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### QUALITATIVE STUDY

## Navigating the Institutional Terrain

*A Qualitative Analysis of Business Challenges and Prospects in Senegal (2000–2026)*

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### ABSTRACT

The institutional environment in West Africa presents a complex landscape for enterprise development, characterised by formal regulatory frameworks coexisting with informal norms and practices. Understanding how businesses navigate this terrain is critical for fostering sustainable economic growth. This study aims to analyse the lived experiences of business leaders in confronting institutional challenges and to identify the strategic adaptations that underpin enterprise resilience and growth within this context. A qualitative, interpretivist design was employed, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 42 founders and senior executives of small and medium-sized enterprises across multiple sectors. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns and construct meaning. A predominant theme was the critical role of social capital and informal networks in mitigating bureaucratic inefficiencies. Approximately 70% of participants explicitly described leveraging personal connections to expedite processes like licensing and tax compliance, which were viewed as primary operational constraints. Business success is less dependent on merely understanding formal rules than on strategically navigating the informal institutional layer, suggesting that institutional theory must account for adaptive agency in developing economies. Policymakers should focus on simplifying administrative procedures to reduce the necessity for informal workarounds. Business support programmes should facilitate legitimate networking opportunities to strengthen entrepreneurial ecosystems. This paper provides a novel, empirically-grounded framework of 'institutional navigation' that delineates the tactical behaviours Senegalese entrepreneurs use to reconcile formal and informal institutional demands.

**Keywords:** *Institutional theory, Qualitative case study, Sub-Saharan Africa, Business environment, Informal economy, Entrepreneurship, Senegal*

#### Article Highlights

- 70% of participants leveraged personal networks to mitigate bureaucratic constraints.
- Entrepreneurial resilience stems from tactical reconciliation of formal and informal demands.
- The study introduces a novel 'institutional navigation'

#### Policy Implication

Simplifying administrative procedures can reduce the reliance on informal workarounds, while structured networking support can strengthen legitimate entrepreneurial ecosystems.

<p>framework for developing economies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Findings challenge institutional theory to better account for adaptive agency on the ground.</li></ul>	<p><i>This qualitative analysis offers ground-level insights into how Senegalese business leaders operationalize institutional theory.</i></p>
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## ABSTRACT-ONLY PUBLICATION

This is an abstract-only publication. The complete research paper with full methodology, results, discussion, and references is available upon request.

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