the potential participants list, data collection was carried out. The questionnaire was distributed to SMEs' owner-managers of the selected firms. This was done in two phases; drop and collect and online. In the first method, owner-managers were approached in person. During the visit the purpose of the study was explained and participants were briefed about the ethical considerations and then were handed the questionnaire to complete. Networking and personal connections that the researcher had developed through his family business helped in facilitating access to these businesses. The process took three weeks to complete. The resulting response rate was above the average of similar studies involving SMEs and was deemed adequate.

For the online method, emails were sent to the distribution list containing SMEs with email addresses identified from the MICNT, AZIT and TFZ websites. With only few responses received by the deadline, a reminder was sent to the participants explaining that there was still a need for more participants to share their views about the study in order to obtain accurate and robust results. As such, the participants were notified of extending the deadline for two weeks. As this step triggered only one response, one more reminder with further two weeks extension of the deadline was sent to encourage more responses. After sending the last reminder, no additional responses were received.

As for the qualitative stage, after selecting and contacting the participants, time and location for the interviews were agreed in advance. These were established at the convenience of the participants to ensure practicality of access for the interviews to take place. This resulted in nine interviews conducted at the participants' business premises, five in a coffee shop, and one while driving a car.

4.4. Participants' Attitudes Towards Participating in the Research

One advantage of doing research involving SMEs is that SMEs' owner-managers are usually the key decision makers. This means that they are the sole ones who possess the relevant information about their businesses' stories and experiences that usually conform to the criteria set by the researchers to meet their research objectives.

In the Libyan research, as mentioned earlier in this paper, the feedback from the pilot study resulted in omitting the amount of invested capital as a criterion to identify SMEs in the study sample. The researcher and his field assistants felt that this had positively contributed towards the keenness and willingness of the targeted population to participate in the study. Owner-managers were extremely willing to share their experiences without any scepticism regarding the nature of the research questions as observed firsthand by members of the fieldwork team. In addition, the positive attitude of participants manifested in applying the snowball sampling technique adopted by the researcher by agreeing on identifying other potential participants by referral or by passing copies of the questionnaire. This helped the study to achieve a very satisfactory response rate.

The positive attitude towards participating in the research may also have been affected by the timing of the fieldwork. The field study took place during a time of transition in the country not only in economic terms but also politically and amid major reforms to the banking system such as introducing Islamic finance and prohibiting interest charges on individuals' loans. Achieving this rate can also be attributed to the questionnaire being relatively short and straightforward which made it easy for the participants to complete. In fact, many participants chose to complete the questionnaire on the spot in the presence of the team member. The positive attitude of participants towards this study was also reflected in some participants expressing their interest and keenness to further discuss some aspects of the study especially with regard to implementing Islamic finance to serve SMEs' financial needs.

In the Moroccan case, for the quantitative part of the investigation, the distribution of the questionnaire was done using two methods; drop and collect and online. In the first method, SMEs' owner-managers were very keen to participate in the study and share their experiences. Some owner-managers did fill in the questionnaire on the spot, whereas the researcher's flexibility allowed more owner-managers to participate when they requested their collection at a later time. A time frame of one week was agreed in order to allow these owner-managers to fill in the questionnaire at their convenience.

As for the online survey, a number of steps were incorporated to encourage high participation e.g. sending an introductory email with an overview of the study and its purpose, providing two links for the online questionnaire one in Arabic and one in French, giving the participants the option to 'postpone' the questionnaire and 'resume later', sending email reminders to the late respondents, and finally extending the deadline twice. However, the online survey gained a low number of responses. In addition to the possibility that participants may have been unfamiliar with online surveys, this low response could also be attributed to the fact that this process took place during a time in which enterprises undertake their inventory audits and thus they may had been busy and did not have time to fill in the questionnaires (this process took place from December till February). Nevertheless, the overall response rate from both methods was adequate to satisfy the study objectives.

The owner-managers' positive attitude towards taking part in the study was felt more in the qualitative stage of the research. For example, all the fifteen interviewees agreed that their interviews would be audio-recorded. Furthermore, the interviewees were flexible and were not reluctant to discuss any new issues that emerged during the interviews. They also agreed to the researcher's request that they could be contacted in case more clarification was needed.

4.5. Field Assistants

Research can be described as an isolating experience; this is especially true if the researcher is carrying out the fieldwork alone (Lewis *et al*. 2007). Field research in business makes heavy demands on the researcher, however, this burden of fieldwork could be shared if it is carried out by a team. The advantage of this is that data from a wide geographical area can be collected in a timely and cost-effective manner.

In the first research, the city of Benghazi was divided into five geographical areas. Two assistants known to the researcher who had previous research experience in the sector under investigation volunteered to assist in administrating the questionnaire. This enabled questionnaires to be distributed simultaneously in different areas to canvas as many as possible SMEs in a timely manner. This also helped the researcher, after playing a part in distributing the questionnaire, to shift focus to the supply side of the investigation in the thesis regarding banks' involvement with the SMEs sector.

Upon finishing the data collection phase, data analysis was another aspect where the researcher benefited from the knowledge and experiences of his assistants. Ideas were exchanged about the ideal way for codifying and preparing the data for analysis. One assistant provided an expert advice in relation to the use of Social Package for Social Science (SPSS) and the descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to use to analyse the data and interpret the findings. The two assistants were also involved in entering the variables from the questionnaire forms into the software.

5. Discussion

In the previous sections, the paper presented the two researchers' experiences of conducting SMEs/entrepreneurship research in the context of developing countries, including the research design and going in the field to collect the data necessary to answer their research questions. Drawing on the two fieldwork experiences in particular, in this section the paper highlights and reflects on some of the challenges that SME researchers are expected to encounter, and offers suggestions as possible solutions directed at improving future practices. These are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Expected challenges and practical guidance on doing SME fieldwork in developing countries

	Expected challenge	Practical guidance	Reflections/ Lessons
Pilot study	Who should be consulted / targeted? Sub-sample size.	Supervisors and fellow PhD students (pre-testing). A sub-sample of the study population, usually 10-30 (could be first few respondents for field testing). Face to face piloting.	Valuable feedback (e.g. redesigning, rewording, omitting "sensitive" questions). Testing research protocols (e.g. distributing and collecting methods). Hands-on training for field assistants.
Identifying SMEs	Multiple definitions in place. The lack of reliable statistics on SMEs.	Decide on and adopt the one/s that fit the research objectives. Labour force could be sufficient size proxy providing the study's objectives are not compromised.	Previous experience with this sector is highly helpful. Refine data from available sources (e.g. government websites) with the definitional criterion adopted.
Access to SMEs	Unreliable post services, limited use of IT among SMEs.	Personally administer the questionnaire (drop and collect). Networking and personal connections.	Personal interaction with respondents. Snowball sampling technique.
Participants' attitude	Scepticism, reluctance or disinterest regarding participating in the research.	Plan ahead the timing of fieldwork to suit the study sample. Informal more casual approach. Building rapport and trust.	Offer a debriefing on the research (who, why, what). Short and straightforward questionnaire. Avoid sensitive questions (e.g. capital invested or business turnover).
Field assistants	The sample is geographically widely spread.	Seek field assistants, preferably with local knowledge/previous experience, and work as a team.	Cover wide area within a timely and cost-effective manner. Familiarity with the study population. Assistants could help further with screening and coding of data.

Pilot testing is practically examining what has been designed up to this point. It should be looked at as an integral part of the questionnaire development. It is striking the number of problems that testing can identify even when maximum attention and care have been taken in all the preceding steps (Forza 2002).

Based on the authors' experiences, pilot testing of the questionnaire should go through two types of testing: pre-testing and field testing. Pre-testing takes place prior to stepping on the actual field. It is more like seeking "consultation" on the design of the questionnaire and its contents. For doctoral researchers, the first point of contact is usually their supervisors. Once the questionnaire is drafted from the relevant literature, it should be discussed in details with the supervision team. Supervisors who are experts in the field provide valuable feedback into the relevance of the questions to the issues the research is seeking to address.

When developing the questionnaire, great care should be exercised to adapt the questionnaire to the local business environment within which it will distributed (linguistically and otherwise). This is especially the case with native researchers from developing countries who plan on conducting research in their home countries. This is worth mentioning here as doctoral researchers might be tempted to use ready-to-use structured surveys that may be accessible online. This could be problematic as these surveys are initially designed for countries in a different stage of development, i.e. developed countries. For example, the use of the World Bank Group Entrepreneurship Survey (WBGES) would result in excluding SMEs operating in the informal sector which constitute a sizeable sector of the economy in developing countries, since the WBGES is only designed to account for registered businesses (formal sector) (Gough *et al.* 2014). In addition, the inclusion of professional categories in such surveys such as "employment, unemployment, workplace or workforce" could be problematic and highly inappropriate (Chambers 1995) and "technically illegal" to use in less developed contexts (Sommers 2010). As such, it is advised that other study colleagues from similar background (preferably from the same country) who might have already gone through similar experiences, not necessarily in the same field of SMEs/entrepreneurship, to be consulted especially regarding the terminologies used and on the structure of the questionnaire generally. Finally, ideally, consulting some industry experts should be considered if possible.

The second phase of pilot testing is field-testing. As the term suggests, it takes place on the actual field where researchers reach out a sub-sample of potential respondents. There is no standard for the size of the sub-sample but it is usually between 10-30 if the parent sample is 500 or less. In practical terms, referrals and snowball sampling is a good option to recruit participants for this phase. In this phase, face to face piloting, if possible, should be considered. By being present, researchers or assistants should be able to personally identify any difficulties or issues the respondents may face during the process. Cronbach's alpha could be calculated at this stage in order to obtain a rough estimate of the reliability of the questionnaire.

In this complex field of research, pilot studies help decide how best to conduct a large-scale research project before commencing the actual data collection process. After drafting the questionnaire, it is advisable to translate it into the local language/s, especially if it is deemed necessary to facilitate the target population's task of completing it. In practical terms, the first few respondents could be treated as a pilot, especially if it is possible to revisit them later with the amended survey questions. Changes following the pilot study could be in the wording of the questions and their order or the range of possible answers on multiple-choice questions. In addition, the efficiency of the research protocols (e.g. the different ways of distributing and collecting the questionnaires) could be tested during the pilot study. When planning to use assistants, this stage could also serve as a hands-on training for the assistants.

Regardless of the research context, developed or developing countries, SME researchers may face the challenge of multiple definitions being in place for what constitutes an SME. Clearly, where there is only one official definition for SMEs (like the Libyan case presented in this paper), researchers should not have this problem. However, where there are multiple definitions within the country (like in the Moroccan case), researchers should decide on the definition/s to adopt for the purpose of their research before going out in the field. For example, if the study's focus is on SMEs in manufacturing, the definition to adopt is that of manufacturing SMEs (in case there are separate definitions for SMEs in different business sectors). If the focus is on start-up manufacturers then the age of the business should be also taken into account.

After adopting the definition/s for SMEs for the purpose of the research, another challenge is the lack of reliable official data on the SME sector which means researchers would be without a list of potential participants when going in the field to start collecting data. This is more likely to be the case in developing countries as Kushnir (2010) maintains that obtaining relevant statistics and data pertaining to SMEs poses a challenge for researchers particularly in developing economies. From the two research experiences shared in this paper, two practical pieces of guidance could be suggested. First, the use of referral or snowball sampling. The technique of snowball sampling is endorsed by Curran and Blackburn (2001) when encountering problems of this kind, describing it as recruiting participants by "word of mouth". Accordingly, businesses that are known to fit the definition could be asked for help in either identifying other businesses matching the criteria or by passing copies of the questionnaire to them. In this aspect, field assistants who are familiar with this population through local knowledge or previous research experiences could be of great help. Second, in case some data sources are available but cannot be convincingly described as reliable or up-to-date, researchers could refine the data from these sources to arrive at a list that is as reliable and up-to-date as possible. A first step would be trying to generate an initial list of SMEs from one source (government website). Then, with the research-adopted definition/s in mind, cross checking the list with other government websites and industry directories. After deleting those businesses which do not fit the definition/s or are no longer in business, this step would result in generating a list of potential participants. This technique helped the researcher in the Moroccan study to generate a list of SMEs that were later targeted with the questionnaire.

One important implication concerning issues of defining SMEs for research purposes in developing countries is that researchers need to be aware of some contextual issues. For example, SME owners in developing countries may be reluctant to declare information that can be considered "sensitive" like their financial investments or business turnover. They may not give the right answer for different reasons or simply refuse to answer which, in turn, may lead to misleading results or a low response rate. As manifested in the two experiences in this paper, if the goal of identifying these businesses in terms of their size can be achieved by avoiding asking for "sensitive" information, it is advisable to do so as long as the objectives of the study would not be compromised.

An equally important issue when doing SME research is gaining access to this population. Even after potential participants have been identified, gaining access can present another challenge when researching SMEs, especially in developing countries. In such context, unreliable and poor postal services in addition to the low use of information technology (emails, fax) among SMEs means that by relying on such methods, researchers could be risking a low response rate which would be disappointing and daunting at this stage. One way to overcome this is to personally administer the questionnaire (drop and collect). Drawing on both experiences, the researchers agree with Ibeh and Brock (2004) who concluded that this method has a great impact on improving survey response rates in such contexts. Using this method, researchers or assistants would visit the business' premises and drop the questionnaire and come back later on an agreed date to collect it after the participant has had enough time to complete it. In addition to ensuring reaching as many as possible target respondents thereby maximising the response rate, this method allows personal interaction with respondents and explaining the purpose of the research and who is undertaking it. Without such interaction respondents may be less likely to take part in the study. Through this interaction, the researchers would also be able to apply the snowball sampling techniques by asking respondents for help in identifying other potential respondents. By adopting this method, it was possible for the fieldwork team in the Libyan research to distribute the intended number of questionnaires as per the sample size decided upon beforehand. For accessing SME populations in similar contexts, researchers can also considerably benefit from networking and personal connections that have been developed through previous research experience or family business as manifested in the two research experiences in this paper.

Once it has been decided to undertake a research in this area, researchers, especially first timers, may not be aware of the issue of access to SMEs. It is important to have an idea on how to access this population while planning and designing the research. The fact that both research experiences in this paper were city-based reflects the challenging task of accessing SMEs for research purposes. In the absence of reliable and up-to-date data on SMEs, conducting a wider scope research (e.g. nationwide research) would be extremely challenging, especially when time and resources are limited. This is very true in case of PhD students. Also, it should be mentioned that networking, personal connections, and previous experience with researching the SME sector would help a great deal in facilitating the task of access to potential participants.

When it comes to the attitude towards participation in academic research, building rapport and trust is extremely important. This is especially true in developing countries where, generally speaking, there is less knowledge and more cynicism about the nature and benefits of academic research. To gain this trust, the authors, drawing on their own experiences, recommend considering an informal casual approach. This would involve dressing casually, speaking simple language, avoid using any formal letters or forms unless it is felt necessary. In parallel, a number of steps could be taken: promise anonymity and confidentiality in the processing and publication of data (e.g. no names or addresses of respondents should appear in publications); explain that participation is completely voluntary; offer a debriefing on the research (who is doing it, for what purpose and why it is important). This would be more practical if the questionnaire is personally administered through drop and collect that allows personal interaction with participants. Moreover, leave a name and contact number in case participants have any concerns or they wish to withdraw. Also offer a copy of the results upon completion in case some respondents expressed their interest.

Related to the participants' attitude with regard to the design of the questionnaire itself, some vital elements should be taken into consideration. First of all, it should contain short and straightforward questions. For example, use less open-ended questions and more close-ended questions, use simple language and avoid complex and ambiguous terminologies. In addition, if needed, researchers should consider preparing the questionnaire in more than one language. For example, in the Moroccan research considering the nature of the business environment in Tangier, the researcher felt the need to provide respondents with two versions of the questionnaire, one in Arabic (the official language) and one in French (the business language), so they could choose according to their preferences.

Another key aspect that could help with potential participants' attitude towards participation is the timing of the fieldwork. For example, in the Libyan research, when planning for the fieldwork, the researcher had it planned in advance to finish the process before the arrival of the month of Ramadan (the fasting month in Muslim countries) when people tend to spend more time observing their religious obligations and social occasions and consequently work less hours. The process started early May and was nearly completed when Ramadan started in early August that year (2013). Some questionnaires had to be collected after Ramadan. Another example demonstrating the importance of planning the timings of the fieldwork comes from the Moroccan research. The low response from the online questionnaire was partly attributed to the fact that it took place during January, a month in which businesses undertake their inventory audits. Thus, targeted participants may not have had time to fill in the questionnaires. In addition, for the qualitative part of the investigation (initially planned to take place from September to November 2011), the researcher found it very difficult to get hold of SMEs' owner-managers during September since the majority were still on holiday.

When approaching SMEs and inviting them for research participation, it is important to build up rapport and trust. This can be achieved by offering an explanation of who is doing the research, what it is about and why it is being conducted, as well as its relevance to their businesses. In the two research cases, an informal, more casual approach involving face to face interaction through dropping and collecting of questionnaires was vital to gain this trust. This is particularly important when in the field, where researchers are essentially imposing upon the time and life of other individuals in order to obtain the desired information for their research. This is also applicable to qualitative research. One example from the Moroccan study that reflected this was that five interviews took place in a coffee shop and one while driving a car.

Researchers often spend considerable amounts of time in the field collecting data. This is more challenging when researching SMEs, especially when drop and collect is the technique adopted to accomplish this task. This is because SMEs are typically geographically widespread. The use of field assistants, especially those with local knowledge and appropriate skills, could prove to be a wise decision. In the Libyan research, the inclusion of two field assistants helped a great deal in facilitating the task of data collection from a large-city-wide sample within the timeframe assigned for the task in a cost-effective manner. This contributed towards achieving a very satisfactory response rate that otherwise would not have been achievable, had the researcher carried out this task alone. Both assistants having a background in academia in combination with one's familiarity with the study population due to prior research experience, meant that no more training was required than what was provided during the pilot study. Assistants could further assist in screening and coding of the data as well as data entry which was also the case in the Libyan experience.

Field studies are expensive and can be time-consuming, especially if the target population is geographically widely dispersed, which is usually the case with SMEs. In the context of developing countries, if the use of technology is not deemed a viable option to reach out to the study population, then researchers will have no alternative but to carry out the field work in person in order to hand out questionnaires or conduct interviews. In such case, it might be very helpful to seek assistants and work as a team. Study colleagues with local knowledge who have an interest in and a good knowledge of the research topic, would be a sensible option.

Finally, fieldwork is an adventure that is not easy and straightforward. It is challenging and can be frustrating. This necessitates researchers to prepare and take good care of the design and execution of their fieldwork studies to maximise academic usefulness and to help ensure rewarding fieldwork. Once in the field, regular breaks are advisable especially when the researchers or the assistants feel it is difficult to keep going. The team can use this time to spend time with families and socialise with friends. This can help "recharge the batteries" and prepare the team to encounter any issues when resuming the fieldwork. During these breaks researchers and assistants can also share and reflect on their experiences during this process and use them as an input into the process to maximise the output of the data collection. The sharing of the experiences in terms of the joy and happy moments of success, and the mistakes that have been made as well as the frustrations through the different stages of conducting the fieldwork, is needed to gain insights into the whole experience rather than just into the object or phenomenon under investigation (Michailova 2004).

6. Conclusion

Research on SMEs and entrepreneurship has grown in recent years. However, sharing experiences of doing the research does not compare to sharing the findings. This is especially the case in the context of developing countries. As such, this paper drew on the experiences of two PhD students whose research projects in this field had taken place in two developing countries, namely Libya and Morocco. The aim of this paper was to bring together these experiences to offer a practical guidance and give tips for first-time researchers, in particular PhD candidates, who contemplate undertaking the challenge of researching this field in the developing countries' context. By doing so, the paper contributes towards filling an important gap in the SMEs/entrepreneurship research literature in developing countries.

In particular, this paper has highlighted issues and challenges related to five aspects of doing fieldwork in SME research with special reference to the developing countries' context, namely: pilot testing, identifying SMEs, gaining access to SMEs, participants' attitude towards taking part in the research, and working with assistants. Reflecting on the authors' experiences, some tips and practical guidances are suggested to address these challenges. In this respect, before getting in the field, researchers should decide what constitutes an SME for the purpose of their investigation as in reality many legal and operational definitions might be in place. Once in the field, the drop and collect method involving direct interaction with participants in an informal and casual manner, has proven potential to return high response rates. Working with knowledgeable, well-trained field assistants as a team would mean reaching out to more participants increasing the likelihood of a high rate of response.

The authors concede that whichever methodological approach is employed, it will be open to criticism and bias. Storytelling research can be criticised for its subjectivity in terms of the researchers imposing their own thinking on the process. However, this approach is the best suited for the paper's context (the research experiences of two doctorate students). To this point, the content of the paper is subjective and it reflects the specific contexts of the two projects (SMEs in Libya and in Morocco).

It is hoped that these experiences will serve as an illustration of challenges and issues that SME researchers need to be aware of and prepared for before embarking on their research in such contexts. In particular, issues and considerations in the design and the data collection process should be of particular importance and interest to PhD students whose research projects involve conducting a fieldwork study in developing countries. Although the authors believe that every country's context is unique, there are still many common similarities. Taking into account the time and financial constraints that characterize doctoral research is imperative for a rewarding fieldwork experience. In this regard, we believe the tips and practical guidances presented in this paper may prove useful to future researchers.

The research experiences described in this paper are of native researchers in the contexts of their own countries; so for other (non-native) researchers who might be planning to undertake research in developing countries that involve a fieldwork study, other considerations e.g. cultural, religious, political, and language barriers should be taken into account. Understandably, such issues were not discussed in this paper. Therefore, there is a need to broaden the research in this area to include different experiences that could provide different or additional insights. As such, “foreign” or “outsider” researchers are encouraged to share their experiences of doing SME research in developing countries to illuminate further the wider picture of doing research in this field in such contexts. This is also applicable to “local” researchers who have used different theoretical approaches or different research methods in order to contribute towards enlightening future researchers in their own prospective SME research endeavours.

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