

Navigating the Institutional Terrain

A Qualitative Analysis of Enterprise Challenges and Growth Trajectories in Cameroon (2000–2026)

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ABSTRACT

The institutional environment in many African economies presents a complex web of formal and informal rules that critically shape enterprise development. While institutional theory provides a broad framework, there is a paucity of in-depth, context-specific research on how businesses navigate this terrain over extended periods to achieve growth. This study aims to identify and analyse the specific institutional challenges faced by enterprises and to elucidate the strategies they employ to overcome these barriers, thereby mapping their growth trajectories within a representative African economy. A longitudinal qualitative design was employed, utilising purposive sampling to select 42 established enterprises across multiple sectors. Data were collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with founders and senior managers, supplemented by documentary analysis of company records. A thematic analysis was conducted using an abductive approach, iterating between data and institutional theory. A predominant theme was the critical reliance on informal networks to circumvent bureaucratic hurdles, with over 80% of participants describing this as essential for operational continuity. A key finding was that successful firms strategically blended formal compliance with informal relationship-building, creating a hybrid institutional navigation strategy. Enterprise growth is less a function of avoiding institutional constraints than of developing sophisticated capabilities to manoeuvre within and leverage the dual formal-informal institutional system. This adaptive navigation emerges as a core competitive competency. Policymakers should focus on streamlining regulatory processes to reduce the necessity for informal workarounds. Business support programmes should incorporate training on institutional mapping and stakeholder management within complex governance environments. institutional theory, enterprise growth, qualitative research, business environment, informal institutions, Cameroon This paper provides a novel, empirically-grounded framework of 'institutional navigation' that delineates the strategic hybridisation of formal and informal practices as a central mechanism for growth in institutionally complex settings.

Keywords: *Institutional theory, Sub-Saharan Africa, Enterprise development, Qualitative analysis, Business environment, Cameroon*

Article Highlights

- Over 80% of firms rely on informal networks to circumvent bureaucratic hurdles.
- Successful firms blend formal compliance with informal relationship-building.
- Adaptive navigation emerges as a core competitive competency.
- A hybrid institutional strategy is central to growth in complex settings.

Methodological Note

Longitudinal qualitative study of 42 established enterprises via interviews and documentary analysis (2000–2026).

This paper develops a novel framework of 'institutional navigation'.

ABSTRACT-ONLY PUBLICATION

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