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ACTION RESEARCH

Navigating Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

An Action Research Framework for Business Development in South Sudan (2000–2026)

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ABSTRACT

Post-conflict entrepreneurial ecosystems in fragile states present unique, under-researched challenges for business development, particularly regarding institutional voids and social capital formation. This study aimed to co-develop and implement a participatory action research framework to identify systemic barriers and facilitate practical business development strategies within a nascent entrepreneurial ecosystem. A multi-cycle action research methodology was employed, involving iterative phases of diagnosis, planning, intervention, and evaluation with a cohort of 42 local entrepreneurs and key institutional stakeholders over several years. Data were gathered through participatory workshops, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. A primary finding was the critical role of informal trust-based networks in overcoming formal institutional gaps, with approximately 70% of successful early-stage ventures attributing their foundational capital to such networks. The research identified three dominant themes: the primacy of social legitimacy over formal registration, the hybridisation of subsistence and commercial logics, and the need for hyper-localised, rather than imported, business models. Effective business development in such contexts requires frameworks that are adaptive, recognise the centrality of indigenous social structures, and integrate economic activity with community rebuilding. Policymakers and support agencies should prioritise facilitating and strengthening existing informal networks as a core development strategy. Business training programmes must be radically contextualised, moving beyond generic models to address hybrid livelihood-commercial logics. action research, entrepreneurial ecosystem, fragile state, business development, institutional voids, social capital This paper provides a novel, longitudinally tested action research framework for business development in post-conflict settings, demonstrating how iterative, participatory cycles can generate context-specific knowledge and practical interventions where conventional models fail.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurial ecosystems, Institutional voids, Action research, Fragile states, Post-conflict economies, Sub-Saharan Africa, Social capital*

Article Highlights

- Informal trust networks provide foundational capital where formal institutions are absent.
- Business legitimacy stems from social acceptance, not formal registration.
- Successful models hybridize subsistence livelihoods with

Core Insight for Practitioners

Effective support must strengthen existing informal networks and radically contextualize training to address hybrid livelihood-commercial logics, moving beyond generic models.

This study presents a longitudinally tested, participatory framework

<p>commercial logic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hyper-localized frameworks outperform imported business development models.	<p><i>for business development in post-conflict settings.</i></p>
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