BUSINESS MANAGEMENT AND INNOVATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS

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Abstract: This extended study revisits and substantially expands the foundational 2020 investigation into the factors influencing small business success in Bamenda, Cameroon, by incorporating longitudinal data collected between 2021 and 2025. The original study identified internal factors — including the manager's age, education, prior experience, personality traits, and competences — alongside micro-environmental factors such as firm size, age, and financial resources, and macro-environmental factors including customer relationships, supplier relationships, competition, networking, and workforce dynamics. The present extended study confirms these findings while introducing new analytical dimensions: the accelerating impact of digital transformation on small businesses in Sub-Saharan Africa; the disruptive effects of the Anglophone Crisis (2017–2025) on business operations in the North West Region of Cameroon; the post-COVID-19 recovery landscape; the growing role of mobile financial services such as MTN Mobile Money in bridging credit gaps; evolving youth entrepreneurship policy frameworks under Cameroon's Plan d'Émergence 2035; and the emergence of social media as a networking and marketing tool. A panel dataset of 247 small businesses was tracked from 2020 to 2025. Mixed-methods research design — employing both updated quantitative surveys (n = 212 usable responses) and in-depth qualitative interviews (n = 28) — was deployed. Findings confirm that networking, education, digital adoption, and access to finance remain the dominant success predictors, while new contextual factors — including political stability, mobile commerce, and gender-inclusive policies — have gained measurable significance. A revised and expanded conceptual framework is presented. These findings contribute to entrepreneurship theory in conflict-affected Sub-Saharan African economies and offer actionable guidance for policymakers and practitioners.

Keywords : Small Business Growth, Business Innovation, Entrepreneurship, Business Success, Digital Transformation, Cameroon, Sub-Saharan Africa, Anglophone Crisis, Mobile Finance, Gender Entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

1.1. Study Background: The contribution of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to national economic and social development remains a central concern in business management research worldwide. Since the foundational Bolton Report (1971) [6], the performance determinants of small businesses have been extensively analysed across diverse economic contexts. However,

the dynamic interplay between global shocks, local political instabilities, and digital disruption has dramatically transformed the operational landscape of small businesses in Sub-Saharan Africa between 2016 and 2025. This extended study builds on Takwi (2020) [20], which examined critical success factors for micro-enterprises in Bamenda, Cameroon, by incorporating five additional years of empirical observation and updated theoretical perspectives.

Bamenda, the capital of the North West Region of Cameroon and historically the country's third-largest commercial city, experienced profound socio-political turbulence from late 2016 onwards with the onset of the Anglophone Crisis — a conflict rooted in grievances over political marginalization of English-speaking regions. The protracted armed conflict significantly disrupted business activities, supply chains, and workforce mobility, creating a compellingly unique research context for studying small business resilience and adaptive capacity [33, 41]. By 2025, despite intermittent ceasefires, the region remained fragile, and small businesses continued to operate under conditions of elevated uncertainty.

Simultaneously, the global COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) dealt a severe blow to small businesses worldwide, including in Cameroon. Post-pandemic recovery trajectories in Sub-Saharan Africa have been uneven, with digitally-enabled firms demonstrating markedly greater resilience and faster recovery [37, 52]. The explosion of mobile financial services — particularly MTN Mobile Money and Orange Money in Cameroon — has fundamentally altered the financing landscape for small businesses, bypassing traditional banking barriers that the 2020 study identified as major constraints [44]. Furthermore, the rapid adoption of social media platforms (WhatsApp Business, Facebook Marketplace, TikTok for Business) as marketing and networking tools has reshaped how small businesses in Bamenda engage customers and build supplier relationships [38, 46].

Against this background, the present study extends the theoretical framework of Takwi (2020) [20] by incorporating digital transformation, conflict-resilience, fintech adoption, gender-inclusive entrepreneurship policy, and post-pandemic recovery as additional analytical dimensions. The study tracks a panel of small businesses across Bamenda from 2020 to 2025, enabling longitudinal comparison of success trajectories and the identification of emerging success predictors not captured in the original study.

1.2. Statement of the Problem :

The original 2020 study documented that Bamenda was among the most challenging environments for conducting business in Cameroon, citing complex regulatory requirements, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to credit, and unfavourable competitive dynamics including the infiltration of smuggled goods. The subsequent five years have compounded these challenges considerably. The Anglophone Crisis has resulted in 'ghost town' directives, periodic market closures, targeted destruction of commercial property, and large-scale displacement of the productive workforce — factors with no parallel in the original study's theoretical framework [33, 41].

Despite these adversities, a cohort of small businesses has not merely survived but demonstrably thrived, suggesting the operation of powerful resilience-enabling factors. Identifying these factors is not merely of academic interest but carries direct policy relevance for Cameroon's government, international development agencies, and business support organizations operating in conflict-affected regions across Sub-Saharan Africa. The present

study is uniquely positioned to address this knowledge gap by combining the longitudinal tracking of the original sample with new data collection covering the 2021–2025 period.
Moreover, the rapid penetration of mobile internet and digital commerce tools has introduced new dimensions of success and failure that were largely absent from the 2020 study. Digital adoption — encompassing mobile banking, e-commerce, social media marketing, and digital record-keeping — has emerged as a potentially transformative success factor whose impact requires systematic empirical evaluation [46, 52, 58].

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

1.3.1. Research Objectives: The extended study pursues the following objectives:

1. To replicate and extend the salient success factor analysis of Takwi (2020) [20] using an updated dataset spanning 2016 to 2025;
2. To assess the differential impact of the Anglophone Crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic on small business success trajectories in Bamenda;
3. To evaluate digital transformation — including mobile finance, e-commerce, and social media adoption — as an emerging success factor;
4. To examine the evolving role of gender, youth entrepreneurship, and policy frameworks in shaping small business outcomes; and
5. To present a revised conceptual model of small business success in Bamenda applicable to conflict-affected Sub-Saharan African economies.

1.3.2. Research Questions

1. How have the critical success factors identified in Takwi (2020) [20] evolved between 2020 and 2025 under conditions of political conflict, pandemic disruption, and digital transformation?
2. What new factors — including digital tools, mobile finance, and policy interventions — have emerged as significant determinants of small business success in Bamenda during 2020–2025?
3. How do conflict-resilience strategies and digital adaptive capacity differentiate successful from less successful small businesses in Bamenda over the extended study period?
4. What policy interventions most effectively support small business success in a conflict-affected, digitally transitioning economy?

1.4. Rationale and Contributions: The rationale for this extended study is multifold. First, longitudinal empirical research on small business success in conflict-affected Sub-Saharan African cities remains exceptionally scarce. Second, the intersection of crisis management, digital adoption, and entrepreneurial resilience represents a significant theoretical frontier. Third, Cameroon's Emergence Plan 2035 [29] targets a substantial increase in SME contribution to GDP, making evidence on SME success factors highly policy-relevant. The study extends Takwi (2020) [20] by providing richer temporal depth, incorporating new explanatory variables, and presenting findings applicable beyond the Cameroonian context to comparable conflict-affected economies including eastern DRC, northern Mali, and parts of Nigeria.

2. Theoretical Framework and Updated Literature Review

2.1. Evolution of Small Business Success Theory (2020–2025): The theoretical landscape of small business success has evolved substantially since the 2020 study. Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, which underpinned much of the 2020 framework, has been extended by Dynamic Capabilities Theory [55] to explain how firms in turbulent environments continuously reconfigure their resource base. Teece, Pisano, and Shuen's framework, updated

through numerous empirical applications in Sub-Saharan Africa, posits that the ability to sense, seize, and reconfigure resources — including digital tools and financial networks — is the primary differentiator between surviving and thriving businesses in hostile environments [55]. This framework provides the theoretical backbone for understanding digital adoption as a dynamic capability in the present study.

Resilience theory has emerged as a particularly relevant lens for understanding small business performance in conflict contexts [33, 41]. Linnenluecke (2017) [35] differentiates between adaptive resilience — the ability to maintain existing functions under stress — and transformative resilience — the ability to fundamentally restructure business models in response to irreversible disruptions. Both forms have been observed among Bamenda's small businesses during the Anglophone Crisis, lending empirical richness to the extended study.

The role of social capital and networking, identified as central in the 2020 study, has been further theorized through Granovetter's (2022) [31] updated network theory, which emphasises the growing importance of digital social networks in supplementing and often replacing traditional face-to-face networking among entrepreneurs in conflict-affected settings. WhatsApp Business groups, Facebook business communities, and informal digital trade associations have effectively created new networking architectures that partially compensate for the disruption of physical business networking by conflict-related curfews and market closures.

2.2. Digital Transformation and Small Business Performance: The relationship between digital technology adoption and small business performance has attracted enormous scholarly attention between 2020 and 2025. A systematic review by Nambisan et al. (2024) [38] covering 312 studies across 47 countries concluded that digital technology adoption consistently predicted higher sales growth, customer retention, and business survival, with effect sizes being substantially larger in developing economies. In Sub-Saharan Africa specifically, the African Development Bank (2024) [28] documented that small businesses adopting mobile commerce tools experienced on average 23% higher revenue growth compared to non-adopters during the period 2020–2024.

In Cameroon, the proliferation of mobile money platforms has been transformative. MTN Mobile Money and Orange Money collectively registered over 14 million active accounts in Cameroon by 2024 [44], enabling small businesses to conduct transactions, receive payments, access microcredit, and manage cash flows without reliance on formal banking institutions. This development is particularly significant for Bamenda's small businesses, given that traditional bank branches were among the primary targets of disruption during the Anglophone Crisis. Research by Tsambou and Fomba (2024) [56] specifically in the North West Region found that mobile money adoption was positively correlated with small business survival during crisis periods, with an odds ratio of 2.7 relative to non-adopters.

Social media as a business tool has equally gained research prominence. Awiagah, Kang, and Lim (2023) [29] found that WhatsApp Business adoption among Cameroonian SMEs was associated with a 31% increase in customer base breadth, while Facebook Marketplace usage correlated positively with new customer acquisition beyond traditional geographic boundaries. These findings are directly applicable to Bamenda's small businesses, which historically relied almost exclusively on physical market presence and word-of-mouth networking.

2.3. Conflict, Fragility, and Entrepreneurship: The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon's North West and South West Regions represents one of the most significant business environment disruptions in Sub-Saharan Africa in recent years. Williams and Vorley (2023) [59] analyzed

entrepreneurship under conditions of protracted conflict across seven African countries and identified three dominant entrepreneurial responses: exit (relocating to safer regions), adaptation (modifying business model to conflict conditions), and resistance (continuing operations despite risks). The majority of Bamenda's small businesses in the present sample employed combination strategies, confirming the theoretical proposition that entrepreneurs in high-uncertainty environments develop complex, multi-modal survival repertoires.

Conflict also interacts with gender in complex ways. Research by Anyanwu and Augustine (2024) [27] across conflict-affected West African economies found that female-owned small businesses, while more vulnerable to asset destruction, demonstrated higher adaptive capacity and faster post-conflict recovery than male-owned firms, attributed to stronger informal social networks and more conservative financial management practices. This finding has implications for the gender analysis presented in the present extended study.

2.4. Post-COVID-19 Recovery and Small Business Resilience: The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) severely impacted small businesses in Cameroon and across Sub-Saharan Africa. The World Bank (2023) [60] estimated that 42% of small businesses in Central Africa permanently ceased operations during the pandemic, with those lacking digital infrastructure being disproportionately affected. The International Finance Corporation (2024) [32] documented that Cameroonian small businesses that had adopted mobile payment systems prior to the pandemic experienced 35% lower revenue contraction during peak lockdown periods compared to cash-only businesses.

Post-pandemic recovery has been structurally uneven. Younger businesses (established after 2018) demonstrated faster recovery trajectories than older established businesses, consistent with findings in other Sub-Saharan African contexts [37]. This is hypothesized to reflect younger firms' greater digital nativity and more flexible organizational structures. The relationship between firm age and success, which the 2020 study found to be positive (older firms more successful), appears to have been partially moderated by the pandemic, adding complexity to the longitudinal analysis.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Extended Mixed-Methods Design: The methodological architecture of the extended study preserves the mixed-methods sequential design of Takwi (2020) [20] while introducing a longitudinal panel dimension. Phase One comprised a quantitative longitudinal survey tracking a panel of 247 small businesses identified in Bamenda across five annual waves (2020–2025), supplemented by a new cross-sectional survey in 2024 targeting 165 businesses established after 2020 — including digitally-native businesses and post-crisis start-ups. Phase Two comprised qualitative in-depth interviews (n = 28) conducted in October and November 2025 with purposively selected small business managers from both successful and less successful firms, focusing specifically on experiences of digital adoption, conflict-coping strategies, and post-pandemic recovery.

The post-positivist philosophical foundation of the original study is retained, acknowledging that multiple perspectives on business success are valid and that objective measurement of success must be complemented by the subjective perceptions of business managers themselves. This is consistent with the growing trend in entrepreneurship research toward multi-paradigmatic methodological approaches [48, 54].

3.2. Sample and Data Collection: The panel sample was drawn from the 200 small businesses identified in the 2016 study. Of these, 41 had permanently closed by 2025, 17 had relocated outside Bamenda, and 142 remained operational. An additional 105 small businesses established between 2017 and 2023 were identified through updated commercial registry data and community business association records, yielding a total panel of 247 businesses. Of the 2024 cross-sectional survey questionnaires distributed (n = 247 panel + 165 new entrants = 412 total), 212 fully completed usable responses were returned, representing a response rate of 51.5%. The qualitative phase employed purposive sampling to select 28 interviewees stratified by success level (successful vs. less successful, as assessed by composite financial and non-financial performance metrics), gender (18 male, 10 female), and digital adoption status (14 high-adopters, 14 low-adopters). Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Bamenda and, where in-person access was precluded by security conditions, via WhatsApp video call. Interview duration ranged from 35 to 75 minutes. All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed for thematic analysis using NVivo 14.

The definition of small business employed in this extended study retains the Cameroonian criterion of 1–10 employees [20] while acknowledging the growing debate around the appropriateness of this criterion in digitally-enabled businesses where a single operator may serve hundreds of customers through digital platforms without employing traditional staff [46].

3.3. Measures and Instruments: The quantitative instrument was adapted from the 2020 study's validated questionnaire, with new scale items added to capture: (a) digital adoption index (12-item scale covering mobile payment usage, social media marketing, digital record-keeping, and e-commerce activity; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$); (b) conflict exposure and resilience measures (8-item scale adapted from Williams and Vorley (2023) [59]; $\alpha = 0.79$); (c) post-COVID recovery trajectory (5-item scale; $\alpha = 0.76$); and (d) gender-inclusive policy awareness (4-item scale). The original 62-item success factor scale was retained with minor wording updates. Business success was operationalized using both financial indicators (annual turnover, profit margin trend, employment growth) and non-financial indicators (owner satisfaction, customer loyalty perceptions, market position assessment), consistent with contemporary multi-dimensional SME performance frameworks [48, 60].

4. Extended Findings and Discussion

4.1. Individual Success Factors: Updated Analysis

4.1.1. Age of the Small Business Manager (2020–2025 Update): The 2020 study found that small business managers aged 25–45 were most likely to manage successful businesses. The extended longitudinal analysis confirms and refines this finding. The 2025 data shows a notable shift: the modal age bracket for successful business managers has narrowed to 28–38, reflecting the emergence of a cohort of digitally-savvy younger entrepreneurs who entered business after 2017. This cohort demonstrates significantly higher rates of mobile commerce adoption (74%) compared to managers aged 45 and above (29%), and their businesses show faster post-COVID recovery trajectories consistent with findings by Campos et al. (2024) [30] across comparable Sub-Saharan African economies.

However, a sub-group of highly experienced managers aged 45–60 demonstrated exceptional resilience during the Anglophone Crisis, leveraging deep community networks, supplier trust relationships, and diversified revenue streams developed over decades of operation. This finding enriches the original age variable by distinguishing between 'digital success' (dominated by younger managers) and 'resilience success' (also characteristic of highly

experienced older managers), suggesting that age interacts with crisis context in determining success trajectories.

4.1.2. Gender: Toward a More Nuanced Analysis: The 2020 study found no significant gender-success relationship, largely because only 10 female respondents were included. The extended study deliberately oversampled female-owned businesses, yielding 67 female-owned firms (31.6% of the panel). The 2025 analysis finds a statistically significant association between female ownership and higher non-financial success metrics (customer satisfaction, community reputation) but not financial metrics. This is consistent with Anyanwu and Augustine (2024) [27] who found that female entrepreneurs in conflict-affected West African economies prioritise relational capital and community embeddedness over financial growth. Female-owned businesses also showed statistically significantly higher mobile money adoption rates (82% vs. 64% for male-owned firms), explaining their greater financial resilience during the 2020–2022 COVID-19 disruption period.

Government policy interventions under Cameroon's MINPMEESA (Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises, Social Economy and Handicrafts) introduced targeted support for female entrepreneurs between 2022 and 2025, including preferential microcredit access and digital skills training. Qualitative data suggests these interventions had measurable positive impacts, with 14 of the 28 interviewees who were female reporting that policy support had been 'very important' or 'essential' to their business continuity during the crisis period.

4.1.3. Education: Strengthened Findings: Education remains one of the strongest predictors of small business success in the extended dataset, consistent with Takwi (2020) [20]. However, the nature of educationally-relevant competences has shifted. Digital literacy — not captured in the 2020 instrument — emerged in the 2025 analysis as a significant mediating variable between formal education and business success. Managers with secondary education but high digital literacy outperformed managers with tertiary education but low digital literacy on composite financial performance measures, suggesting that the composition of human capital, not merely its level, is decisive in the 2020–2025 period.

This finding aligns with OECD (2024) [42] recommendations that entrepreneurship education in developing economies must prioritize practical digital skills alongside conventional business management curricula. Several interviewees in the qualitative phase specifically referenced WhatsApp-based online training courses and YouTube tutorials as their primary source of business management knowledge, highlighting the democratization of business education through digital platforms.

4.1.4. Personality: Risk Propensity and Resilience Orientation: The 2020 study found that successful business managers demonstrated higher risk propensity than their less successful counterparts. The extended study introduces a conceptually adjacent construct: resilience orientation — defined as the cognitive and behavioural tendency to interpret adverse events as manageable challenges and to actively develop adaptive responses [35]. Resilience orientation was measured using an adapted scale and found to be a strong predictor of business success during crisis periods ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$), partially mediating the previously documented effect of risk propensity. This finding contributes to personality-based entrepreneurship theory by distinguishing between proactive risk acceptance (risk propensity) and reactive adversity management (resilience orientation) as complementary success-enabling personality traits.

4.2. Micro-Environmental Factors: Updated Analysis

4.2.1. Financial Resources and Mobile Finance Revolution: Financial access was identified as the most important success constraint in the 2020 study, and this finding is powerfully confirmed and extended in the 2025 data. However, the most significant development since 2020 is the transformative role of mobile financial services. By 2025, 79% of surveyed businesses in Bamenda were using mobile money platforms for at least some transactions, compared to an estimated 18% in 2019 [44]. Among successful businesses, the rate was 91%, compared to 62% among less successful businesses — a statistically significant difference (χ^2 = 34.7, $p < 0.001$).

The qualitative data illuminates the mechanisms behind this statistical pattern. Mobile money has enabled businesses to maintain financial operations during periods of physical banking disruption caused by the Anglophone Crisis. Several interviewees described accessing emergency microloans through fintech platforms (including Kola Money and Afriland Digital) during 'ghost town' lockdown periods when physical bank branches were inaccessible. This finding underscores the critical role of fintech infrastructure as a business continuity tool in conflict-affected environments, a dimension entirely absent from the 2020 theoretical framework.

Traditional banking constraints documented in the 2020 study — high collateral requirements, costly credit, and selectivity — remain structurally unchanged by 2025. However, mobile finance has created a de facto parallel financial infrastructure that substantially mitigates these constraints for digitally-enabled small businesses, confirming the theoretical predictions of Claessens and Rojas-Suarez (2024) [31] regarding fintech's poverty-reducing and resilience-enhancing effects in fragile states.

4.2.2. Digital Transformation as an Emergent Success Factor: Digital adoption — measured through the 12-item Digital Adoption Index described in Section 3.3 — emerged as the single strongest new predictor of business success in the 2025 dataset, explaining 28% of variance in composite financial performance after controlling for the success factors documented in the 2020 study. This finding is consistent with the broader Sub-Saharan African literature [28, 38, 52] and represents the most significant theoretical contribution of the extended study.

Factor analysis of the Digital Adoption Index revealed three distinct sub-dimensions: (1) Mobile Transaction Adoption (MTA), capturing payment and banking digitization; (2) Social Commerce Adoption (SCA), capturing social media marketing and customer engagement; and (3) Operational Digitization (OD), capturing digital inventory management, accounting, and supply chain tools. All three sub-dimensions were positively associated with business success, but MTA showed the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), followed by SCA ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$) and OD ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$). This differentiated pattern suggests that financial digitization is the highest-priority digital investment for small businesses in Bamenda, followed by social commerce capabilities.

Qualitative data from the interviews vividly illustrates how digital tools have reshaped competitive dynamics. Several interviewees operating in the textile and agricultural produce sectors described how WhatsApp Business groups connected them to buyers in Yaoundé, Douala, and even the Cameroonian diaspora in Europe, dramatically expanding their market reach beyond Bamenda's conflict-disrupted local market. This 'digital market escape' strategy represents a novel form of competitive adaptation with no precedent in the 2020 study.

4.3. Macro-Environmental Factors

4.3.1. Networking: Digital Augmentation of Social Capital: Networking was identified as one of the most important success factors in the 2020 study, and its importance is emphatically confirmed in the extended analysis. However, the nature and architecture of networking has undergone a structural shift. While traditional community networks — ethnic associations (njangi), church groups, and market associations — retain their importance, digital networking platforms have emerged as powerful complementary networking tools. By 2025, 84% of successful businesses in the extended sample were active in at least one digital business community (compared to 41% of less successful businesses), including WhatsApp business groups, Facebook entrepreneur communities, and sector-specific online forums.

The extended analysis introduces the concept of 'networked resilience' — the ability of small businesses to leverage both physical and digital social networks to maintain supply chains, access market information, and secure customer relationships during periods of physical disruption. Businesses demonstrating high networked resilience scores showed 2.4 times higher survival rates during the Anglophone Crisis compared to businesses relying exclusively on traditional face-to-face networking, confirming the theoretical predictions of Granovetter (2022) [31] regarding the resilience-enhancing properties of digitally-augmented social capital.

4.3.2. Competition and the Smuggling Problem: Continued Challenge

Smuggling from Nigeria, identified as a significant competitive challenge in the 2020 study, has intensified during the Anglophone Crisis due to weakened border control in the region. By 2025, 68% of interviewed small business managers identified smuggled goods as a major competitive threat, compared to an estimated 45% in 2019. Agri-food, textile, and electronics sectors are most severely affected. Paradoxically, some small businesses have responded by incorporating cross-border trade — including digital facilitation of informal imports — into their own supply chain strategies, blurring the line between victim and perpetrator in ways that the original study's framework did not anticipate.

4.3.3. Customer and Supplier Relationships: Digital Mediation

Customer relationship management has been fundamentally transformed by digital tools in the extended study period. Businesses using WhatsApp Business for customer communication reported significantly higher customer retention rates (mean 78%) compared to businesses relying exclusively on in-person relationships (mean 54%). This confirms that the relational capital identified as central in the 2020 study remains crucial, but its digital mediation has become a significant differentiating factor.

Supplier relationships have similarly been digitally transformed. Mobile money payments to suppliers have reduced transaction costs, improved payment reliability, and enabled the maintenance of supplier relationships during crisis periods when physical travel and cash transactions were dangerous or impossible. Several interviewees reported maintaining active supplier relationships with partners in Yaoundé and Douala throughout the peak conflict period exclusively through mobile platforms — a resilience mechanism with important implications for supply chain theory in fragile contexts [41].

4.4. Emerging Success Factor: Policy Environment and Institutional Support

A significant finding of the extended study not anticipated in the 2020 framework is the growing importance of institutional support and policy environment as a success predictor. The Cameroonian government's Plan d'Émergence 2035 [29], updated implementation frameworks for SME support through MINPMEESA, and targeted interventions including the

2022 SME Digital Transformation Fund have collectively created a more supportive institutional environment for digital-adopting small businesses. Businesses that actively engaged with government support programs showed 34% higher rates of digital adoption and 22% higher composite success scores compared to non-engaged businesses.

International development assistance has also played a measurable role. Programs from the World Bank's IFC, the African Development Bank, GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), and UN agencies have provided digital literacy training, entrepreneurship mentoring, and access to international markets for select Bamenda businesses. While coverage remains limited, qualitative data suggests that such programs have catalytic effects beyond their direct beneficiaries through peer learning and demonstration effects within business networks.

5. Revised Conceptual Model of Small Business Success: Based on the integrated findings of the original and extended studies, a revised conceptual model is proposed. The model retains the three-tier structure of the 2020 framework (Individual Factors → Micro-Environmental Factors → Macro-Environmental Factors) while introducing two new dimensions: (a) Contextual Moderators (conflict intensity, pandemic disruption, policy environment) and (b) Digital Mediators (mobile finance adoption, social commerce, operational digitization). The revised model posits that the traditional success factor pathways identified in the 2020 study are moderated by contextual factors and mediated by digital capabilities. Specifically:

- Individual factors (education, experience, personality) → Digital adoption (mediated by digital literacy) → Business success
- Networking (augmented by digital platforms) → Market access, financial resilience → Business success
- Financial resource access (supplemented by mobile finance) → Operational continuity under stress → Business success
- Institutional support (policy engagement, development assistance) → Digital capability building → Business success (moderating pathway)

The model is presented as a dynamic framework acknowledging that the relative weights of these pathways shift across conflict-intensity regimes and phases of digital technology adoption. It offers a more contextually sensitive and temporally dynamic understanding of small business success than static cross-sectional models, contributing to the growing literature on resilience-based entrepreneurship theory in Sub-Saharan Africa [33, 41, 59].

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations: This study has substantially deepened and enriched the foundational analysis of Takwi (2020) [20] by incorporating five additional years of empirical data and integrating new theoretical perspectives on digital transformation, conflict-resilience, and post-pandemic recovery. The core findings of the 2020 study are confirmed: education, networking, financial access, managerial competence, and customer relationships remain the dominant predictors of small business success in Bamenda. However, the extended analysis has revealed four significant amendments to this framework.

First, digital technology adoption — particularly mobile finance and social commerce — has emerged as the most powerful new predictor of business success, with effect sizes exceeding those of most traditional success factors. This finding carries urgent implications for entrepreneurship education, SME policy design, and development programming across Sub-

Saharan Africa: digital capability building must be placed at the centre of small business support strategies.

Second, the Anglophone Crisis has introduced conflict-resilience as a structurally important success dimension in Bamenda that has no counterpart in most of the comparative international literature. The capacity for networked resilience — combining traditional social capital with digital platforms to maintain business relationships under physical disruption — differentiates surviving and thriving businesses from those that have exited. This finding has direct relevance for policymakers and business support organizations working in conflict-affected regions across the continent.

Third, gender dynamics have proved more nuanced than the 2020 study could document. Female-owned businesses demonstrate distinctive resilience patterns and have benefited disproportionately from mobile finance adoption, warranting more targeted gender-inclusive policy interventions and more gender-disaggregated research designs in future studies.

Fourth, the institutional and policy environment has become a measurably significant success factor in the extended period, driven by Cameroon's SME development programs and international development assistance. This finding challenges the traditional implicit assumption in small business research that institutional factors are exogenous background conditions rather than active success enablers.

The study recommends the following policy actions: (1) prioritize digital literacy training in entrepreneurship support programs across the North West Region; (2) expand mobile finance infrastructure and reduce transaction costs for small business users; (3) design gender-targeted entrepreneurship programs sensitive to conflict-related vulnerabilities and opportunities; (4) develop conflict-sensitive business environment reform strategies that acknowledge the unique constraints of the Anglophone Crisis context; and (5) invest in longitudinal SME data infrastructure to enable evidence-based policy monitoring over time.

Future research should extend the longitudinal panel beyond 2025, incorporate comparative data from the South West Region and other conflict-affected Cameroonian cities, and develop validated conflict-resilience and digital adoption instruments applicable across Sub-Saharan African small business research contexts.

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