

Power Outage Perils: Assessing the Impact of Load-Shedding on SMEs in Enoch Mgijima Local Municipality, South Africa

Konwaba Klishi

Walter Sisulu University, Komani, South Africa

kklish@wsu.ac.za

Abstract: This qualitative case study delves into the profound impact of load-shedding, the deliberate and temporary interruption of electricity supply, on small and medium (SMEs) in the Enoch Mgijima Local Municipality (EMLM) of South Africa. The study, conducted within an interpretive research paradigm and a qualitative methodology, provides a nuanced understanding of how institutional forces shape SMEs' behavior, decision-making, and overall functioning in the face of energy disruptions. The persistent power cuts due to load-shedding have had a substantial toll on the survival of SMEs in the EMLM, with businesses across diverse sectors, including hospitality, beauty, manufacturing, retail, and services, struggling to maintain operations. The study brings to light the multifaceted challenges SMEs face, such as disruptions to daily activities, equipment damage, and significant financial losses. It also presents a concerning trend of layoffs by SMEs in the region, contradicting the National Development Plan's (NDP) employment creation goals. The findings provide valuable insight for policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders, underlining the urgent need for collaborative efforts to develop tailored programs, promote alternative energy sources, and advocate for policies that prioritize the energy needs of SMEs. The study acknowledges limitations related to geographical specificity, temporary constraints, and data source reliance and recommends further research to extend the geographical scope, conduct longitudinal analyses, and incorporate diverse data collection methods. By addressing these limitations, further studies can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the broader challenges and potential solutions faced by SMEs amid energy-related crises.

Keywords: Loadshedding, Small and micro enterprises, Business operations, Sustainability, Renewable energy

1. Introduction

Over the past two years, the Enoch Mgijima Local Municipality (EMLM) has found itself under the scrutiny and intervention of the national and Eastern Cape Provincial government, prompted by a series of challenges plaguing its operations. As highlighted by the South African Parliament (2024), these challenges include deficiencies in record-keeping and a lack of robust systems to identify impoverished individuals accurately. Consequently, the municipality grapples with inadvertent benefit distribution to those ineligible, directly impacting its financial well-being.

Adding to the municipality's financial woes is a considerable debt owed to Eskom, as highlighted by the South African Parliament (2024). According to the South African Government News Agency (2024), EMLM bears the weight of a prolonged history of indebtedness, protracted legal battles, and persistent power interruptions. The aging and dilapidated electric infrastructure within the municipality stands out as a major contributor to these ongoing power disruptions (ibid), affecting communities across the board. The resulting struggle to maintain a consistent energy supply has created a ripple effect, hampering the business sector's ability to operate seamlessly and, in turn, impeding local economic development (Tokota, 2023).

Recognising the paramount role of energy in driving economic activities, as emphasised by Tembo et al. (2015), it becomes evident that a steady and adequate energy supply is crucial for any nation's economic development. This point is taken further by Bwalya (2022) who states that most economically productive activities rely heavily on a consistent energy supply. The International Energy Agency (IEA) reported in 2010 that over 20% of the global population, approximately 1.4 billion people, faced limited access to electricity, emphasising the worldwide significance of reliable energy access (IEA, 2010).

While global energy demands surge with increasing population, industrialisation, and economic activities, meeting these needs becomes a complex challenge. According to the World Bank (2017), power utility providers, often government-owned entities in emerging nations, struggle to expand their generation and supply capabilities at a pace matching the soaring energy demands. The obstacles identified by the World Bank (2017) include inadequate generation capacity, transmission and distribution infrastructure, low tariffs, high costs of supplying remote areas, and the financial instability of utility providers.

In the South African context, Eskom's financial concerns coincide with a growing crisis of continued power cuts, posing a substantial threat to the business sector. The repercussions of load shedding are particularly crippling for Small Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), which play a pivotal role in sustaining economic development and fostering progress in developing nations (World Bank, 2020). Mbomvu et al. (2022) emphasise the

socioeconomic importance of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to the South African economy, asserting that their significance cannot be overstated. As asserted by (Maziriri and Chivandi, 2020; Charamba and Ladzini, 2021) these enterprises are increasingly being recognised as catalysts for economic growth, innovation, job creation, and overall development.

The Eastern Cape Socioeconomic Consultative Council (2021) sheds light on the pivotal role played by SMEs in the economy. The promotion and economic contributions of SMEs are rationalised based on three main reasons: serving as incubators for entrepreneurship development, innovation, and risk-taking behaviour; providing viable options for sustainable income in agricultural processing industries; and playing a crucial role in transitioning to agro-led industrial economies (Seda, 2019). Furthermore, SMEs contribute significantly to the development of societal productive capacity, absorbing economic resources at all levels and fostering interconnected, resilient economic systems for both small and large businesses.

2. Problem Statement

Since 2008, Eskom, South Africa's primary energy provider, has implemented power cuts, known as load shedding, attributed to issues such as inadequate and deteriorating infrastructure (Carlsson & Martinson, 2016; Kusakana, 2019; Winkler et al., 2020). This ongoing challenge has far-reaching consequences, extending beyond the realm of household activities to significantly impact business enterprises (Goldberg, 2015). Established businesses often manage these disruptions by resorting to alternative energy sources such as solar panels and wind turbines (Sgqolana, 2023). In contrast, emerging enterprises, particularly SMEs, grapple to secure alternative energy solutions.

An insightful perspective from Viljoen and Struweg (2016) reveals that a staggering 97% of businesses in South Africa are actively operating in the SMME category. These enterprises collectively contribute to over 60% of the national labour force, constituting approximately 45% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Chumucheka, 2013; Amoros & Moska, 2016; Borat et al., 2018). Thus, as mentioned above, SMEs, predominantly categorized as emerging businesses, hold a pivotal position in the South African economy and are acknowledged as critical drivers of economic growth (Bruwer, 2020). According to Ndiaye (2018) most economies worldwide, especially those in developing countries, depend heavily on SMEs. Hence these business enterprises are significant drivers of economic development. Bizcash (2023) agrees that SMEs are making a great contribution to economic growth as they contribute to economic diversity by bringing a diverse range of goods and services to the market. As a result of this diversification, the economy is less dependent on a small number of major companies and is, hence, more shock resistant.

In the context of the EMLM, the effects of load shedding are negatively affecting SMEs. These business enterprises are under massive strain. This strain affects SMEs in sectors such as hospitality, manufacturing, the beauty industry, construction, agriculture, and many more (Businesses, 2023; Sgqolani, 2023; Emalahleni et al., 2023). The Majority of SMEs in this area are micro and small (Jolingana, 2014). Therefore, they struggle to make an annual turnover of more than R150 000 (Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council, 2021). Many of the SMEs purchase generators for the sake of continuing business. But that also costs them, as generators operate with petrol, so their operations have an added fuel expense.

Studies on SMEs exist. However, studies on the impact of load shedding on SMEs in the EMLM are scarce. This study aims to bridge the existing gap by examining the multifaceted effects of load shedding on the daily operations, financial health, and sustainability of SMEs in the EMLM. By shedding light on these intricacies, the research seeks to propose effective strategies and interventions to enhance the resilience and endurance of SMEs, ensuring their continued role as pillars of economic vitality within the local community.

3. Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to comprehensively assess the socio-economic impact of load shedding on SMEs within the Enoch Mgijima Local Municipality, South Africa, with the aim of identifying challenges faced by SMEs during power outages and proposing viable solutions to mitigate their adverse effects on business operations.

4. Research Question

This study aims to unravel the intricate dynamics surrounding the effects of load shedding on SMEs within the Enoch Mgijima Local Municipality, South Africa. The study specifically answers the following question:

- How does load-shedding impact these enterprises' daily operations?

The research seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by SMEs in this specific geographic context. Through this, the study endeavors to contribute valuable insights to inform targeted interventions and strategies. By bridging this knowledge gap, the research aims to empower policymakers, local authorities, and business stakeholders in the EMLM to foster an environment that supports the resilience and growth of SMEs, ultimately promoting economic stability within the municipality.

5. Theoretical Framework

The study on the effects of load shedding on EMLM can be anchored within the Institutional Theory framework. Rooted in sociology and organizational studies, this theory provides a lens through which to understand how external institutional pressures influence the behavior and responses of organizations. In the context of this study, the institutional environment is shaped by governmental policies, regulations, and socioeconomic structures that directly impact the operations of SMEs during load shedding. Drawing on the works of institutional theorists such as Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the study explores how the institutional environment, represented by government interventions and energy policies, influences the adaptive strategies and resilience mechanisms adopted by SMEs in response to load-shedding.

Within the Institutional Theory framework, the study investigates the isomorphic pressures that lead SMEs to mimic certain practices and conform to institutional norms during energy disruptions. Additionally, it delves into the role of institutional entrepreneurs, such as local business associations or government agencies, in shaping the responses and strategies adopted by SMEs to navigate the challenges posed by load-shedding. By adopting this theoretical lens, the study contributes to nuanced insights into how institutional forces shape SMEs' behavior, decision-making, and overall functioning in the face of energy disruptions, offering a comprehensive understanding of the socioeconomic context within which these enterprises operate.

6. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to comprehensively report on the impact of load shedding on SMEs in the EMLM. Qualitative research methodology in a social context offers a comprehensive view of social processes and human behavior. It also offers a means of learning about things like people's experiences, histories, and cultures (Bange et al., 2018). In the context of social research, qualitative research uses numerous techniques that include observations, focused groups, surveys, interviews, and archival research (ibid). In this study this methodology is justified by its suitability to assist in analysing the specific and current circumstances surrounding SME operation.

Embedded within an interpretivist research paradigm, this study explores the in-depth understanding and experiences of SMEs in EMLM. The foundation of interpretive research as a paradigm is on the idea that human experiences and the social context determine social reality (Rehman and Alaharti, 2016; Shah et al., 2013).

Utilising a case study design, this research aims to construct a thorough understanding of how load shedding impacts SMEs in the ELMM. Kuruppuge et al., (2020) state that researchers can assure methodological rigor in their studies and produce solid and informative findings by utilizing qualitative case study methodologies within an interpretivist paradigm.

This paper adopts an intrinsic case study design, as recommended by Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2014), to provide a detailed description of the situation. This approach ensures that the study does not merely serve insights but offers a thorough exploration of the phenomenon. By conducting an intrinsic case study, the researcher was able to acquire a nuanced and detailed understanding of the effects of load shedding on SMEs in the EMLM.

6.1 Population and Sample/Study Group/Participants

This study used a purposeful sampling technique to select the document used to generate data. The sample consisted of five newspapers, of which two were printed, and three were online. One newspaper focuses on the entire Eastern Cape Province, while the other three focus on the Chris Hani District, where the EMLM is situated. This type of purposeful sampling also has attributes of convenience sampling. It is convenient in the sense that the documents are easily accessible and reasonable to acquire.

6.2 Data Collection Tools/Instruments

The data generation tools that were used in this study were achieving and document analyses and observation. Archives that were used to generate data are copies of the local newspapers. While document analysis was

conducted on four online newspapers. In total, five sources were used to generate data. The five sources are the size of the sample for this study. Observations were also conducted for the purpose of collecting data. Observations were conducted at the 2024 Emalahleni Local Municipality Investment Summit; further observations were conducted during the Chris Hani SME forum. Observations allowed me to capture elements of the effects of load-shedding that were not reflected in the online and printed newspapers. Using more than one method of generating data is a form of triangulation. The researcher was able to validate the credibility of the data collected by means of triangulation. Bowen (2009) confirms that triangulation may assist the researcher in providing reliable data while minimizing the possibility of biases in the research.

7. Data Analysis and Ethical Consideration

The collected data underwent a meticulous examination and interpretation process employing content analysis techniques. The data was systematically analysed based on the year and dates of publication of the respective sources. This methodological approach proved effective in mitigating potential risks associated with labelling and coding errors. As Wolfe (1992) emphasised, a systematic and clear organisation of data significantly reduces the likelihood of inaccurate coding and labelling.

Notably, no explicit consent was required to conduct this research; however, the outcomes, feedback, and findings derived from the study will be made readily accessible online. Additionally, comprehensive presentations will be delivered SME forums within both the Chris Hani and Enoch Mgijima Local Municipalities. This proactive dissemination strategy ensures that the insights garnered from the research are not only accessible to a wider audience but are also tailored to benefit and engage the specific communities and stakeholders relevant to the study.

8. Presentation Documentary Data

This section delves into a comprehensive examination of data sourced from various documents, shedding light on the profound implications of power supply challenges, particularly the prevalent issue of load shedding, on Small Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa. The significance of this matter is indicated by its emergence as a leading cause of failure for SMEs in recent years (Jolingana, 2014). BusinessTech (2023) and Daily Dispatch (2023) provide corroborating insights, portraying a landscape where load shedding is actively undermining businesses throughout South Africa, affecting SMEs across diverse sectors.

Zooming in on the specific impact within the EMLM, Sgqolani (2023) and The Representative (2020) elucidate the severity of the crisis, detailing how SMEs in this geographical area are grappling with the relentless disruptions caused by ongoing power outages. Komani, a town nestled within the, EMLM emerges as a focal point of concern, as reported by Sgqolani (2023). Small businesses in Komani are navigating the harsh realities of load shedding, struggling to sustain their operations amidst the town's recurrent and pervasive power failures.

In the subsequent sections, we extract and analyse data from these documented sources, providing an in-depth exploration of the challenges specific business enterprises face within the EMLM. These narratives serve as poignant illustrations of the broader impact of load shedding on SMEs, highlighting the urgency for a nuanced understanding and targeted interventions to fortify the resilience of these enterprises in the face of ongoing power supply challenges. The following and the documentary statements:

- Anthony Marriot owns and runs a cleaning detergent business. The business is called Superclean Detergents. Anthony relays that the business is operating in tough situations, and it is difficult to increase prices because of competition. (Document from Sgqolani, 2023). Increasing prices is not an option, as it could drive the customers to the competition, adds Anthony (ibid).
- Darryl Westran, owner of The Repair Centre, said his appliance repair business is heavily reliant on electricity (Document from Schriebers, 2023).
- Rouche House in Komani has been without electricity for two weeks. This is killing the hospitality industry (ibid).
- Seamstresses mention that they have been changing business premises due to power outages. This move had to be made to meet targets and finish orders on time (Document from The Representative, 2020).
- All natural Poultry farms, which are situated at the borders of Enoch Mgijima and Emalahleni Municipalities, are struggling to meet consumer demands due to power shortages. This business has a backup generator, but it still struggles to keep the power due to low capacity of the generator

(Document from Emalahleni Local Municipality, 2023). Many times, rotten meat must be disposed of in this business enterprise. "Loadshedding is destroying the poultry business (Solundwana, 2023).

9. Discussions

It was found that the persistent power cuts due to load shedding in the EMLM have taken a substantial toll on the survival of SMEs in the region (Sgqolani, 2023; The Representative, 2020). This struggle extends across diverse sectors, encompassing the hospitality, beauty, manufacturing, retail, and service industries (Sgqolani, 2023; Chris Hani District Municipality, 2018). The multifaceted impact of load shedding on SMEs becomes apparent, showcasing businesses' widespread challenges in EMLM.

The article aligns its findings with the Institutional Theory framework by explaining how institutional forces shape SMEs' behavior, decisions, and overall functioning in the face of energy disruptions caused by load shedding. Through the lens of Institutional theory, the article provides nuanced insights into the socioeconomic context within which SMEs operate in the Emalahleni Local Municipality.

The study reveals that while some SMEs can afford to invest in generators as a means of power substitution, maintaining these substitutes proves to be a burdensome additional expense to their operations. Moreover, the escalating petrol prices further exacerbate the financial strain on these enterprises (Sgqolani, 2023). Consequently, SMEs in EMLM are compelled to lay off employees, presenting a concerning trend that directly contradicts the National Development Plan's (NDP) ambitious projection of creating 11 million new jobs in South Africa by 2030, with SMEs expected to contribute 60-80% to this target (Seda, 2019). This study, challenges the optimism of the NDP, revealing a stark contrast between its employment creation goals and the current reality in EMLM. The skepticism arises from the observed layoffs by SMEs in the region due to the detrimental effects of load-shedding, a trend that is not isolated and potentially indicative of broader challenges SMEs nationwide face (Sgqolani, 2023). Supporting this perspective, (Bushe, 2019) states that in South Africa, more than 70% of SMEs fail within the first five to seven years of operation, resulting in job and income loss, poverty, social ills, and unemployment.

The challenges contributing to the failures of SMEs are multifaceted, as identified in the findings. These challenges encompass a lack of business drive, limited access to markets, insufficient financial and non-financial support, and non-compliance issues, with the latter posing a considerable threat to the sustainability of these enterprises (Lo Ning, 2023). Thus, the discussion of findings not only sheds light on the direct impact of load shedding on SMEs in EMLM but also delves into the broader challenges that these enterprises grapple with, suggesting a need for comprehensive and targeted interventions to bolster their resilience and viability in the face of such adversity.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study *Power Outage Perils: Assessing the Impact of load shedding on SMEs in ENMLM*, South Africa, highlights the profound and far-reaching consequences of power outages on the daily operations, financial health, and sustainability of these businesses. The findings emphasize that load-shedding is a significant challenge for SMEs in the region, particularly in sectors such as hospitality, manufacturing, and agriculture. The persistent power cuts have led to a ripple effect, hampering the ability of these enterprises to operate seamlessly and ultimately impeding local economic development. The study underscores SMEs' critical role in the South African economy, contributing significantly to the national labor force and GDP. However, their resilience is being severely tested by the ongoing power disruptions, which are causing significant financial strain and impacting their ability to maintain a consistent energy supply.

11. Recommendations

The research recommends that policymakers and local authorities in the EMLM develop targets and interventions to support the resilience and growth of SMEs. This includes enhancing the institutional environment by improving energy infrastructure and providing alternative energy solutions. Additionally, fostering a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship through initiatives such as training and mentorship programs can help SMEs adapt to the challenges posed by load-shedding. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to address the impact of load shedding in the EMLM. By understanding the intricacies of this issue and implementing effective strategies policymakers can help ensure the continued vitality of these businesses and promote economic stability within the local community.

12. Limitations and Further Studies

While this study offers valuable insights into the effects of load shedding SMEs in the EMLM, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that may have influenced the outcomes:

- **Geographical Specificity:** The study focused exclusively on EMLM which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions. Different economic, infrastructural, or regulatory contexts in other areas could yield varied impacts of load shedding on SMEs.
- **Temporary Constraints:** The study's scope was constrained by the available data, primarily derived from recent years. A longitudinal analysis would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how SMEs adapt to load shedding over an extended period.
- **Data Source Reliance:** The study heavily relies on documentary sources, potentially leading to a bias based on the perspectives presented in these documents. A more diverse data collection approach, incorporating interviews or surveys with SME owners and stakeholders, could offer a more holistic understanding.

13. Recommendations for Further Studies

Comparative Regional Analyses: Future studies could extend the geographical scope by comparing the effects of load shedding on SMEs in various municipalities or provinces. This approach would enhance the understanding of how regional disparities influence SME resilience to power supply challenges.

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Conducting longitudinal studies would enable a more nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics between load shedding and SMEs over an extended timeframe. This approach could capture trends, adaptations, and the long-term impact on business sustainability.
- **Sector-Specific Investigations:** Delving deeper into specific sectors affected by load shedding, such as manufacturing, hospitality, or retail, could uncover sector-specific challenges and opportunities for resilience. This targeted approach would facilitate tailored interventions and policy recommendations.
- **Policy Evaluation:** Assessing the effectiveness of existing policies and support programmes to assist SMEs during power supply challenges could be a valuable avenue for further research. This evaluation could inform policymakers about the efficacy of current interventions and areas for improvement.

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