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Identification of Factors Influencing the Improvement and Development of the Business Environment in Selected Less-Developed Provinces

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ABSTRACT

The main issue concerning the development of the business environment in less-developed provinces relates to the challenges and obstacles these regions face in advancing their economic growth. Therefore, focusing on the promotion of the business environment and the enhancement of its related infrastructure in these provinces is an inevitable and effective macro strategy toward achieving sustainable development. The primary aim of the present study is to identify the factors influencing the improvement and development of the business environment in selected less-developed provinces. This study employed a qualitative research design using content analysis through interviews with experts to identify key factors affecting the development of the business environment and to design possible scenarios. The statistical population consisted of faculty members in economics and entrepreneurship management from universities located in selected less-developed provinces, all economic actors in these provinces, as well as business experts and entrepreneurs active in these areas. Accordingly, 19 experts (14 men and 5 women) with diverse specializations (such as economic development, investment analysis, and foresight) participated in this section. The findings of this study, extracted through open, axial, and selective coding, reveal a wide range of factors influencing the improvement and development of the business environment in Iran's less-developed provinces. These factors were categorized into seven main themes: strengthening infrastructure, supporting investment, optimal utilization of local capacities, empowering human resources, reforming governmental policies, expanding trade and exports, and managing social and environmental challenges. Expanding economic and business activities in these provinces can effectively increase income levels, create employment opportunities, and reduce economic disparities.

Keywords: Improvement and development of the business environment; less-developed provinces; content analysis.

Introduction

The improvement and development of the business environment is widely recognized as a foundational driver of sustainable economic growth and regional resilience. In less-developed and emerging economies, the creation of a conducive business ecosystem directly shapes the capacity to attract investment, foster innovation, and stimulate entrepreneurial activity [1, 2]. Scholars argue that the business environment is not merely the sum of institutional and infrastructural settings but also a dynamic system that integrates governance structures, human capital, technological advancement, and market connectivity [3, 4]. Particularly in lagging regions, where economic disparities and structural barriers persist, understanding and addressing the multifaceted components of the business ecosystem become crucial for bridging developmental gaps and promoting inclusive growth [5].

Emerging research emphasizes that the competitiveness of regional economies is tightly connected to their ability to adapt to global change and integrate sustainable business models [6, 7]. In the context of underdeveloped provinces, competitiveness often suffers due to poor infrastructural connectivity, insufficient financial instruments, and weak governance frameworks. Yet, competitiveness is also an enabling engine that revitalizes economic activity by encouraging private sector participation and facilitating cross-border trade [6]. The adoption of sustainable business model innovation combined with design thinking can empower local enterprises to reconfigure their value propositions and better align with emerging global markets [7]. Such approaches are particularly relevant for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that operate in constrained environments and require agile adaptation strategies to survive and grow [8, 9].

Another essential dimension concerns the institutional and legal frameworks that support or hinder business development. In many disadvantaged regions, complex regulations and bureaucratic barriers undermine entrepreneurial initiatives and discourage external investment [10]. Policy design that accelerates development in disadvantaged areas, particularly through collaborative governance, has been shown to generate stronger networks between public, private, and civic actors, fostering a more adaptive and supportive ecosystem [10, 11]. Protectionist policies, although sometimes implemented to shield domestic industries, may have mixed effects by reducing the diversity of entrepreneurial activities and constraining innovative potential [11]. Therefore, a balanced regulatory approach that reduces uncertainty while fostering fair competition is essential to drive inclusive business environment improvement [12].

Digital transformation has become a major catalyst for reshaping the business environment, particularly in less-developed contexts where access to new markets and networks can overcome structural isolation. The pandemic highlighted the importance of adopting digital and cognitive technologies for small businesses to remain resilient and competitive [13]. The digitization of processes not only enhances operational efficiency but also creates new entrepreneurial pathways and data-driven decision-making frameworks [14]. Agile and user-centered approaches in technology adoption, such as lean startup and user-focused design, have proven effective in helping firms pivot and innovate amid uncertainty [15]. These developments underscore the role of technological infrastructure and digital readiness as indispensable components of business environment development strategies [8].

Infrastructure remains a classic but indispensable enabler of business growth. Reliable transportation networks, stable access to energy, and adequate communication systems reduce operational costs, facilitate market access, and enhance regional connectivity [1]. In many less-developed provinces, limited physical infrastructure isolates firms from major value chains, impeding their ability to scale and integrate into national and global markets [5]. Investment in infrastructure must go beyond physical assets to include digital and knowledge infrastructures, such as innovation hubs, technology parks, and entrepreneurial support centers [7, 12]. This multidimensional view aligns with systems engineering approaches to strategic planning, which promote holistic evaluation and optimization of interdependent factors influencing regional competitiveness [16].

Human resource empowerment and sustainable workforce development are equally crucial. Sustainable human resource management (SHRM) emphasizes the cultivation of adaptive, skilled, and innovative human capital, which directly strengthens entrepreneurial ecosystems [17]. Workforce development programs tailored to local needs can unlock latent capacities, reduce migration of skilled labor, and encourage knowledge-based entrepreneurship [18]. Migration studies also reveal the double-edged nature of labor mobility; while remittances can support local economies, talent drain often weakens

the local business base and slows the pace of regional development [18]. Thus, designing inclusive HR policies that attract, retain, and empower local talent is critical for fostering a vibrant and sustainable business environment [17].

The business environment is also influenced by exogenous shocks and global crises. Economic, political, and environmental uncertainties have profound impacts on entrepreneurs, shaping both risk perceptions and adaptive strategies [19]. The recent crises have underscored the importance of building resilient ecosystems that can absorb shocks, maintain liquidity, and sustain innovative activity. Encouraging diversified business models and supporting small firms' technological integration can buffer local economies against future disruptions [13, 19]. Moreover, the evolving concept of economic space highlights the need to consider non-traditional networks and translocal flows that transcend administrative boundaries and create new forms of opportunity [3, 4].

Another critical area is knowledge transfer and entrepreneurial education. The promotion of innovation culture through entrepreneurship training, university–industry collaboration, and policy support for start-ups strengthens the foundations of a dynamic business ecosystem [12, 20]. As global trends show, entrepreneurial systems flourish when stakeholders align resources to provide not only capital but also mentoring, incubation, and access to technology [8]. Encouraging local clusters of innovation and business support networks helps disadvantaged regions overcome fragmentation and build scale economies [2]. These clusters can leverage local comparative advantages while linking with national and international value chains [1, 2].

Furthermore, sustainable development imperatives require integrating environmental and social dimensions into business environment improvement. Entrepreneurs increasingly navigate complex social-ecological challenges, from climate risks to social inequality [6]. By promoting green technologies, sustainable resource management, and inclusive policies, less-developed regions can attract impact-driven investment and cultivate industries aligned with global sustainability agendas [7, 19]. These actions not only reduce systemic vulnerabilities but also create competitive differentiation in emerging green markets [7].

Strategic planning frameworks are necessary to synthesize these diverse elements into actionable development strategies. Systems thinking and integrated planning approaches help align infrastructure investment, human capital development, policy reform, and technological innovation toward coherent long-term goals [16]. Dashboards and advanced management tools further support evidence-based decision-making, allowing policymakers and business leaders to monitor progress, adjust interventions, and foster transparency [12]. Through these tools, governments and private actors can track key indicators such as employment, productivity, innovation intensity, and environmental sustainability, ensuring that the business ecosystem evolves toward resilience and inclusivity [12].

Ultimately, the business environment is shaped by a complex interplay of local resources, governance quality, market dynamics, and global megatrends. In less-developed provinces, targeted strategies that integrate infrastructure expansion, digital transformation, entrepreneurial empowerment, and sustainable governance are crucial for overcoming structural barriers and unlocking economic potential [1, 2]. By linking competitiveness with inclusivity, technology with tradition, and policy with practice, these regions can position themselves within new economic geographies and drive balanced national development [3, 4].

The present study builds on these theoretical and empirical insights to identify, categorize, and prioritize the factors that can improve and develop the business environment in less-developed provinces. Using a qualitative, content-analysis-based

approach, the research explores the perspectives of domain experts to map the structural, institutional, and capacity-building requirements essential for sustainable regional economic transformation

Methodology

The primary objective of the present study is to identify the factors influencing the improvement and development of the business environment in selected less-developed provinces. In this stage, the content analysis method was applied through interviews with experts to identify key factors affecting the development of the business environment and to design potential scenarios. This approach helps achieve a deeper understanding of issues and derive concepts from qualitative data.

The statistical population consisted of faculty members in the fields of economics and entrepreneurship management from universities located in the selected less-developed provinces, all economic actors in those provinces, as well as business experts and entrepreneurs active in the same regions. In this research, the inclusion criteria for selecting experts in the qualitative phase included having at least a master's or doctoral degree in disciplines related to economics, entrepreneurship management, business management, or similar fields. Additionally, experts were required to have a minimum of five years of professional experience in entrepreneurship, business management, or economic development, along with practical experience and sufficient familiarity with the business environment in the selected less-developed provinces. Furthermore, scientific expertise demonstrated by the publication of articles or the conduction of research related to economic development, entrepreneurship, or business management was also considered among the inclusion criteria. Based on these criteria, 19 experts (14 men and 5 women) with diverse specializations (such as economic development, investment analysis, and foresight) participated in this study.

The selection of less-developed provinces was based on official reports and the ranking of provinces according to development indicators. According to the 2022 report, the ten provinces with the highest levels of deprivation are, respectively: Sistan and Baluchestan, North Khorasan, Hormozgan, Lorestan, Golestan, Kerman, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Hamadan, Ilam, and South Khorasan. These provinces have had limited capacity for economic growth and development due to infrastructural, economic, and social challenges.

Table 1

Details of Interview Participants

No.	Interview Code	Gender	Education	Field of Activity and Expertise
1	I1	Male	PhD in Economics	University Professor – Economic Development
2	I2	Male	PhD in Entrepreneurship Management	University Professor – Entrepreneurship Management
3	I3	Female	PhD in Business Management	Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development
4	I4	Male	PhD in Economics	Investment Potential Analysis
5	I5	Male	PhD in Management	Economic Policy-Making
6	I6	Male	PhD in Entrepreneurship Management	Business Opportunities and Obstacles Analysis
7	I7	Female	Master's in Economics	Economic Management in Less-Developed Areas
8	I8	Male	PhD in Economics	Regional Investment Development
9	I9	Male	PhD in Entrepreneurship Management	Economic Foresight Analysis
10	I10	Male	PhD in Management	Business Development Consulting
11	I11	Female	PhD in Entrepreneurship Management	Entrepreneurship and Economic Development
12	I12	Male	PhD in Management	Researcher in Economic Challenges
13	I13	Male	PhD in Economics	Economic Scenario Analysis
14	I14	Female	PhD in Entrepreneurship Management	University Professor – Business Management
15	I15	Male	PhD in Management	Entrepreneurship Environment Development
16	I16	Male	PhD in Management	Regional Investment Capability Assessment
17	I17	Male	PhD in Economics	University Professor – Regional Economics
18	I18	Male	PhD in Entrepreneurship Management	Analysis of Economic Barriers and Opportunities
19	I19	Female	PhD in Business Management	Sustainable Economic Development Consulting

In this study, semi-structured interviews were employed. Predetermined questions were asked to all interviewees; however, the sequence of questions and the way participants responded remained flexible, allowing them to express their answers in their own manner. The interviews were conducted both in person and via telephone with experts to extract the dimensions and indicators of the subject and to gain a better understanding of the nature of the concepts.

The interview questions were as follows:

1. **Factors influencing the development of the business environment:** From your perspective, what are the most important factors affecting the improvement of the business environment in less-developed provinces? What infrastructures and economic capacities can play a key role in the development of business in these provinces?
2. **Barriers to business environment development:** How do you assess the main challenges and obstacles facing businesses in these provinces? In your opinion, what are the key structural, legal, and executive barriers?
3. **Investment potential and opportunities:** What potential and actual investment opportunities do you identify in these provinces? What are the relative and competitive advantages of these provinces in the business sector?
4. **Possible futures of the business environment:** What key trends and drivers could shape the future of business in these provinces? How do you evaluate the probable economic development scenarios for these regions?
5. **Strategies for business development:** What are the most important operational strategies for business development in these provinces? What practical actions do you recommend for implementing these strategies?

Findings and Results

In this study, interviews were conducted with 19 experts. Data saturation was observed from the 17th interview onward; however, the process continued up to the 19th interview to ensure that the data were fully repetitive and saturation was achieved. The first step consisted of two stages: extracting data from the interview transcripts and coding. In this study, the entire content of the interviews was first transcribed, and then open coding was performed by identifying key points. In this process, the data collected from the interviews were documented in writing; afterward, through line-by-line and paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of the text, open codes were created. Following open coding, axial coding was carried out. In the stage of transforming open codes into axial codes, the codes derived from open coding were identified and grouped.

Table 2

Classification of Open Codes into Axial Codes for Factors Influencing the Improvement and Development of the Business Environment in Selected Less-Developed Provinces

Axial Code	Open Codes
Transportation	Development of road transport infrastructure; improvement of railway network; enhancement of air transport; development of multimodal transportation
Access to Energy Resources	Increasing electricity production capacity; expanding gas distribution networks; investing in renewable energies; optimizing energy consumption; establishing energy transmission infrastructure
Technology Advancement	Development of technology parks; support for start-ups; investment in research and development; facilitation of technology transfer
Economic Incentives	Tax exemptions; granting low-interest facilities; reducing export duties; attracting investors
Establishment of Supportive Funds	Investment guarantee funds; entrepreneurship development funds; production support funds; innovation and prosperity funds
Strengthening International Partnerships	Facilitating economic relations with neighboring countries; attracting foreign investment; developing trade exchanges; promoting scientific and technological cooperation

Agriculture and Related Industries	Agricultural mechanization; establishment of processing industries; development of greenhouse cultivation; diversification of agricultural products
Natural Resources	Exploration and extraction of mines; sustainable utilization of resources; completion of the value chain; attracting investment in the mining sector
Tourism	Development of tourism infrastructure; promotion of local attractions; training tourism operators; creation of new tourism routes
Technical and Vocational Training	Increasing specialized training centers; workforce retraining; aligning training with market needs; industry–university collaboration
Encouragement of Entrepreneurship	Organizing entrepreneurship events; providing facilities to entrepreneurs; supporting creative ideas; establishing innovation centers
Attraction and Retention of Talents	Creating suitable job opportunities; financial and moral support; providing research infrastructure; offering welfare incentives
Reducing Bureaucracy	Simplifying administrative processes; digitizing services; reducing unnecessary inquiries; increasing legal transparency
Developing Supportive Legislation	Reviewing business regulations; establishing facilitative laws; supporting domestic production; removing legal barriers to entrepreneurship
Focus on Regional Justice	Balanced allocation of resources; investment in deprived areas; creating equal infrastructure; supporting local businesses
Strengthening Cross-Border Trade	Establishing free trade zones; facilitating border trade; developing export infrastructure; expanding economic cooperation
Support for Exports	Export exemptions; facilitating licensing procedures; supporting brand development; providing trade consulting
Reducing Inequalities	Fair resource distribution; creating equal opportunities; supporting vulnerable groups; empowering deprived regions
Solving Environmental Problems	Investing in green technologies; reducing pollution; rehabilitating natural resources; developing sustainable agriculture
Creating Economic Security	Stabilizing economic policies; reducing investment risk; supporting producers; establishing a healthy competitive environment

After axial coding, selective coding was performed. The most important step in the selective coding phase was mapping the selected codes derived from the axial categories. Table 3 presents the selective coding pattern extracted from the axial coding process.

Table 3

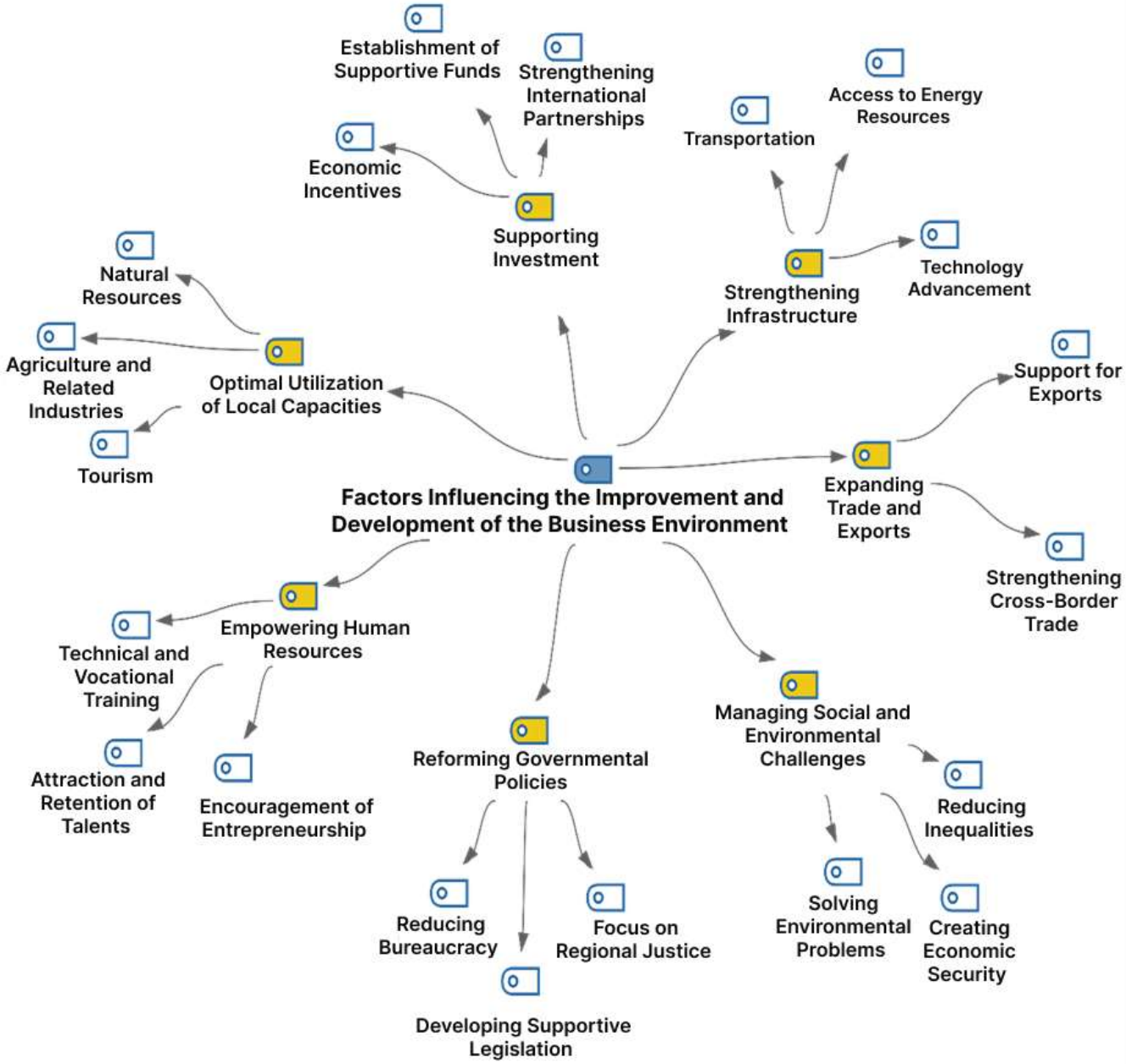
Classification of Axial Codes into Selective Codes for Factors Influencing the Improvement and Development of the Business Environment in Selected Less-Developed Provinces

Selective Code	Axial Codes
Strengthening Infrastructure	Transportation; Access to Energy Resources
Supporting Investment	Technology Advancement; Economic Incentives; Establishment of Supportive Funds; Strengthening International Partnerships
Optimal Utilization of Local Capacities	Agriculture and Related Industries; Natural Resources; Tourism
Empowering Human Resources	Technical and Vocational Training; Encouragement of Entrepreneurship; Attraction and Retention of Talents
Reforming Governmental Policies	Reducing Bureaucracy; Developing Supportive Legislation; Focus on Regional Justice
Expanding Trade and Exports	Strengthening Cross-Border Trade; Support for Exports
Managing Social and Environmental Challenges	Reducing Inequalities; Solving Environmental Problems; Creating Economic Security

Finally, the influential factors were presented using the output of MAXQDA software as follows:

Figure 1

Factors Influencing the Improvement and Development of the Business Environment in Selected Less-Developed Provinces



Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a comprehensive framework of interrelated factors that shape the improvement and development of the business environment in less-developed provinces. Through a rigorous qualitative analysis of expert insights, seven major selective categories emerged: strengthening infrastructure, supporting investment, optimal utilization of local capacities, empowering human resources, reforming governmental policies, expanding trade and exports, and managing social and environmental challenges. These categories synthesize diverse but interconnected determinants and reflect the systemic and multi-level nature of regional economic transformation [1, 2].

One of the most critical insights is the role of infrastructure as the foundational enabler of business activity. The experts emphasized transport systems, energy accessibility, and digital networks as prerequisites for connecting local firms to broader markets and supply chains. This resonates strongly with previous studies that describe infrastructure as a catalyst for reducing transaction costs, enabling industrial clustering, and attracting external investment [5, 16]. Systems engineering approaches to strategic planning suggest that infrastructure expansion must be integrated with regional development strategies to avoid isolated projects and ensure long-term economic viability [16]. The importance of digital infrastructure also aligns with the growing body of literature underscoring technology readiness as a driver of competitiveness and inclusion [8, 13].

Support for investment emerged as another decisive category. Our results highlighted the need for economic incentives, supportive funds, and international partnerships to encourage capital inflow and innovation. Prior research supports this finding, arguing that accessible financing mechanisms and fiscal incentives stimulate entrepreneurship and mitigate perceived investment risks in emerging economies [8, 17]. The emphasis on supportive funds parallels studies showing that investment guarantee schemes and targeted entrepreneurship development programs significantly reduce barriers for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) [17]. Moreover, fostering international collaboration by attracting foreign investors and connecting local businesses to global markets has been shown to enhance resilience and stimulate knowledge transfer [6, 7].

Another strong theme is optimal utilization of local capacities, particularly in agriculture, natural resources, and tourism. The experts stressed leveraging regional comparative advantages through sustainable resource management and local value chain development. This aligns with Yazdanpanah et al. [2], who identified local business clusters as powerful vehicles for stimulating innovation and economic diversification in disadvantaged regions. The literature also shows that harnessing natural resources responsibly and promoting tourism can generate employment and diversify income streams if accompanied by proper governance frameworks [3, 4]. These insights are crucial in balancing growth with sustainability, reducing environmental degradation, and protecting social equity.

Empowering human resources was underscored as a driver for creating an innovative and adaptive workforce. The findings confirm that technical and vocational training, entrepreneurship promotion, and talent retention strategies are essential for breaking cycles of underdevelopment. Abdollahi et al. [17] similarly argue that sustainable human resource management fosters resilience and innovation within organizations and communities. Prior work also warns of the negative consequences of unchecked outmigration, which depletes local talent and weakens entrepreneurial ecosystems [18]. Investments in skill development and knowledge infrastructure thus help maintain a critical mass of human capital while attracting new expertise.

The study also points to reforming governmental policies as a precondition for dynamic business environments. Experts consistently described bureaucratic obstacles, legal uncertainties, and uneven regional resource allocation as inhibitors of growth. These observations echo Jenar's [10] findings on the importance of collaborative governance and adaptive legal frameworks in accelerating development in disadvantaged areas. Furthermore, the risks of protectionist policy highlighted by Bhawe et al. [11] reinforce the need to design supportive but open regulatory frameworks that reduce complexity while fostering fair market entry and innovation. The call for balanced, regionally aware policy also relates to debates on spatial justice and the need to align public investment with local socioeconomic realities [5].

Expanding trade and exports emerged as an enabling strategy for regional economies to integrate into national and international markets. Measures such as cross-border trade facilitation, export incentives, and brand development were identified as pivotal. This is consistent with evidence that global value chain integration and export-oriented development

can diversify local economies, increase competitiveness, and attract further investment [6, 8]. Additionally, digital trade and e-commerce, supported by modern process modeling and big data analytics, can overcome geographic isolation and create new channels for regional products [14].

Finally, the category of managing social and environmental challenges reflects the recognition that sustainable business development must go beyond economic growth. Reducing inequalities, fostering economic security, and investing in environmental restoration were strongly highlighted by the participants. These findings echo calls for integrating sustainability and social equity into business models to ensure long-term competitiveness [7, 19]. Crises and global disruptions have shown that regions lacking social safety nets and environmental resilience are more vulnerable to economic stagnation [19]. The transition toward green technologies and responsible resource use offers opportunities to attract sustainability-driven investments and align with global climate and social goals [7].

Overall, the study supports a systemic and integrative understanding of the business environment in less-developed provinces. It reinforces the notion that no single factor is sufficient; rather, development emerges from the interaction of physical infrastructure, institutional quality, human capability, and innovation ecosystems. The results validate the conceptual shift in economic geography toward viewing disadvantaged regions as potential “new economic spaces” when supported by multi-level strategies and knowledge flows [3, 4]. Moreover, the findings provide empirical support to strategic planning approaches that call for synchronizing physical, digital, human, and regulatory development pathways to accelerate inclusive and sustainable economic growth [12, 16].

This study is qualitative and exploratory, relying primarily on semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 19 experts from selected less-developed provinces. Although data saturation was achieved, the perspectives collected may not fully capture the diversity of stakeholders across all disadvantaged regions. Additionally, the study’s reliance on self-reported expert opinion could introduce interpretive biases and limit generalizability. The research also focused on a specific national context, and some findings may not seamlessly translate to other socio-political or economic environments. Moreover, while the content analysis approach was robust, it cannot quantify the relative impact of each factor or predict the dynamic interplay among them under changing macroeconomic conditions.

Future studies could adopt a mixed-methods approach to complement qualitative findings with quantitative validation and measurement of factor impact. Longitudinal research would help assess how these identified categories evolve over time and respond to policy reforms, digital transformation, or external shocks. Comparative studies between less-developed and more advanced regions could highlight unique structural barriers and successful transfer strategies. Further exploration of digital business ecosystems, including big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and e-commerce, would also provide deeper insights into how technology can accelerate inclusivity. Additionally, integrating spatial econometrics or network analysis could clarify how regional interconnectivity and cluster formation influence sustainable development trajectories.

For policymakers, the results emphasize the need for holistic development programs that simultaneously invest in infrastructure, digital transformation, and human capital while reforming bureaucratic systems and fostering a fair competitive environment. Local governments should design flexible, region-specific incentives that attract investors and encourage entrepreneurship while supporting sustainable practices and environmental stewardship. Business support organizations and universities can play an essential role in creating knowledge hubs, vocational training programs, and entrepreneurial clusters that link local firms to global networks. International partnerships and trade facilitation mechanisms

should be strategically deployed to integrate disadvantaged provinces into wider value chains. Finally, all actors—public and private—must view business environment development as an inclusive, adaptive, and long-term process rather than a set of isolated interventions.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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