

Entrepreneurial Dynamics and the Sustainability of Very Small Enterprises: The Case of Networking in a Sub-Saharan African Context.

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Abstract

In a Cameroonian context marked by the structural fragility of very small enterprises (VSEs) and a high mortality rate during their first years of existence, this study examines the effect of networking, understood as the mobilisation of formal, informal and cooperative ties, on the sustainability of these economic units. Grounded in social capital theory (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973, 1985; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998) and in the entrepreneurial ecosystem framework (Isenberg, 2010, 2011; Stam, 2015), the study relies on a questionnaire survey administered to thirty VSEs in the city of Douala, selected through non-probability purposive sampling. Data were processed with SPSS version 20 using principal component analysis, a reliability test (Cronbach's alpha) and simple linear regression. Results show that networking has a positive and highly significant effect on the sustainability of the VSEs studied (standardised beta of 0.988; R^2 of 0.977; p below .001), confirming the research hypothesis. The discussion situates this finding within recent international literature on entrepreneurial social capital and new venture survival, and highlights the particular role played, in the Cameroonian context, by informal networks such as tontines and family, ethnic or religious solidarities, alongside formal and cooperative networks. The article also discusses, with due caution, the unusually large magnitude of the relationship observed given the very small sample size, and offers managerial recommendations and avenues for future research based on replication at a larger scale.

Keywords: networking, social capital, sustainability, very small enterprise, entrepreneurial ecosystem, Cameroon.

Introduction

Very small enterprises (VSEs) occupy a structuring place in the Cameroonian economic fabric. They account for close to 80% of all registered small and medium-sized enterprises and contribute significantly to job creation in urban areas (MINPMEESA, 2022; INS, 2022). This quantitative weight nonetheless stands in contrast with persistent fragility: a high proportion of these entities disappears within their very first years of existence, owing to the combined effect of restricted access to formal financing, a shortfall in managerial skills, and still-incomplete embedding within institutional support mechanisms (St-Pierre et al., 2015). Faced with this structural vulnerability, the entrepreneurship literature has long identified networking, the capacity of the entrepreneur and their organisation to build, maintain and mobilise relationships with other economic and institutional actors, as a lever capable of at least partially offsetting the narrow resource base typical of small firms (Granovetter, 1973, 1985; Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Networking encompasses a plurality of forms whose relative importance varies with the institutional context. In developed economies, attention has long focused on formal networks, professional associations, chambers of commerce, interfirm partnerships, and on their capacity to reduce transaction costs and facilitate access to resources (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007; Dagnino & Padula, 2002). In African economies, marked by high economic informality and by formal support institutions that remain thin on the ground, informal networks, tontines, family, ethnic or religious solidarities, play a role that is at least as decisive, partially substituting for the financing and regulatory mechanisms that formal institutions do not always provide (Fafchamps, 2006; Meagher, 2010; Minbaeva et al., 2023). The entrepreneurial ecosystem framework (Isenberg, 2010, 2011; Stam, 2015; Autio et al., 2014) precisely allows these different layers of networks, formal and informal, to be articulated as components of a supportive environment whose density and accessibility shape the trajectory of young firms.

While the effect of networking on the performance or growth of small firms has been the subject of an abundant literature, notably through the foundational meta-analysis by Stam, Arzlanian, and Elfring (2014), the more specific question of its effect on firm survival or sustainability, that is, on firms' capacity to endure over time rather than on their financial performance at a given point, remains comparatively under-documented, particularly in the African context. Recent studies have

begun to fill this gap in other settings: Song, Dana, and Berger (2021) show that the structure of entrepreneurs' online social networks predicts the subsequent survival rate of the firms they create, while Boudreaux et al. (2025) establish that community-level social capital moderates the effect of the founder's own social capital on new-venture survival. To our knowledge, however, these recent advances have no equivalent focused on Cameroonian very small enterprises, where the available literature most often addresses performance or growth rather than survival as such, and where the interplay between formal networks and community-based informal networks remains empirically under-explored (St-Pierre et al., 2015; Um Ngouem et al., 2026). We therefore rely on this reality to frame the research topic as follows: “Entrepreneurial dynamics and the sustainability of very small enterprises: the case of networking in a sub-Saharan African context”.

This research's main objective is to examine the effect of networking on the sustainability of Cameroonian VSEs, drawing on field data collected from thirty VSEs in the city of Douala. The hypothesis tested is as follows: networking has a significant effect on the sustainability of Cameroonian VSEs. The article is organised in four parts. It first presents the theoretical framework and literature review, together with the formulation of the hypothesis (I). It then sets out the methodology adopted (II), before presenting the results of the statistical analysis (III). These results are then discussed at the light of the existing literature, and ended with the limitations of the study and perspectives for further studies (IV).

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.1. Networking as a Component of the Entrepreneur's Social Capital

The concept of networking rests on the theoretical foundation of social capital, defined by Coleman (1988) as the set of resources embedded in an actor's social relationships and mobilisable in pursuit of their objectives. Granovetter (1973) was the first to draw attention to the strength of weak ties, those infrequent but diverse relationships that provide access to non-redundant information and to opportunities that strong ties, denser but more homogeneous, do not always afford. In a later, equally classic article, Granovetter (1985) deepens this reflection by showing that economic action always remains embedded, that is, structured by the social relations within which it takes place, rather than determined by the individual calculus alone that neoclassical economic theory postulates. Nahapiet

and Ghoshal (1998) extend this perspective by distinguishing three dimensions of social capital, structural, relational and cognitive, and by showing how their combination facilitates the creation and exchange of intellectual resources within and between organisations. Fukuyama (1995), for his part, emphasises trust as the foundation of economic cooperation, while Lin (2001) formalises social capital as an investment in social relations from which a return is expected, on a par with an investment in human or financial capital. Bidault and Jarillo (1995), finally, show that interpersonal trust reduces transaction costs and facilitates the conclusion of economic agreements in environments where formal institutions offer incomplete guarantees, conditions that correspond fairly closely to those under which Cameroonian VSEs operate.

These various contributions converge on a shared intuition: the relationships an entrepreneur maintains with their environment constitute a resource in their own right, distinct from financial or human capital, yet capable of partially offsetting their insufficiency. This relational resource may take the form of formal networks, structured around an institution or an explicit contractual framework, cooperatives, professional associations, chambers of commerce, public support schemes, or of informal networks, grounded in interpersonal ties of trust, reciprocity and community belonging, family networks, tontines, ethnic or religious networks (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 2001). A third form, coopetition, denotes the coexistence, between otherwise competing firms, of cooperation targeted at non-differentiating activities, logistics, procurement, market intelligence, which allows certain costs to be pooled while preserving each firm's strategic autonomy (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996; Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Dagnino & Padula, 2002). This latter form of networking is nonetheless accompanied by specific tensions, arising from the coexistence of convergent and divergent interests, which Tidström (2014) analyses through the lens of relational tension management.

1.2. Networking, Entrepreneurial Ecosystems and Small Business Survival

The entrepreneurial ecosystem framework, developed by Isenberg (2010, 2011) and later systematised by Stam (2015), offers a complementary reading of networking, situating it within a broader set of cultural, social, financial, institutional and human conditions that jointly determine a territory's capacity to support firm creation and survival. Autio et al. (2014) particularly stress the importance of the context within which entrepreneurial action unfolds, a context of which networks

form a central component. Applied to the African continent, however, this framework has recently come under critical scrutiny: Coad et al. (2025) argue that transposing the entrepreneurial ecosystem model as such, conceived from institutionally dense North American and European settings, risks underestimating the importance of structural transformation and of the fabric of large firms in African development trajectories. This caution calls for avoiding too mechanical a transposition of the entrepreneurial ecosystem framework and for paying particular attention to the forms of networking actually mobilised by small firms in African contexts, informal forms in particular. Negri, Ciambotti, Theodoraki, and Littlewood (2025), drawing on a study of entrepreneurial support organisations in Uganda, show that these organisations must contend with specific resource constraints that limit their capacity to densify the local ecosystem, which further reinforces the importance of the proximity networks mobilised directly by entrepreneurs. In Cameroon, St-Pierre, Foleu, Abdulnour, Nomo, and Fouda (2015), drawing on a survey of more than a hundred SME owner-managers, document the specific challenges facing the development of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in this context, notably limited access to financing and the low density of support structures, which further increases the compensatory role played by networks mobilised directly by entrepreneurs.

On strictly empirical grounds, the recent international literature establishes an increasingly precise link between networking and firm survival, rather than between networking and performance in the broad sense. Song, Dana, and Berger (2021) show, drawing on the study of the online social network structure of two hundred and seventy-three founders, that the characteristics of these networks predict the subsequent survival rate of the firms created. Boudreaux, Bradley, Jha, and Mazzoni (2025) establish that the social capital of the community of establishment moderates the effect of the founder's own social capital on new-venture survival, suggesting that the effect of networking is not confined to the relationships directly mobilised by the entrepreneur but extends to the relational density of their immediate environment. Amini, Johan, Kashefi Pour, and Mohamed (2023) confirm, in a different setting, that of firms taken public, that social capital is a robust predictor of firm survival. Klyver, Hou, van Burg, and Elfring (2026), in a recent synthesis of this field, further call for considering the entrepreneur not merely as the passive beneficiary of their network but as an agent who actively shapes its structure and composition, a perspective that

usefully illuminates how Cameroonian VSE owner-managers build their portfolio of formal and informal relationships over time.

1.3. Informal and Coopetitive Networks in the African Context

In economies where formal institutions offer incomplete guarantees, informal networks play a widely documented substitutive role. Minbaeva, Ledeneva, Muratbekova-Touron, and Horak (2023) show, from a general theoretical standpoint, that the persistence of informal institutions alongside formal ones is explained precisely by their capacity to fill the latter's shortcomings, rather than by a mere cultural holdover. In Cameroon, this substitutive function is particularly well documented with respect to tontines, those rotating savings and credit associations to which Tello Rozas and Gauthier (2012) devote a now-classic study, showing that participation in a tontine is associated with improved firm performance by providing access to credit that the formal banking system does not always extend to very small firms. Family, ethnic and religious networks play an analogous role in pooling resources and reducing perceived risk, in a context of limited access to bank credit (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2007; Fafchamps, 2006).

Coopetitive networks, although less documented in the Cameroonian context, are gaining relevance as the fabric of very small enterprises operating in adjacent sectors becomes denser. Sabel, Dalborg, von Friedrichs, and Kallmuenzer (2024) show, drawing on a study conducted during a public-health crisis, that microenterprises engaged in coopetitive networks display markedly greater robustness than those without such ties, fifty-nine percent of firms in a coopetitive network being classified as robust against twenty-five percent of isolated firms. This result suggests that the targeted pooling of certain resources among competitors, far from weakening each firm's position, can instead strengthen collective capacity to absorb shocks, a finding directly relevant to the question of Cameroonian VSE sustainability. On the African continent, John (2024), drawing on a survey of two hundred and seventy-eight Tanzanian SMEs, and Dwumah, Amaniampong, Kissiedu, and Boahen (2024), drawing on a survey of two hundred and one Ghanaian owner-managers, both confirm that the density of an entrepreneur's relational ties positively moderates their firm's non-financial performance, lending further regional support to the hypothesis of a networking effect on the trajectory of African small firms.

1.4. Hypothesis Development

Taken together, this body of theoretical and empirical work converges on the idea that networking, in its various forms, formal, informal and cooperative, constitutes a relational resource capable of strengthening small firms' capacity to endure over time, by partially offsetting the narrowness of their own resources. In the specific context of Cameroonian VSEs, marked by limited access to formal financing and by the persistent density of community solidarities, this relationship appears all the more plausible. On this basis, the following hypothesis is formulated and subjected to an empirical test: *networking has a positive and significant effect on the sustainability of Cameroonian VSEs.*

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design and Epistemological Stance

As part of this study, we adopted a positivist epistemological stance. The choice of a positivist epistemological stance is justified by the desire to objectively measure the effect of networking on the sustainability of very small enterprises (VSEs). This stance makes it possible to test hypotheses based on quantitative data and to statistically identify relationships between the variables under investigation.

This research follows a hypothetico-deductive approach and relies on a quantitative methodology, deemed appropriate for statistically testing a postulated relationship between two variables and for objectively measuring its intensity (Charreire & Durieux, 2007). The study adopts a cross-sectional research design, data having been collected at a single point in time from the units of observation.

2.2. Population, Sampling and Data Collection

The target population consists of all very small enterprises located in the city of Douala, chosen for its position as the country's leading economic centre and the resulting concentration of firm headquarters. In the absence of an exhaustive sampling frame listing all Cameroonian VSEs, a condition frequently encountered in research on the informal or weakly formalised sector, sampling was carried out using a non-probability, purposive method, targeting owner-managers or officers of

VSEs able to provide reliable information on networking practices and on the situation of their firm. The final sample comprises thirty VSEs. Data collection was carried out by means of a structured questionnaire, administered both in person and electronically, whose items on networking and sustainability were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

It should be emphasised from the outset, in the interest of the methodological transparency that will be revisited in the discussion section, that the size of this sample, although common in dissertations of this level, remains very small relative to the standards usually expected for publication in an internationally refereed journal. The results presented below should therefore be read as those of an exploratory study, rather than as estimates generalisable to the entire population of Cameroonian VSEs.

2.3. Variable Measurement

The independent variable, networking, was operationalised through items relating to attendance at meetings of the respondent's cooperative structure, the perceived contribution of cooperative resource-pooling to firm performance, participation in strategic alliances with competitors, participation in tontines for financial support, the perceived quality of information exchange within the network, and the perceived role of the network in overcoming difficult periods. Together, these items cover the three forms of networking identified in the literature review, formal, informal and cooperative. The dependent variable, sustainability, was measured through items relating to regular improvement in profitability, meeting customer needs and expectations, investment in employee development, and revenue growth over time.

2.4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data were processed using SPSS software, version 20. The analytical procedure followed three steps. A principal component analysis was first conducted separately on the networking items and on the sustainability items, in order to verify the unidimensionality of each construct and to extract a composite score; the adequacy of each analysis was verified through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The reliability of each scale was then assessed using

Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Finally, a simple linear regression was estimated, regressing the sustainability factor score on the networking factor score, in order to test the research hypothesis.

3. Research findings

3.1. Sample Profile

The sample surveyed comprises thirty owner-managers of VSEs in the city of Douala. It includes a majority of women (66.7%); respondents are predominantly aged between twenty-five and thirty-five (70.0%) and mostly hold a higher-education qualification (83.3%). The firms represented operate mainly in retail trade (46.7%), food service (26.7%) and services (20.0%), most often employ between one and five staff (66.7%), and are for the most part recently established, 43.3% having been in operation for less than a year and 46.7% between one and five years.

3.2. Principal Component Analysis and Scale Reliability

The principal component analysis conducted on the six retained networking items yields a single-component solution, with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index standing at 0.875, a value rated "meritorious" to "marvelous" against usual thresholds, and Bartlett's test of sphericity being significant (approximate chi-square = 87.589; $df = 15$; $p < .001$), confirming the adequacy of the data for factor analysis. This single component accounts for 64.9% of the total variance of the six items, with an eigenvalue of 3.896. Scale reliability is very satisfactory, with Cronbach's alpha standing at 0.888. The analysis conducted on the four retained sustainability items yields results of the same nature: a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index of 0.772, a significant Bartlett's test (approximate chi-square = 50.385; $df = 6$; $p < .001$), a single component accounting for 69.8% of the variance, with an eigenvalue of 2.793, and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.852.

Table 1. Factorial adequacy and reliability indicators for the scales

Construct	Retained items	KMO	Bartlett's chi-square (df)	Sig.	Variance explained	Cronbach's alpha
Networking	6	0.875	87.589 (15)	.000	64.9%	0.888
Sustainability	4	0.772	50.385 (6)	.000	69.8%	0.852

Source: survey results, SPSS 20 analysis.

3.3. Hypothesis Testing

The simple linear regression model, explaining the sustainability factor score by the networking factor score, proves highly significant overall. The coefficient of determination R^2 reaches 0.977 (adjusted R^2 of 0.976), meaning that networking explains, in this sample, 97.7% of the observed variance in the sustainability of the VSEs surveyed. The F-test of overall model significance confirms this result ($F(1, 28) = 1385.138$; $p < .001$).

Table 2. Regression model summary (dependent variable: sustainability)

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. error of the estimate	F	df1	df2	Sig.
1	0.988	0.977	0.976	0.1548	1385.138	1	28	.000

Source: survey results, SPSS 20 analysis.

Examination of the coefficients confirms this effect at the individual level. The standardised regression coefficient associated with networking is 0.988 ($t = 37.217$; $p < .001$), indicating a positive, strong and highly significant relationship between networking and the sustainability of the VSEs in the sample. Unsurprisingly, since the factor scores are centred, the model's constant is not significantly different from zero.

Table 3. Regression coefficients (dependent variable: sustainability)

Variable	B	Std. error	Standardised beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	≈ 0.000	0.026	—	0.000	1.000
Networking	0.988	0.027	0.988	37.217	.000

Source: survey results, SPSS 20 analysis.

In light of these results, the research hypothesis that networking has a significant effect on the sustainability of Cameroonian VSEs is confirmed by the sample data. This result aligns with the general thrust of the literature reviewed, while displaying, as discussed below, an unusually high statistical intensity that calls for cautious interpretation.

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation of Results in Light of the Literature

The result obtained, a positive and highly significant effect of networking on sustainability, corroborates the theoretical thesis advanced by proponents of entrepreneurial social capital (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1985; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) and is consistent with recent empirical work establishing a link between an entrepreneur's relational structure and their firm's survival (Song, Dana, & Berger, 2021; Boudreaux et al., 2025). It also lends support to the specific contribution of the literature on informal networks in the African context, particularly the role attributed to tontines in financing and securing the activity of very small enterprises (Tello Rozas & Gauthier, 2012), as well as the broader thesis that informal institutions persist and play a leading economic role precisely where formal institutions remain incomplete (Minbaeva et al., 2023). Finally, in a setting more strongly marked by informality, the result obtained extends the findings of Sabel et al. (2024) on the protective role of cooperative networks, and those of John (2024) and Dwumah et al. (2024) on the role of networking in the performance of African small firms.

4.2. A Statistical Intensity Warranting Cautious Interpretation

Scientific rigour requires commenting, without downplaying it, on the statistically unusual character of the result obtained. A coefficient of determination of 0.977, together with a standardised coefficient of 0.988, far exceeds the orders of magnitude generally reported in the literature on entrepreneurial social capital, where coefficients of determination for this type of relationship most often fall between 0.10 and 0.40, including in the larger-scale studies drawn upon in the literature review. Several, non-mutually-exclusive explanations may be advanced. The first relates to the very small sample size, thirty observations, which makes estimates particularly sensitive to sample composition and liable to produce relationships of a magnitude that would not necessarily replicate in a larger sample. The second relates to the risk of common-method variance bias, as both variables were measured simultaneously from the same single respondent per firm, using scales of the same format, which may artificially inflate the observed correlation between scores. The third relates to the very nature of the items used to measure sustainability, which remain perceptual indicators self-reported by the owner-manager rather than objective indicators of verified survival or financial performance, increasing the likelihood that the respondents most engaged in their network are also, more generally, those who report the most positive outlook on their firm, independently of any direct causal link between the two. These considerations do not call into question the direction of the relationship observed, which remains consistent with the theory mobilised, but they strongly caution against extrapolating the magnitude of the coefficient obtained beyond the sample studied, and suggest that this result be treated as an exploratory indication to be confirmed rather than as a robust estimate of the effect size in the population of Cameroonian VSEs.

4.3. Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this research contributes to the literature on entrepreneurial social capital by illustrating, in a highly informal African economy, the coexistence and possible complementarity of the three forms of networking identified in the literature review, formal, informal and cooperative. It also confirms, in a context still under-documented on this specific point, the relevance of using survival or sustainability, rather than financial performance alone, as the dependent variable in research on entrepreneurial social capital, in line with the recent call by Klyver et al. (2026) to better understand how entrepreneurs actively shape their networks over time.

4.4. Managerial Implications

Managerially, the results, notwithstanding the methodological caveats expressed above, invite Cameroonian VSE owner-managers to treat relational investment as a fully-fledged component of their sustainability strategy, on a par with financial or commercial management. Concretely, this entails active participation in their sector's cooperative and associative structures, deliberate use of tontines as a financial safeguard complementary to bank credit, and a measured openness to forms of cooperation with direct competitors on non-strategic activities such as procurement or logistics. For public authorities and support structures such as the SME Promotion Agency, these results argue for policies that go beyond direct financial support alone and also seek to densify the networking spaces accessible to very small enterprises, particularly in sectors and areas where traditional informal networks are least developed.

4.5. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This research presents several limitations that should be explicitly acknowledged. The first, already noted, relates to the very small sample size, thirty VSEs in a single city, which strongly limits the generalisability of the results and calls for treating them as exploratory. The second relates to the non-probability nature of the sampling, which does not rule out a selection bias favouring firms already better integrated into networks. The third relates to the cross-sectional design of the survey, which does not allow the direction of causality between networking and sustainability to be established with certainty, as an already-sustainable firm could just as easily attract networking opportunities more readily than a fragile one. The fourth relates to reliance on a single respondent per firm and on exclusively self-reported measures, for both networking and sustainability, which exposes the results to the risk of common-method variance bias already discussed above. Future research should seek to replicate this work on a substantially larger sample covering several Cameroonian cities, to draw, where possible, on objective indicators of firm survival, such as administrative data on actual duration of existence, rather than exclusively perceptual indicators, and to consider a longitudinal design allowing the joint evolution of networking and firm trajectories to be tracked over time.

Conclusion

This research set out to examine the effect of networking on the sustainability of Cameroonian very small enterprises, drawing on a survey of thirty VSEs in the city of Douala. Grounded in social capital theory and in the entrepreneurial ecosystem framework, the study confirms, for the sample studied, the existence of a positive and significant effect of networking on sustainability, a result consistent with the recent international literature on entrepreneurial social capital and new-venture survival. The article nonetheless stresses, with the scientific rigour demanded by the statistically unusual magnitude of the result obtained, the need to confirm its scope on a larger and more representative sample before drawing generalizable conclusions. It remains the case, however, that in the Cameroonian context, where informal networks such as tontines and community solidarities play a leading economic role, the relational investment of VSE owner-managers deserves to be recognised, both by research and by public support policies, as a fully-fledged dimension of building entrepreneurial sustainability.

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