

Navigating the Terrain

A Qualitative Exploration of Entrepreneurial Ecosystems and Institutional Voids in Senegal (2000–2026)

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurial ecosystems in sub-Saharan Africa are characterised by significant institutional voids, which present both constraints and adaptive opportunities for business founders. The Senegalese context, with its unique socio-economic landscape, offers a critical case for examining how entrepreneurs navigate these systemic gaps. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of entrepreneurs operating within the Senegalese ecosystem, specifically investigating the strategies they employ to identify, interpret, and circumvent institutional voids to sustain and grow their ventures. A qualitative, interpretive design was employed, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 32 founders of small and medium-sized enterprises across diverse sectors. Data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach to develop robust, data-driven themes. Analysis revealed that entrepreneurs predominantly engage in 'institutional bridging', creating informal networks to substitute for missing formal structures. A prominent theme was the reliance on religious and community-based associations for securing trust-based financing, cited by over two-thirds of participants as more critical than formal banking channels. The findings demonstrate that institutional voids are not merely obstacles but are actively reconfigured by entrepreneurs into spaces for innovative, context-specific institutional work, fundamentally shaping the ecosystem's character and evolution. Policymakers should focus on formalising and supporting existing informal support networks rather than solely importing foreign ecosystem models. Financial institutions must develop products that leverage, rather than compete with, community-based trust mechanisms. institutional voids, entrepreneurial ecosystems, qualitative research, Senegal, adaptive strategies, informal institutions This paper provides a novel, empirically-grounded framework of 'institutional bridging' that delineates the micro-processes through which entrepreneurs actively co-construct ecosystems in response to systemic gaps, moving beyond deficit-based narratives.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurial ecosystems, Institutional voids, Sub-Saharan Africa, Qualitative research, Business environment*

Article Highlights

- Qualitative study reveals 'institutional bridging' as a core adaptive strategy for Senegalese entrepreneurs.
- Over two-thirds of founders rely on religious and community associations for trust-based financing over formal banks.
- Findings challenge deficit narratives, showing voids as spaces for entrepreneurial co-construction of ecosystems.
- Policy implications stress formalizing existing informal networks rather than importing foreign models.

Core Concept: Institutional Bridging

The study's novel framework detailing how entrepreneurs create informal networks to substitute for missing formal structures, actively co-constructing the ecosystem.

This article provides an empirically-grounded framework for understanding entrepreneurial adaptation in complex institutional environments.

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