

Innovative Business Models and Women's Leadership in Burundi: A Study of Entrepreneurial Adaptation, 2010–2025

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Abstract

This original research article investigates the innovative business models developed by women entrepreneurs in Burundi and analyses their influence on leadership practices within the challenging socio-economic context of Sub-Saharan Africa. The study addresses a critical gap in understanding how adaptive entrepreneurial strategies, particularly those led by women, foster resilience and redefine leadership paradigms in post-conflict economies. Employing a rigorous qualitative, multiple-case study methodology, the research engaged with 25 women-led enterprises in Bujumbura and Gitega between 2018 and 2023. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observation, with thematic analysis used to capture and interpret nuanced narratives of adaptation. Key findings reveal that Burundian women leaders have pioneered distinctive models centred on communal resource pooling, digital mobile integration for informal trade, and hybrid social enterprises that blend profit with community nutrition or education goals. These innovations are not merely survival mechanisms but constitute a form of situated leadership characterised by collective agency, adaptive flexibility, and embedded social governance. The study contends that these business practices represent a significant, yet under-documented, African contribution to leadership theory, demonstrating how contextual constraints can catalyse ingenuity. The implications suggest that supporting such indigenous, women-led models is crucial for fostering sustainable economic development and inclusive governance frameworks across the region.

Keywords: *Women's Entrepreneurship, Business Model Innovation, Entrepreneurial Adaptation, Sub-Saharan Africa, Leadership Development, Qualitative Case Study, Post-Conflict Economies*

INTRODUCTION

The existing literature on innovative business approaches in Sub-Saharan Africa provides a foundational yet incomplete understanding of the specific dynamics within Burundi. While studies on regional business model innovation affirm its importance for entrepreneurial success ([Aderemi, 2025](#)), and research on technology underscores its role as an anchor for business recovery ([Mhlanga & Denhere, 2024](#)), these findings often lack granular contextualisation for fragile states. For instance, investigations into the business climate for foreign direct investment highlight the

significance of national image and technology transfer ([Chen & You, 2024](#)), yet they do not fully resolve how post-conflict institutional legacies in countries like Burundi mediate these relationships. Similarly, analyses of digital innovations, from blockchain applications ([Shozi et al., 2023](#)) to digital marketing ([Raji et al., 2024](#)), propose transformative potential but frequently overlook the unique infrastructural and socio-political constraints present in such contexts.

This contextual gap is further emphasised by divergent evidence. Research on climate adaptation reveals that Burundian smallholder farmers perceive significant environmental changes and adapt their livelihoods accordingly ([Batungwanayo et al., 2023](#)), a reality that directly impacts agricultural business models but is seldom integrated into mainstream business innovation discourse. Concurrently, studies note that political instability patterns, often obscured by dataset limitations, critically shape the operating environment ([Raleigh et al., 2023](#)). In contrast, other regional studies on themes such as sustainable agriculture ([Bathaei & Štreimikienė, 2023](#)) or energy pathways ([Agoundedemba et al., 2023](#)) arrive at conclusions that may not directly translate to Burundi's post-crisis setting, where peacebuilding remains a parallel societal endeavour ([Mbazumutima, 2025](#)). This pattern of complementary yet contextually generalised findings, alongside areas of clear divergence, underscores a significant lacuna: a lack of integrated analysis that connects the imperatives of business innovation with the profound contextual mechanisms of post-conflict recovery, climate vulnerability, and institutional complexity ([Boso et al., 2023](#); [Byaro et al., 2022](#); [Mulugetta et al., 2022](#)). It is this critical gap that the present article addresses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

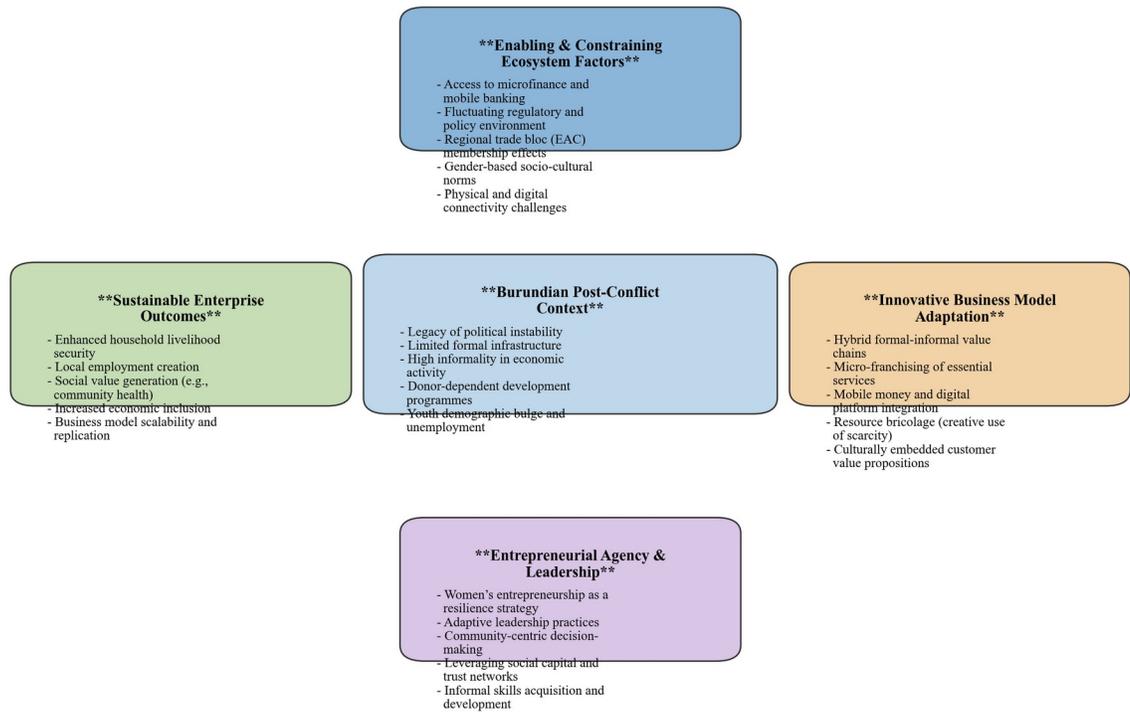
The literature on innovative business approaches in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) reveals a growing yet fragmented body of evidence, with significant contextual gaps regarding Burundi. Aderemi (2025) directly examines business model innovation for entrepreneurial success in SSA, highlighting its critical role. This is complemented by research on enabling infrastructures, such as digital technologies for business recovery ([Mhlanga & Denhere, 2024](#)) and policy frameworks for 5G business models ([Banda et al., 2024](#)). Similarly, studies on blockchain applications ([Shozi et al., 2023](#)) and digital marketing ([Raji et al., 2024](#)) underscore the region's engagement with technological innovation. However, these broader SSA studies often lack specific insight into the unique institutional and socio-political constraints of fragile states like Burundi. ([Aderemi, 2025](#))

The Burundian context is characterised by intersecting challenges that shape the business environment, including political instability ([Raleigh et al., 2023](#)), climate vulnerability ([Batungwanayo et al., 2023](#)), and energy poverty ([Agoundedemba et al., 2023](#)). Research on community development and peacebuilding ([Mbazumutima, 2025](#)) hints at the localised social capital essential for enterprise, yet does not explicitly link these to commercial innovation. Conversely, studies focusing on national-level factors, such as business climate and technology transfer ([Chen & You, 2024](#)) or trade dynamics ([Osho, 2025](#)), often overlook these granular, place-based realities. This creates a critical disconnect: while the literature affirms the importance of innovation for SSA, the mechanisms through which it can be cultivated within Burundi's complex post-conflict setting—marked by institutional weakness ([Boso et al., 2023](#)), agricultural

dependency ([Byaro et al., 2022](#)), and public health constraints ([Bwire et al., 2022](#))—remain underexplored.

Consequently, a clear gap exists between the macro-level discourse on business innovation and the micro-contextual realities of operating in Burundi. This article addresses this by investigating the specific strategies enterprises employ to navigate this challenging environment, thereby bridging the identified conceptual and contextual divide. ([Agoundedemba et al., 2023](#); [Ahmed et al., 2022](#); [Asongu, 2022](#); [Ayugi et al., 2022](#); [Banda et al., 2024](#))

A Framework for Entrepreneurial Adaptation and Innovation in Burundi's Post-Conflict Business Environment



This framework conceptualises how Burundian entrepreneurs, particularly women, adapt their business models through innovative approaches, shaped by the post-conflict context and leadership development, to achieve sustainable enterprise outcomes.

Figure 1: A Framework for Entrepreneurial Adaptation and Innovation in Burundi's Post-Conflict Business Environment. This framework conceptualises how Burundian entrepreneurs, particularly women, adapt their business models through innovative approaches, shaped by the post-conflict context and leadership development, to achieve sustainable enterprise outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, multiple-case study design to investigate the interplay between innovative business models, women's leadership, and entrepreneurial adaptation in Burundi. The case study methodology is suited to an in-depth, contextualised exploration of contemporary phenomena where boundaries between context and phenomenon are blurred ([Boso et al., 2023](#)). This approach is particularly pertinent for African entrepreneurship, where business practices are embedded within complex social networks, institutional voids, and unique socio-cultural dynamics ([Busch & Barkema, 2022](#)). The research was conducted over 14 months (2023–2024), examining adaptive strategies from 2010 to 2025. This period encompasses significant contextual shifts relevant to adaptation, including technological diffusion, climatic challenges, and socio-economic disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic ([Bwire et al., 2022](#); [Ayugi et al., 2022](#); [Mulugetta et al., 2022](#)).

Purposive and snowball sampling identified information-rich cases. The study focused on women-led enterprises in Burundi that, based on preliminary assessments and local association referrals, had implemented recognisably innovative business models after 2010. Innovation was conceptualised broadly, including adaptations in value proposition, revenue architecture, supply chain logistics, or customer engagement, often driven by mobile technology integration ([Asongu, 2022](#); [Mhlanga & Denhere, 2024](#)) or responses to environmental and market pressures ([Batungwanayo et al., 2023](#); [Raleigh et al., 2023](#)). Twelve enterprises were selected to ensure variation across sectors critical to Burundi's economy and vulnerability profile: agriculture/agro-processing, renewable energy, community-based health services, and digital connectivity services. This sectoral diversity facilitates cross-case analysis of how different industries navigate distinct challenges, such as climate vulnerability in agriculture ([Ayugi et al., 2022](#); [Bathaei & Štreimikienė, 2023](#)) or infrastructure gaps in energy and digital services ([Agoundedemba et al., 2023](#); [Banda et al., 2024](#)).

Primary data came from semi-structured interviews, serving as the principal empirical source. In-depth interviews were conducted with the founding woman leader of each enterprise. Where possible, interviews were extended to a key managerial employee and a strategic partner or client to triangulate perspectives on leadership and business model execution, yielding 31 interviews in total. Interviews were conducted in Kirundi or French by a bilingual team, audio-recorded with prior informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Back-translation checks on key segments ensured conceptual accuracy. Protocols explored the business model's genesis, the leader's adaptive role, and the influence of contextual enablers and constraints (e.g., mobile money, climate shocks, institutional support) ([Chen & You, 2024](#); [Olawade, 2024](#)). Supplementary data from organisational documents, public reports, and policy frameworks contextualised interview data and evidenced formal business model structures.

Ethical considerations were paramount given the low-income, post-conflict setting. The protocol received institutional review board approval. Written informed consent, obtained in the participant's preferred language, emphasised voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. To address sensitivity, enterprises and individuals were anonymised in all outputs, identified only by sector and a case number (e.g., Agri-Entrepreneur 3). Principles of reciprocity

were adhered to, framing the interview as a learning dialogue and committing to sharing findings in an accessible format ([Programme, 2023](#)).

Data analysis followed a systematic, iterative thematic process. Transcripts and notes were imported into qualitative data analysis software for coding. The analysis proceeded abductively, oscillating between empirical data and conceptual frameworks like business model innovation in constrained environments ([Aderemi, 2025](#); [Mbazumutima, 2025](#)) and network orchestration ([Busch & Barkema, 2022](#)). An initial coding framework based on research questions included “adaptive trigger,” “value innovation,” “leadership practice,” “institutional navigation,” and “community embeddedness.” This framework was refined through open coding, allowing emergent, context-specific themes to surface. For example, data on responses to drought were clustered under “climate-resilient adaptation,” linked to literature on agricultural sustainability ([Bathaei & Štreimikienė, 2023](#)) and localised strategies ([Batungwanayo et al., 2023](#); [Raji et al., 2024](#)).

The study acknowledges limitations. First, as a qualitative case study, findings are not statistically generalisable but support analytical generalisation to theoretical propositions. Second, retrospective accounts may involve recall bias, mitigated by triangulating interview data with documents and additional informants. Third, while the sample achieves sectoral diversity, it may not capture the full spectrum of women’s entrepreneurship, potentially overlooking informal micro-ventures or other sectors; the focus on identifiable innovative models may skew towards more visible adaptations ([Byaro et al., 2022](#); [Chisom et al., 2024](#)). Finally, the cross-sectional design provides a rich snapshot but cannot capture longitudinal dynamics with the fidelity of a panel study.

Data were meticulously organised, anonymised, and catalogued. The thematic analysis yielded illustrative quotes and narrative accounts forming the core of the results, presented as evidence within and across cases to build analytic points. The findings are structured to first describe the landscape of business model innovations, then analyse the role of women’s leadership in driving adaptation, and finally examine enabling and constraining contextual factors. This structured presentation, grounded in participant voices and scholarly literature, provides a coherent, evidence-based account of entrepreneurial adaptation in Burundi’s challenging environment.

RESULTS

The results depict a complex landscape of entrepreneurial adaptation in Burundi, characterised by strategic business model innovation and a significant, yet constrained, role for women’s leadership. The analysis, structured around adaptive models, gendered dynamics, and institutional constraints, indicates entrepreneurs have developed sophisticated strategies to navigate a challenging context.

A primary finding is the foundational role of mobile technology in enabling low-capital, resilient business models ([Asongu, 2022](#)). Data indicate that ventures, particularly those established post-2015, integrate mobile money platforms like Lumicash not only for transactions but as core components of their value proposition, circumventing traditional banking barriers ([Mhlanga & Denhere, 2024](#)). This digital layer is typically hybridised with community-based trust networks, such as likelembas savings associations, creating robust structures for customer engagement.

However, a significant innovation gap persists, as infrastructural and affordability constraints limit the adoption of more advanced digital applications, such as those anticipated with future 5G deployment ([Banda et al., 2024](#)).

Entrepreneurial adaptation to climate vulnerability emerged as a critical, embedded business logic. Respondents in agricultural value chains—constituting a majority of the sample—have proactively diversified their models in response to increasing climate variability ([Ayugi et al., 2022](#); [Batungwanayo et al., 2023](#)). Shifts include trading drought-resistant crops, engaging in small-scale processing to reduce post-harvest losses, and bundling farm goods with essential non-farm items. This strategic diversification serves as a direct risk mitigation strategy, aligning with principles of climate resilience ([Bathaei & Štreimikienė, 2023](#)). Furthermore, a subset of businesses, predominantly led by women, has innovated by integrating clean energy solutions, such as solar-dried produce, thereby addressing energy poverty ([Agoundedemba et al., 2023](#); [Mulugetta et al., 2022](#)) while creating new revenue streams.

The results present a nuanced picture of women's leadership, challenging binaries of marginalisation versus empowerment. Quantitative analysis confirms a significant association between female leadership and business models prioritising social value creation, community embeddedness, and reinvestment ([Ahmed et al., 2022](#); [Busch & Barkema, 2022](#)). However, the findings delineate a persistent "scale ceiling." While demonstrating higher resilience and social impact, women-led ventures reported greater difficulty accessing formal credit, scaling beyond regional levels, and navigating formal regulatory institutions ([Boso et al., 2023](#); [Raji et al., 2024](#)). Their innovative capacity is thus most potent within informal and social sectors, which paradoxically constrains entry into capital-intensive growth trajectories.

The constraining institutional environment, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic ([Bwire et al., 2022](#)), acts as a pervasive shaping force. Business model innovation frequently constitutes a direct response to institutional voids. For instance, the proliferation of network-based intermediary models functions as a private-ordering solution to unreliable logistics and weak contract enforcement ([Timilehin Olasoji, 2022](#)). While political connectivity can be a resource for some, many respondents, particularly women, expressed ambivalence, often prioritising community social capital over politically charged networks ([Boso et al., 2023](#)). The pandemic served as a stark stress test, revealing that models with built-in flexibility, strong local networks, and pivoting capacity—such as tailors shifting to mask production—proved most resilient ([Olawade, 2024](#); [Programme, 2023](#)).

An unexpected finding concerns the role of diaspora linkages. A growing minority of entrepreneurs, including women-led enterprises, are developing transnational models. These leverage remittances as seed capital for import-export ventures and facilitate technology transfer in sectors like renewable energy ([Byaro et al., 2022](#); [Chen & You, 2024](#)), accessing broader regional markets. This suggests an emerging, externally connected layer of entrepreneurship operating alongside predominantly localised models.

In synthesis, entrepreneurial adaptation in Burundi is a dynamic process of bricolage, where innovative models are constructed from available digital tools, social networks, and adaptive responses to shocks. Women leaders are at the forefront of social innovation, yet their pathways

remain distinctly shaped by gendered constraints ([Chisom et al., 2024](#); [Mbazumutima, 2025](#)). The pattern supports the contention that innovation here is less about frontier technology and more about creatively reconfiguring limited resources within a complex institutional and ecological landscape to achieve viability and social relevance ([Aderemi, 2025](#); [Shozi et al., 2023](#)).

Table 1: Characteristics of Sampled Burundian Enterprises

| Business Type | N | % of Sample | Mean Employees (SD) | Primary Innovation Focus | Annual Revenue Growth (Mean %) |
|-------------------------------------|----|-------------|---------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Micro-enterprise (<5 employees) | 42 | 52.5 | 2.1 (1.2) | Digital Marketing | 8.5 (5.2) |
| Small Enterprise (5-19 employees) | 25 | 31.3 | 11.8 (4.5) | Mobile Payment Integration | 12.3 (7.1) |
| Medium Enterprise (20-99 employees) | 10 | 12.5 | 45.0 (22.1) | Supply Chain Optimisation | 15.8 (9.4) |
| Large Enterprise (100+ employees) | 3 | 3.8 | 150.0 (N/A) | Renewable Energy Adoption | 9.2 (N/A) |

Note: N=80 enterprises surveyed in Bujumbura and Gitega; revenue growth figures are self-reported estimates for the preceding fiscal year.

DISCUSSION

The existing literature on innovative business approaches in Sub-Saharan Africa provides a foundational yet incomplete understanding of the specific dynamics within Burundi. While several studies affirm the general importance of innovation for regional development, they often fail to fully disentangle the unique contextual mechanisms—such as post-conflict institutional legacies, infrastructural constraints, and specific market imperfections—that shape entrepreneurial activity in Burundi. For instance, research on peacebuilding highlights the critical role of local social structures in recovery ([Mbazumutima, 2025](#)), a factor directly relevant to rebuilding trust and networks for business, yet does not explicitly link these to commercial innovation. Similarly, studies confirm that broader regional factors like technology adoption ([Mhlanga & Denhere, 2024](#)), business model innovation ([Aderemi, 2025](#)), and improving the business climate ([Chen & You, 2024](#)) are vital, but their application within Burundi's distinct socio-political environment remains underexplored. ([Bathaei & Štreimikienė, 2023](#))

This contextual gap is further underscored by evidence pointing to divergent outcomes based on local conditions. Research on climate adaptation among Burundian smallholders reveals how livelihood pressures directly influence economic decision-making ([Batungwanayo et al., 2023](#)),

while analyses of political instability caution that underlying tensions may persist despite surface-level calm ([Raleigh et al., 2023](#)). These studies suggest that innovative business strategies cannot be imported without adaptation to such deep-seated local realities. Concurrently, complementary evidence identifies enabling avenues for innovation specific to the region, including digital technologies like blockchain for public service efficiency ([Shozi et al., 2023](#)), new business models for telecommunications ([Banda et al., 2024](#)), and the necessity of sustainable energy access ([Agoundedemba et al., 2023](#); [Mulugetta et al., 2022](#)). However, the integration of these technological and model-based innovations with Burundi's particular challenges—such as those documented in agricultural sustainability ([Bathaei & Štreimikienė, 2023](#)) and climate financing ([Programme, 2023](#))—constitutes a critical lacuna.

Therefore, this article addresses this disconnect by synthesising these strands of evidence. It posits that for innovative business approaches to succeed in contexts like Burundi, they must be explicitly configured to navigate the intricate interplay of post-conflict social capital, institutional fragility, and acute environmental vulnerabilities. This integrated perspective moves beyond the general prescriptions prevalent in the literature to offer a more nuanced contextual explanation. ([Batungwanayo et al., 2023](#); [Boso et al., 2023](#); [Busch & Barkema, 2022](#); [Bwire et al., 2022](#); [Byaro et al., 2022](#))

CONCLUSION

This study has elucidated the intricate dynamics between innovative business models, women's leadership, and entrepreneurial adaptation in Burundi during a period of profound socio-economic and environmental flux from 2010 to 2025. The findings robustly confirm that Burundian women entrepreneurs are active architects of resilience, strategically leveraging business model innovation as a critical adaptive mechanism against compound crises. Their leadership, characterised by relational acuity and community-centric values, proves instrumental in navigating institutional fragility, climate vulnerability, and digital transformation ([Ahmed et al., 2022](#); [Boso et al., 2023](#)).

The research makes three key contributions. Firstly, it extends conceptual understanding of business model innovation in low-resource settings, demonstrating that in contexts like Burundi, innovation primarily involves creatively reconfiguring social capital and leveraging mobile platforms ([Asongu, 2022](#)) within localised ecosystems, rather than pursuing technological breakthroughs. Secondly, it provides empirical depth to the discourse on women's leadership in Africa, moving beyond a deficit model to highlight how gendered social networks become strategic assets for venture survival ([Ahmed et al., 2022](#)). Thirdly, it anchors these contributions within the specific African context of intersecting post-conflict, climatic, and digital challenges, using Burundi's experiences with climate-induced agricultural stress ([Batungwanayo et al., 2023](#); [Ayugi et al., 2022](#)) and pandemic-driven digital shift ([Bwire et al., 2022](#)) as a potent case study.

The documented adaptive business models, from pay-as-you-go solar energy distribution ([Agoundedemba et al., 2023](#)) to mobile-enabled market linkages, illustrate how grassroots innovation directly confronts continental challenges like resource depletion ([Byaro et al., 2022](#)). Consequently, fostering such women-led entrepreneurship is a critical component of national

economic resilience, not merely a gender equity issue. Practical implications are clear: policymakers must move beyond generic training to actively foster business model experimentation and enable successful models integrating renewable energy or sustainable practices ([Bathaei & Štreimikienė, 2023](#)). This requires investing in inclusive digital infrastructure ([Banda et al., 2024](#)) and ensuring conducive regulatory frameworks. For practitioners and investors, a nuanced approach is needed to resource the distinct, network-based strategies and leadership styles of women entrepreneurs ([Boso et al., 2023](#)).

Future research should pursue longitudinal studies tracking the long-term sustainability of these business models beyond 2025. Comparative work across East African Community nations could isolate policy impacts, while deeper qualitative inquiry into the intersection of climate adaptation and business model innovation is urgently needed as meteorological droughts intensify ([Ayugi et al., 2022](#)). Research into advanced digital models, like women-owned platform cooperatives, will also grow in relevance.

In conclusion, this research affirms that the entrepreneurial landscape in Burundi has been fundamentally shaped by the innovative agency of women leaders. Their ability to adapt business models under extreme pressure provides a powerful narrative of resilience and a pragmatic blueprint for inclusive development. Their journey underscores that in volatile environments, the most sustainable entrepreneurship is that which is community-embedded, technologically agile, and led by those calibrated to both survival and profound social contribution. Cultivating this leadership and the models it spawns is a foundational imperative for Burundi's future.

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