

Mapping the Challenges and Aspirations of MSMEs in Kerala for Building Growth Strategies

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Abstract

The Central Government has the intent of taking India on a fast track to attain Atma Nirbhar status and self-reliance. The key driver of this revolution is going to be Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Over the years successive governments have rolled out many schemes, both monetary and non-monetary to small-scale units. Although the Indian government stopped with its protectionist policies they have continued with additional support to the MSMEs. For attaining the goal of self-sufficiency it is imperative that the needs of MSMEs are understood, as also the problems they face, the support required and the key to their success. A qualitative study was conducted amongst the MSMEs in the district of Ernakulam and it looked at the challenges faced by the MSMEs, their aspirations and possible growth strategies. A total of 164 fit responses were analysed using the IBM Text Modeller for text analysis. MSMEs face generic challenges like high cost of labour, shortage of manpower, lack of financing and access to technology. However, the silver line lies where the businesses can be sustainable with proper strategies like digital marketing, clustering and government financial support. Although the study was done towards the end of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic the results are applicable in general. The strategies for success for these MSMEs that have evolved out of the study can in all probability be replicated across the country for other MSMEs also.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, MSMEs, MSME Challenges, Self-Sufficiency, Sustainability, Text Analytics

Introduction

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are the mainstay of any country. People should migrate from

agriculture to industry and then to the service sector for a nation's growth and development to be sustainable and MSMEs can play a vital part in this migration and development (Ramarao, 2012). MSMEs provide an equitable distribution of wealth, jobs and opportunities with enterprises being established in remote and underdeveloped areas of the nation. With the Indian Government focusing on an Atma Nirbhar Bharat, the MSMEs have gained more importance. Before we go into details of the study, the challenges faced by them and their expectations, let us look at what we mean by MSMEs.

MSMEs—Definition

The MSMEs have been defined in various manners in different countries. The definition of MSMEs differs not only from country to country but keeps changing even within a country. The criterion for defining enterprises which were enumerated in the MSME Development Act which came into act in 2006 was revised as recently as on 13th May 2020 when the Atma Nirbhar Bharat package was announced.

As per this pronouncement, the definition of MSME in both manufacturing and services sectors are as follows: Micro enterprises, up to Rs. 1 Crore of investment and Rs. 5 Crore of turnover. Small units Rs. 1 to Rs. 10 Crore of investment and Rs. 5 to Rs. 50 Crore of turnover. Similarly, the upper ceiling of medium units was placed to Rs. 20 Crore of investment and Rs. 100 Crore of turnover. The Government of India on 01.06.2020 decided on a further upward revision in the definition of medium enterprises, to Rs. 50 Crore of investment and Rs. 250 Crore of turnover (Gazette, 2020).

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MSME in Figures

The number of MSMEs in general has grown exponentially over the years. Although the Indian Government in the 1990s removed many of the protectionist laws aimed at helping the MSMEs, the promotional schemes that they have implemented in its stead have proved to be fairly effective.

According to the National Sample Survey of MSME (Annual Report, 2018-19) 73rd round, conducted by the National Sample Survey Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation through the period 2015–16, there were a total of 633.88 lakh non-agriculture MSMEs in India involved in different types of economic activities. As per the report Government of India (Annual Report, 2021-22), a total number of 65,23,067 were classified, consisting of 21,13,233 enterprises under the manufacturing category and 44,09,834 under the service category registered. According to the same report, the Top 5 industrial sectors registered are Food Products, Textiles, Apparel, Construction Activities and Construction of Buildings.

Out of the total MSMEs, 324.88 lakh MSMEs (51.25%) were in rural areas and 309 lakh MSMEs (48.75%) were operating in urban areas. The micro sector with approximately 630.52 lakh enterprises accounts for more than 99% of the total estimated number of MSMEs. The small sector with 3.31 lakh and the medium sector with 0.05 lakh estimated MSMEs accounts for 0.52% and 0.01% of total estimated MSMEs, respectively. Micro enterprises cover activities like manufacturing, retailing, servicing, construction, infrastructure, financing etc.

Issues and Obstacles for MSMEs

MSMEs across the world are facing similar problems. Ocloo et al. (2014) organised a study on the obstacles faced by MSMEs in Ghana. They found that the increased degree of competition, changing technology and inadequate infrastructure were the top three difficulties mentioned as affecting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Accra. This is followed by insufficient market expertise, followed by unfavourable policies and regulations enacted by the government in that order. As per Karadag Hande (2015), the MSMEs in Turkey are facing many obstacles, such as financial resource problems, a lack of qualified human resources and low levels of technology.

In a study conducted by Fridah Muriungi Mwobobia (2012) in Kenya, she found that women entrepreneurs

face a lot of discrimination. Among other things were inadequate access to finance, problems dealing with city councils and lack of education. Sara Omar et al (2009) dealt with the HR problems facing SMEs in Malaysia. They found that HRD activities are critical for SMEs for long-term existence. These include career planning, self-directed learning, training and development and employee inspiration. Small businesses are advised to implement plans to improve their knowledge, expertise and skills.

Challenges Faced by Indian MSMEs

According to MSME Annual Report 2021–22, in spite of Government spending on various schemes (Annexure-1), it has not been speculated to the beneficiaries because of their lack of awareness. A number of articles have been published on the main challenges faced by the MSME sector in India.

According to Mathai (2015), the issues SMEs in India confront include a shortage of loan facilities available from banks and other non-banking financial organisations, infrastructure problems, a lack of raw materials, inadequate staff training, a shortage of administrative and technical abilities and rivalry from big businesses. Due to these significant obstacles, they are unable to compete with large a business, which slows down their ability to generate profits and stunts the company's expansion.

In a study by Mukherjee (2018), it was found that the difficulties SMEs in India face include excessive loan costs, the inability to get raw materials at reasonable prices, inadequate water, power and road infrastructure and a scarcity of trained labour for production, marketing and service. MSMEs' capacity to compete in international markets is hampered by a lack of access to and outlay in technology. If additional obstacles like a dearth of digital access, a lack of resources or expertise to update product quality, an inability to bring down export prices, a higher per unit production cost, informational bottlenecks and an inadequate marketing and advertising strategy exist, MSMEs will not be able to fully benefit from globalisation.

As per Pachouri and Sharma (2016), the implementation and development of any innovation need skilled labour. Innovative SMEs are typically unable to hire highly skilled workers because of budgetary restrictions and inadequate infrastructure. Included in this is internal management. Due to paucity of direction, increasing inefficiencies and a lack of a market focus, among other things, the absence of proper internal management can negatively affect the firm's ability to innovate as well

as its overall success. The circumstance calls for more focused capacity-building initiatives that concentrate on an organisation's internal management and its relation to innovation. A mechanism that allows SMEs to access a pool of qualified individuals for carrying out specialised work while addressing concerns about trade secrets also appears to be necessary.

Patil and Chaudhari (2014) found that small-scale industry issues include those with labour, organised marketing, organised credit, insufficient infrastructure, competition, bad planning, managerial abilities, transportation, insufficient power, inadequate warehousing, lack of information, etc.

According to Tripathi et al. (2016), there are primarily six difficulties, including the difficulty of obtaining financing and credit instruments, complex regulatory laws for starting a business, a lack of modern and inexpensive technology, a lack of basic infrastructure amenities, a lack of specialised marketing platforms as well as distribution networks, rigid labour laws and a lack of readily available skilled labour.

In a study on MSMEs, Bhoganandam et al. (2017) found that problems affecting SMEs are caused by both internal and external sources. Production, marketing, financial, infrastructural and human resource development are only a few examples of internal problems. Lack of electricity, shortage of resources, a lack of affordable raw materials, raw materials of bad quality, inadequate machinery, etc. are some of the production obstacles. Lack of promotional tactics, lack of distribution channels that are coordinated, lack of networking opportunities, lack of delivery deadlines, etc. are all examples of marketing obstacles. Financial difficulties include a lack of bank credit, ignorance of programmes and services, sluggish bank processes; a lack of working capital, etc. deficiency in training, insufficient employee motivation, a shortage of skilled workers, a lack of practical and managerial training, incorrect hiring practises, etc. are all issues with human resources development. Infrastructure challenges include lack of water facilities, insufficient storage facilities, inadequate industrial facilities, a dearth of drainage facilities etc.

Summarising the findings of these studies include, lack of accessibility of adequate, cost-effective and well-timed credit and equity capital; collateral requirements; obtaining of raw material at an economical cost; problems of storage, dearth of accessibility to international markets; insufficient infrastructure amenities, including water,

power and roads, poor technology levels and lack of access to up-to-date equipment; absence of managerial capabilities and skilled labour and hence low productivity for manufacturing, services, marketing, etc. Moreover, there are many labour rules and the processes for complying with them are cumbersome.

Strategic Planning and Growth

To achieve sustainable growth the aspect of strategic planning is very important for MSMEs. It will enable them to establish, in an all-inclusive way, the necessary steps to accomplish their objectives. As per David (2011), since the beginning of organisations, the strategic direction process has considerably increased business growth and profitability, even when it is carried out informally or by the owner or businessman. Hodge, Anthony and Gales (2002), emphasise that methods aimed at boosting production and sales, breaking into new markets, mergers, acquisitions and other building techniques can all be used to achieve growth.

Jatmiko et al. (2012) conducted a study to map the best ways for MSMEs to gain a lasting competitive advantage. The study concluded that MSMEs must focus on seven factors to increase their level of business competitiveness. The factors were business strategy, human resources, IT, advertising, products, collaboration and CSR.

A FICCI (2015) report looks at the different risk management mechanisms for MSMEs to ensure sustainability. Besides the report suggest that there should be cooperation and mutual supply of technology among the MSMEs, conduct training and development programmes, ensure sufficient availability of credit and proper research and development.

Ali and Husain (2014) tried to come up with solutions to the problems faced by MSMEs in India. Based on their study they suggested that the government should come out with a panel of experts who would give advice and assistance to the MSMEs, do a detailed study to understand the technical needs of MSMEs and provide relaxation in labour laws and reduction of red tape.

Organisational Sustainability

As researchers like Morioka et al. (2016), Huang et al. (2013) and Law, Kris (2010) have noted, that developing a sustainable business model calls for organisational drive, as well as the appropriate governmental laws. This

fact is also understood by the government. The FICCI (2015) report gives a list of schemes by the government for assisting the MSMEs. These schemes are targeted at offering finance and financial aid, coaching for skill development, infrastructure development, marketing support, technology and quality improvement and a variety of services for MSMEs nationwide.

While this is at the external level at the internal level also a sustainable business model has to cover different aspects. Organisational sustainability, according to Singh et al. (2016), is founded on three key dimensions, namely economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and social sustainability. Matinaro et al. (2019), have also created a sustainable business model based on these three dimensions. Through sustainable operations, an organisation can demand higher prices from markets, gain competitive advantage and improve shareholder value. It can showcase its social values and create better goodwill by taking care of both the social and environmental dimensions. So there is a sustainable value proposition, value formation, sustainable delivery and value capture.

Research Specifics

The research was undertaken among the MSMEs in the Ernakulam district of the South Indian state of Kerala. The study was done during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic period while the markets were still in a state of flux and uncertainty. This article is aimed at entrepreneurs and the senior executives of MSMEs. It gives comprehensive findings on the challenges and aspirations of the MSMEs. They can understand if the obstacles they themselves are facing are unique to their organisation or are common problems faced by the industry. And what actions, if any, the others are taking or thinking of taking. It will help them in taking a measured decision.

Research Objectives

This research study had two primary objectives:

- To explore the challenges and obstacles faced by nano and small entrepreneurs.
- To understand the expectations and aspirations of the entrepreneurs with regard to their growth and sustainability and their mindset towards the climate for entrepreneurship.

Research Methodology

The research methodology used for the study was as detailed below:

Sample Frame: A total of 20,000 nano, micro and small entrepreneurs were available with the District Industrial Council (DIC) which was used as the sample frame.

Sampling Technique: From the database of 20,000 the selection was made via stratified sampling using Rand () command in Excel.

The strata applied for the study were the vulnerable section i.e. low investment size establishments, Nano and Micro and the Social Profile of the entrepreneurs.

Sample Size: The total sample loaded was 370 with an expected sample of 250. Out of a possible 238 queries that were received there were 164 completed queries. The rest 74 queries were unusable because of incomplete responses.

Data Collection Tool and Method: A semi-structured questionnaire was the tool used to collect data. The questions were administered using a direct personal interview method.

Quality Management: At each stage of the study reviews were done and random back checks on crucial questions ensured that there are no discrepancies in understanding of the written word and the respondents thinking.

Analysis and Interpretation: The data was collated, cleaned and tabulated before analysis. Relevant analysis was done using Excel and SPSS software's. Text mining was done using IMB Modeller.

Demographics

The key demographics of the respondents after analysis are as follows. Out of 164 participants:

- *Gender:* 37 were female and 127 were male.
- *Size of Business:* Micro-131, Small-22.
- *Investment:* Ranging from 1 Lakh to 10 Lakhs.
- The majority of the entrepreneurs (92) had an experience of less than 10 years.
- *Age:* ranging from 20–30 (8), 31–40 (31), 41–50 (55) and up to 50 (70).
- For the majority of the entrepreneurs (85) capital sources are their savings followed by loans (64).

Business Operation Styles

- Sole Proprietorship – 136.
- Profile of Business – Manufacturing (92) and Services (56).
- Selling Mechanism – Direct to Customer - 135, rest through retailers.
- Level of Competition – High - 81, Moderate - 56.

Study Mapping

The study was to investigate the challenges, views, and suggestions of entrepreneurs. The model adopted was to map and understand the metrics of development through:

- Awareness and expectation.
- Recognising other challenges.

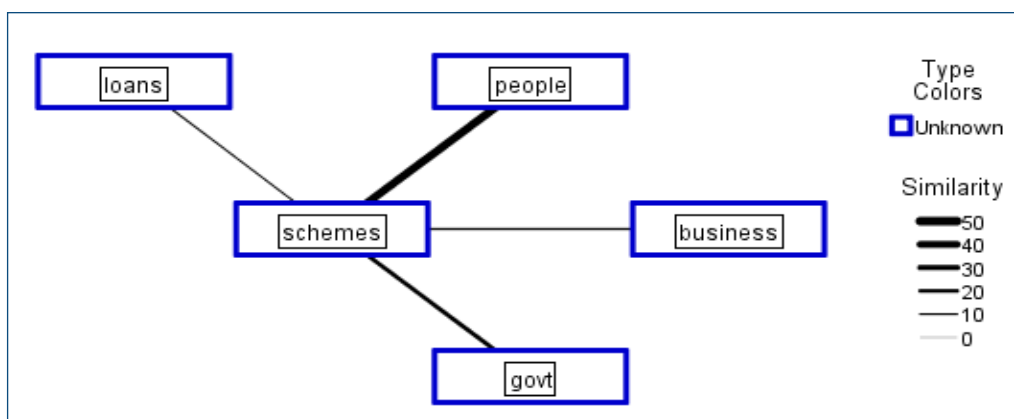
- Exploring means for sustainability.

Awareness Mapping

Table 1: Awareness of Scheme

Item	Awareness	Not Aware
Schemes	38	124
Availed	38	124
Usefulness	07	NA
Inquired	21	143

While investigating it was felt that most of the entrepreneurs were unaware of schemes that they can utilise for their growth. Out of 164 respondents, only 38 were aware of the schemes which they have taken either from PMEGP or Mudhra schemes. This low level of awareness is itself a challenge which cannot be ignored.



Source: IBM Text Modeller.

Fig. 1: Expectations on Scheme

Text mining using IBM Modeller for Scheme related Expectations of the Respondents indicated people’s view towards schemes and Government support is highly sought. There is a connection between loans, schemes and government support. Another connection seen here is people’s view regarding the scheme is to support business.

Recognising Other Challenges

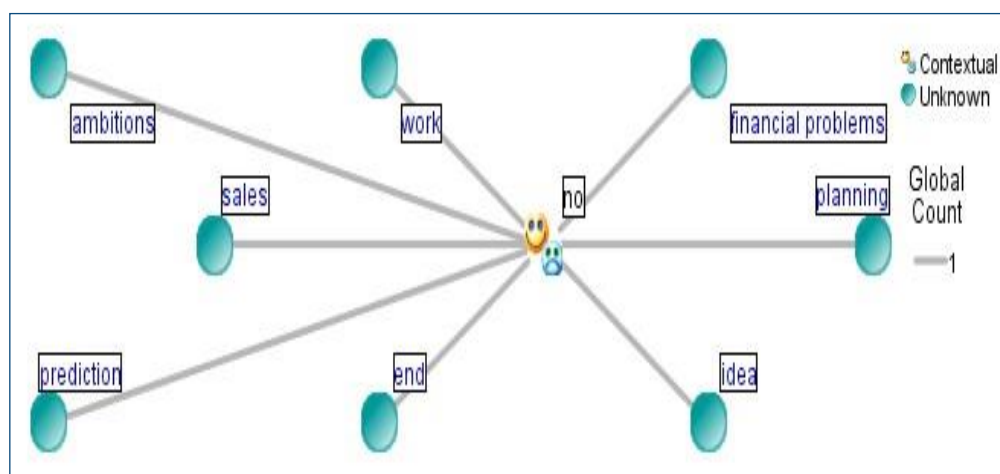
Table 2: Other Challenges Faced

Items/Challenges	Number of Respondents
All Challenges	58
Non-availability of Raw Material	16
Labour Issues	11
Finances	38
Post Corona Issues	12
Marketing issues	16
Technological	06
Competition	07

Table 3: Content Analysis of Responses and the Challenge Mapping

Theme	Content, Challenges and Aspirations Mapping		
Where do you see your business in the next 5 years?	Verbatim Response	Summary of Response	Interpretation
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue like this. Hoping for more sales. I am hopeful. No idea. Business is dull. Need to change the field. No ambition. 	Mixed responses from the respondents.	Hopeful to not hopeful is the feeling among the respondents. New ideas will help them.
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I do not have a better hope. This situation is worse and my future is uncertain. Unpredictable situation. Going to stop the business. Future seems doubtful. 	Losing out hope.	Corona challenge has hit many in a big way, but not for all. Ending the business.
Aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand the business. Expecting more growth. Will open another Plant. I will diversify. I am looking for good place to change my location. Will work to improve my brand image. Hoping for better future. To secure a top 5 position in furniture. Expand outside Kerala. 	There is some hope among more than 60% of the respondents as is obvious from their aspirations. Was able to predict the future.	Hopes of doing good is making the respondents to look forward. Expansion and planning was the key word that emerged in the study
Summary		Content – Neutral, Challenges – Negative and Aspirations – Positive	60% Hopeful 30% in doubt 10% seems lost all hopes

Exploring Means for Sustainability



Source: IBM Text Modeller.

Fig. 2: Sustainability Mapping

This mapping is undertaken to explore the means of sustainability. With challenges around, respondents are hopeful and ambitious for a better future.

Analysis of Where Entrepreneurs See Themselves in the Next Five Years Using IBM Modeller Text Mining

- Majority of Respondents are ambitious.
- They positively can predict their business for the next five years.
- Sales can grow if planning is good or vice-versa.
- Work will improve if ideas are in place or vice-versa if nothing works well they will close their business.

Table 4: Analysis of Entrepreneur’s Suggestions for Sustainability

Sr. No.	Entity	Respondents Experience	Suggestions for Sustainability
1	Government	Requires support.	Financial Support, More Campaign’s from the Government regarding Scheme, Favourable actions from Government.
2	Financial Institutions	This item had the biggest loading.	New Partnership and Credit Grant Scheme.
3	Existing market eco-system	Those aware do praise such platforms however there are those who are not well equipped with online platform.	E-commerce, more digital presences can help them.

Source: IBM Text Modeller.

Further Findings and Recommendations

- Since the study was conducted among the nano, micro and small enterprises there were some issues and challenges that are specific to that strata. The demographics don’t lend itself to exposure in many areas.
- Researchers observed while interacting with the respondents that age is also a hindering factor in awareness and development.

- Most of the respondents who have availed of the schemes were guided well on them by the DIC personnel through the Interview calls. The respondents could clarify doubts as they in return asked questions related to support.
- The information collected on scheme awareness had inconsistency with the data received from DIC. There were many entrepreneurs who had registered with DIC but had no awareness of the schemes. The entrepreneurs started the business themselves and later registered with the DIC without ever learning about the schemes.
- Skill development is one area which entrepreneurs have to really implement.
- Those doing fairly well have to seriously think of expanding capabilities, at the same time cutting down on redundancies in the projects
- Bringing in qualified partners can help sustain those that have potential but are on the brink because of a lack of finance or management expertise.
- Online Marketing is very cost-effective. Awareness is there among the entrepreneurs but they have to be handheld in order to use the same, especially for products that require more visibility.
- Their main requirements are adequate infrastructure, adequate material supply, better distribution channels, technical assistance and competent manpower.
- They also require assistance with managerial training and promotion including designing, packaging and product display, market intelligence and market research.
- Brand building and standards and certification which will improve quality image are also the need of the hour.
- Providing low-cost brand and marketing consultancy would prevent many MSMEs from going down.
- More investment especially in technology, for increasing quality to international standards and R & D would help these MSMEs in improving exports.

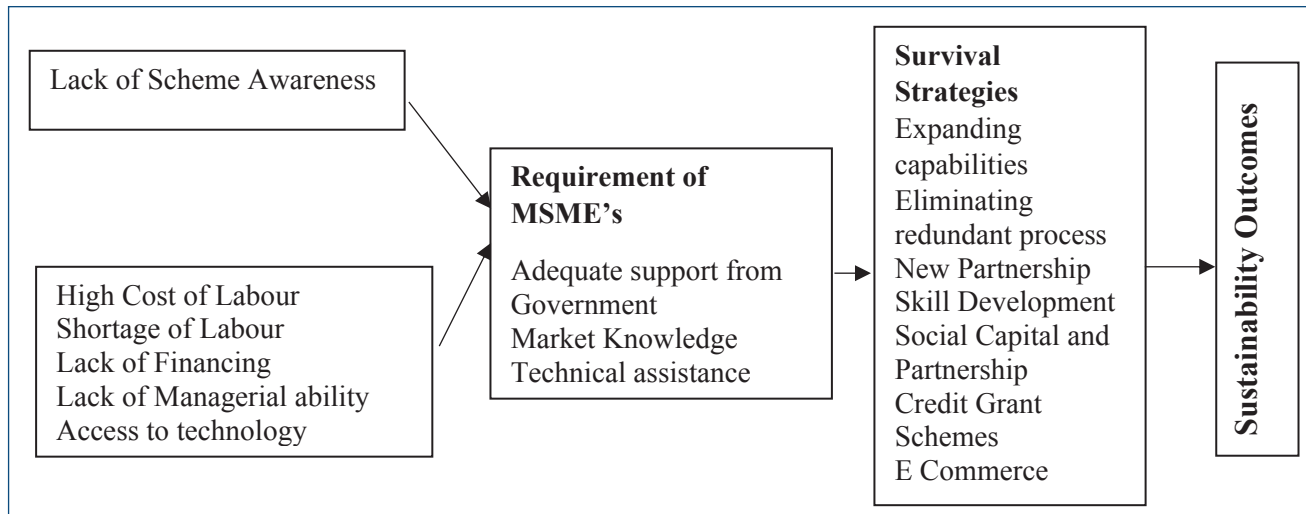


Fig. 3: Research Summary: Model

The above model shows the summary of the challenges and aspirations of the respondent entrepreneurs. It also indicates the researcher's recommendations on strategies for their survival and further growth.

Conclusion

There are numerous issues and obstacles in front of the MSMEs in terms of growth and sustainability. Other than the obvious challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, MSMEs face other generic challenges. These include lack of awareness of various schemes, high cost of labour, shortage of manpower, lack of financing and access to technology as well as lack of managerial ability. With these constraints and obstacles in front of them, MSME owners are hopeful of more government assistance, especially in terms of monetary funding. They also require adequate support from the government for knowledge about the market and technical assistance in order to succeed in the market. For survival in the long term, the MSMEs have to expand their capabilities, eliminate redundant processes and do skill development for their manpower. For all these, they have to come up with additional investment from new investors as well as avail grants available from the government. Cheap and effective marketing is also possible by focusing on e-commerce.

Even with all the problems the MSMEs are facing prospects of sustainability of the businesses seem to be good and with support and better awareness they are confident of scaling up operations. Most MSME owners

have realistic and humble expectations and aspirations but to achieve these too they need help from the government and other external agencies.

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Annexure-1 - Government Expenditure in Various Schemes

Sl. No.	Name of the Scheme	Benefit Type	Total no. of beneficiaries (2021-22) (upto 31.12.21)	Total Expenditure (Rs. crores) (2021-22) (upto 31.12.21)
1	ATI Scheme (Training Component)	In Kind	170	0.625
2	MPDA Grant to Khadi Institutions	Cash	127328	54.03
3	Coir Vikas Yojana	Cash	168	0.598
4	SFURTI SI	In Kind	1821990	8.01
5	Prime Ministers Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP)	Cash	52002	1601.92
6	Entrepreneurship and Skill Development Programme (ESDP)	In Kind	15599	1.83
7	International Co-operation(IC) Schemes	Cash	18	1.98

Source- Annual Report (2021-22), Census Report, Government of India, Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises.