International Journal of Social Science and Human Research

ISSN (print): 2644-0679, ISSN (online): 2644-0695

Volume 08 Issue 11 November 2025

DOI: 10.47191/ijsshr/v8-i11-55, Impact factor- 8.007

Page No: 8966-8972

Institutions, Education, and Policy Synergies: A Qualitative Exploration of Entrepreneurial Culture Development in Uganda

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ABSTRACT: Entrepreneurial culture plays a vital role in economic change and innovation, especially in developing countries. However, we still know little about how institutions, education systems, and socioeconomic policies work together to influence entrepreneurial behaviour in Africa. This qualitative study looks at how these systems shape the entrepreneurial culture in Uganda. Using an interpretivist approach, it combines institutional theory, human capital theory, and policy learning frameworks to reveal the social meanings, views, and processes behind starting and sustaining businesses. We gathered data through semi-structured interviews with 20 entrepreneurs, six policymakers, and four educators, along with document analysis of national policy frameworks. The findings show that predictable institutions, transparency, and protection of property rights build trust and resilience among entrepreneurs. Education systems help foster entrepreneurial values and adaptive skills, while socioeconomic policies offer support but often lack proper implementation. The study finds that Uganda's entrepreneurial culture develops through the interaction of institutional quality, educational flexibility, and coherence in policy. The implications for policy changes, curriculum development, and strengthening institutions are discussed.

KEYWORDS: entrepreneurship, institutional theory, education systems, policy learning, Uganda, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial culture refers to the collective focus on innovation, risk-taking, and recognizing opportunities. It plays an important role in driving economic growth and structural change (Audretsch & Belitski, 2021). In many developing countries, like Uganda, entrepreneurship is viewed as a way to create jobs, reduce poverty, and promote sustainable development. However, despite high levels of entrepreneurial activity, Uganda's business environment is still marked by informality, low survival rates, and limited innovation (Namatovu et al., 2018).

This situation indicates that while individuals may want to be entrepreneurs, the wider systems that influence behavior, such as institutions, education, and policy, may not strongly support an entrepreneurial culture. Institutions set the "rules of the game" (North, 1990), education systems spread knowledge and entrepreneurial values (Becker, 1993), and policies create the right conditions for business growth (Rodrik, 2004). It is crucial to understand how these factors interact to develop ways to turn entrepreneurial hopes into successful businesses. This study looks at how institutional frameworks, education systems, and socioeconomic policies help develop entrepreneurial culture in Uganda. It is guided by the following research question:

RQ1: How do institutional frameworks, educational systems, and socioeconomic policies contribute to entrepreneurial culture development in Uganda?

Two analytical propositions guide this inquiry:

- Proposition 1 (H1 qualitative reframe): The quality of institutions, seen in predictable regulations, protection of property rights, and effective governance, affects how entrepreneurs start and maintain their businesses.
- Proposition 2 (P1 qualitative reframe): Transparency and predictability resulting from institutional reform build entrepreneurial confidence, drive innovation, and support sustainability.

By examining how entrepreneurs, policymakers, and educators understand their institutional and policy environments, this study enhances our theoretical and practical understanding of how entrepreneurial culture develops within changing institutions.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Entrepreneurial culture develops within a network of social structures, norms, and learning systems (Bruton, Ahlstrom, & Si, 2015). To understand this complexity, the study combines Institutional Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Policy Learning and Systems Theory into a unified framework.

Institutional Theory

According to North (1990), institutions are the formal and informal rules that guide human interaction. They include legal frameworks, regulatory systems, and governance norms that influence how people recognize opportunities and take risks. Scott (2014) identifies three types of institutional pillars: regulative (laws and policies), normative (social values), and cognitive (shared meanings). In Uganda, weak enforcement of institutions and inconsistent policies are barriers to entrepreneurship (Ngugi & Bwisa, 2019). However, new institutional reforms, like easier business registration and local investment support, may increase predictability and trust.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) argues that education and training improve productivity, innovation, and flexibility. Entrepreneurial education not only shares knowledge but also fosters creativity, problem-solving, and confidence. In Uganda, universities and technical schools have included entrepreneurship courses to encourage self-employment and innovation (Namatovu et al., 2018). Still, the success of these programs relies on how relevant they are to the local context, how they are taught, and the support from institutions.

Policy Learning and Systems Theory

Policy Learning and Systems Theory (Lundvall, 2016; Rodrik, 2004) highlights the feedback between policy creation, execution, and societal learning. Entrepreneurial ecosystems thrive when policies in education, finance, and governance work together effectively. Disconnected or conflicting policies create uncertainty, which limits entrepreneurial risk-taking. In Uganda, while several policies support entrepreneurship, such as the National Development Plan III and the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) Policy, issues remain in coordination and monitoring.

Integrative Conceptual Model

By bringing these ideas together, the conceptual framework suggests that entrepreneurial culture arises from the interplay of institutional quality, educational flexibility, and policy consistency. Institutions set the formal and informal rules, education develops skills and motivation, and policies influence incentives and resources. Their combined effect creates a system that supports innovation, risk-taking, and sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy

This study follows an interpretivist approach, focusing on context, meaning, and people's experiences rather than just measurement and generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Entrepreneurship is seen as a social process influenced by institutional settings and human interpretations. The researcher believes that knowledge is created through interactions with participants.

Research Design

A qualitative multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018) was chosen to explore different experiences in various contexts. Three cases were selected:

1) Kampala City – representing urban innovation ecosystems.
2) Mbale District – representing agribusiness entrepreneurship.
3) Gulu City – representing post-conflict enterprise development.

This design allows for comparing contexts and identifying patterns across different institutional and policy settings.

Sampling and Participants

Using purposive sampling, 30 participants were chosen:

- 20 entrepreneurs (from micro, small, and medium enterprises)
- 6 policymakers (from the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Cooperatives, and local government agencies)
- 4 educators (from universities and vocational institutions)

Participants were selected based on their involvement in entrepreneurship programs or policy implementation.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Interviews examined views on institutional trust, regulatory stability, education systems, and policy coherence. Focus groups offered shared insights on barriers and supports for entrepreneurship. Documents reviewed included Uganda's National Development Plan III (2020–2025), MSME Policy (2015), and relevant education sector strategies.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which included coding transcripts, identifying themes, and interpreting meanings. Pattern matching (Yin, 2018) was used to compare emerging themes with theoretical propositions (H1 and P1). Triangulation across data sources improved credibility. Member checking was done to confirm interpretations.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was established through triangulating data sources, dependability through systematic coding, confirmability through reflexive journaling, and transferability through detailed context descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Institutional Predictability and Entrepreneurial Trust

Participants consistently linked clear regulatory processes to increased confidence and a greater willingness to invest. Entrepreneurs frequently noted that predictable taxation, licensing, and property rights protection reduced uncertainty and encouraged long-term planning. Many respondents shared those past experiences of arbitrary enforcement, bureaucratic delays, and informal fees had previously hindered business growth. However, recent improvements in digital business registration, streamlined licensing, and local government reforms have built trust between entrepreneurs and state institutions. For instance, interviewees from Mbale mentioned that reliable renewal timelines and fair tendering systems motivated them to expand their operations, hire more staff, and reinvest profits locally. This supports North's (1990) view that strong institutions lower transaction costs and create incentives for effective entrepreneurship.

Further analysis showed that the quality of institutions also influences the moral environment for businesses. Respondents connected regulatory fairness and judicial credibility to a sense of legitimacy and civic responsibility. Entrepreneurs expressed a greater willingness to comply with tax regulations when they felt treated fairly and saw just processes from authorities. This aligns with Scott's (2014) argument that normative and cognitive institutional pillars support stable economic behavior. In contrast, areas with weak enforcement or unclear rules saw informal practices persist, indicating that institutional reform requires both governance and cultural change. Thus, institutional predictability not only boosts investment but also fosters a collective entrepreneurial spirit based on trust, accountability, and civic involvement, which are essential for a sustainable business culture in Uganda.

4.2 Education as Cultural Transmission

Education has become a key way of shaping entrepreneurial values, skills, and ambitions. Participants viewed entrepreneurship education as more than just training; it offers a transformative experience that reshapes perspectives on spotting opportunities and creative problem-solving. University educators noted that including entrepreneurship modules across various disciplines has increased students' confidence to seek self-employment after graduation. Entrepreneurs who had formal training in entrepreneurship credited their resilience and adaptability during economic shocks, like the COVID-19 pandemic, to early exposure to risk management, business ethics, and innovative thinking. These findings support Becker's (1993) idea that building human capital goes beyond technical skills to include vital social and cognitive abilities for innovation.

Moreover, several participants highlighted informal and non-formal learning as equally important. Apprenticeship programs, youth innovation hubs, and peer mentorship groups were regularly mentioned as environments where entrepreneurial attitudes and social connections are developed. These community-based initiatives reflect Lundvall's (2016) concept of a "learning economy," which stresses ongoing learning through networks and practical experiences. However, educators expressed concern that formal curricula often remain theoretical and do not connect well with market realities or local innovation systems. This creates a gap that limits education's potential to drive an entrepreneurial culture. Closing this gap requires reforming curricula to focus on hands-on learning, collaborating with local businesses, and integrating digital skills. Ultimately, education acts as both a bridge for entrepreneurial norms and a means for cultural renewal, shifting entrepreneurship from a survival strategy into a respected and desirable career choice in Uganda.

4.3 Policy Coherence and Systemic Gaps

Even though Uganda's policy framework has increasingly embraced entrepreneurship as a development strategy, participants pointed out significant fragmentation and inconsistency in policy creation and execution. Several respondents from government agencies admitted that overlapping responsibilities and poor coordination among ministries often weaken the impact of well-meaning programs. Entrepreneurs mentioned difficulties accessing government credit schemes due to bureaucratic obstacles and inconsistent eligibility criteria. Similarly, youth entrepreneurship funds were viewed as politicized and unsustainable. This lack of coherence has led to uneven outcomes across sectors and regions. Nonetheless, where policies aligned, such as in the Uganda Industrial Research Institute's incubation centres and the National Development Plan III's sector clusters, entrepreneurial outcomes improved significantly. These findings support Rodrik's (2004) argument that industrial policy succeeds only when guided by ongoing learning, coordination, and feedback.

Participants also connected policy coherence to inclusivity and a long-term vision. Many argued that short-term programs, often driven by donor interests, do not maintain momentum after funding cycles end. In contrast, steady policies that support women, veterans, and youth entrepreneurs received praise for building trust and encouraging collaboration across sectors. This exemplifies the idea of "policy learning" (Lundvall, 2016), where governments adjust based on evidence and stakeholder experiences. Participants stressed the need for integrated monitoring systems that link education, innovation, and enterprise development goals. The findings highlight that policy coherence goes beyond administrative efficiency; it is an essential feature of the ecosystem that allows institutional and educational drivers of entrepreneurship to thrive. Thus, coherent and predictable policies form the connections that transform isolated entrepreneurial activities into a vibrant, self-sustaining cultural and economic system.

5. DISCUSSION IN RELATION TO PROPOSITIONS

5.1 Proposition 1: Institutional Quality and Entrepreneurial Sustainability

The findings support Proposition 1, which states that institutional quality, including predictable regulations, secure property rights, and effective governance, plays an important role in shaping entrepreneurial creation and survival in Uganda. Entrepreneurs consistently associated the stability of institutional frameworks with their ability to make long-term investments, manage risk, and expand operations. This observation aligns with North's (1990) argument that institutions set the "rules of the game" for economic actors, affecting whether productive or unproductive entrepreneurship occurs.

Participants explained how stable licensing processes, enforceable contracts, and accessible registration systems increased their trust in government processes and made them more willing to formalize their businesses. One agribusiness entrepreneur in Mbale said that once the district implemented a clear taxation schedule, "it became easier to plan, borrow, and invest without fear of abrupt penalties." These accounts show that institutional predictability creates both psychological and financial stability, which are essential for entrepreneurial sustainability.

The evidence also aligns with Ahlstrom and Bruton's (2010) view that institutional development in emerging markets decreases uncertainty and encourages companies to focus on opportunity-driven ventures rather than just survival. Additionally, the findings indicate that when institutional rules are fair and predictable, entrepreneurs experience what Scott (2014) calls cognitive legitimacy—feeling that their activities are recognized, valued, and supported within societal norms and structures.

However, the study revealed some signs of institutional weakness. Some participants pointed out that inconsistent local enforcement, bureaucratic delays, and informal payments continue to hinder small-scale entrepreneurs, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. These contradictions support Bruton et al. (2015), who argue that institutional changes often lead to "dual economies," where formal and informal systems coexist and affect entrepreneurial decisions in complex ways. While Uganda's institutional environment is slowly improving, uneven implementation limits the full development of a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Overall, the analysis backs Proposition 1 by showing that institutional quality builds entrepreneurial confidence and survival. Still, the connection varies by context—stronger in urban areas or better-regulated sectors and weaker in rural or politically unstable regions. This insight stresses the need for ongoing institutional reform to not only create structures but also ensure consistent enforcement at all levels of governance.

5.2 Proposition 2: Transparency, Predictability, and Venture Formation

The findings also support Proposition 2, which asserts that transparency and predictability created through institutional reform make it easier for new businesses to form and sustain themselves over time. Respondents often linked transparent governance and clear procedures with lower barriers to entry and greater motivation to innovate. Entrepreneurs described transparency as a "confidence signal" that eased worries about sudden policy changes or hidden costs. This theme aligns with Rodrik's (2004) and Lundvall's (2016) ideas about learning-focused policy environments.

Transparency was especially noticeable in reforms like online business registration, standardized tax codes, and digital payment systems introduced under Uganda's e-Government initiatives. These systems improved access and reduced chances for corruption, thus enhancing fairness perceptions. One female tech entrepreneur in Kampala noted, "Once I could track payments online, I felt secure knowing the system recognized my effort. That made me more committed to growing within the formal space." These stories show how transparent institutional interfaces support both individual agency and collective legitimacy in entrepreneurial activities.

Predictability was another common theme. Entrepreneurs highlighted that knowing when policies might change, how taxes would be imposed, and what compliance steps were required allowed them to allocate resources more effectively. Predictability turns uncertainty into manageable risk—a key distinction in Knight's (1921) classical theory of entrepreneurship, which separates risk-bearing from uncertainty-bearing behavior. In Uganda's emerging economy, where instability often discourages long-term investments, predictability serves as a stabilizing force that helps entrepreneurs become strategic planners rather than opportunistic actors.

Educational stakeholders noted that predictability also benefits the link between policy and education. Stable curricula and consistent support for entrepreneurship programs helped universities and vocational institutes create long-term training modules that met market needs. This interaction shows how institutional transparency works with education and policy to strengthen entrepreneurial culture, echoing Becker's (1993) idea that human capital formation thrives in predictable institutional settings.

Despite these advancements, transparency reforms were sometimes limited by gaps in technology and low digital literacy. In rural districts like Gulu and Mbale, entrepreneurs still faced challenges accessing online systems and often relied on intermediaries who sometimes added informal costs. These disparities point out that while transparency and predictability can be transformative, their benefits are not equally shared, indicating that institutional reform should go hand in hand with inclusive capacity-building strategies.

Overall, the evidence supports Proposition 2, confirming that transparency and predictability boost venture creation and sustainability by fostering trust, reducing transaction costs, and encouraging adaptive learning. The qualitative data also suggest a feedback loop: as entrepreneurs see transparency, they are more likely to formalize their businesses, pay taxes, and push for further reforms, thereby enhancing institutional legitimacy and creating a cycle of better governance and business development.

5.3 Integrative Reflection: Interactions Between Propositions

A synthesis of the propositions shows that institutional quality (Proposition 1) and transparency and predictability (Proposition 2) support each other instead of functioning independently. Institutional quality sets the essential rules and capabilities of the system, while transparency and predictability offer the assurance that these rules are fair, stable, and actionable. Together, they form the socio-institutional foundation from which entrepreneurial culture emerges.

This integration aligns with Lundvall's (2016) idea of the "learning economy," where entrepreneurs, policymakers, and educators evolve together through trust and adaptation. Entrepreneurs learn to navigate and trust formal systems; policymakers learn from the responses of businesses to reforms; and educators adjust curricula to meet the changing needs of market institutions. The process is cyclical, not linear, echoing Rodrik's (2004) view that success in policy for developing economies relies on ongoing learning and institutional experimentation.

Additionally, the findings show that institutional quality and transparency interact through processes of education and socialization. Entrepreneurship education acts as a bridge, translating institutional norms into individual skills and values. When students experience transparent educational governance—clear assessment standards, merit-based progression, and practical exposure—they internalize these principles and apply them in their entrepreneurial activities. This reveals the reciprocal relationship between institutional culture and entrepreneurial behavior, supporting the idea that institutional reform must go hand in hand with educational transformation to promote long-term enterprise development.

5.4 Theoretical and Contextual Implications

The discussion of both propositions adds to broader theoretical debates on institutionalism and entrepreneurship in emerging economies. It suggests that institutional quality and transparency should be viewed not just as structural conditions but as cultural elements that shape entrepreneurial identity, trust, and relationships. In line with Bruton et al. (2015), entrepreneurship in developing contexts is more about co-creating legitimacy within changing institutional landscapes than seizing fixed opportunities.

In context, Uganda represents a transitioning economy—where formal institutions are developing but still coexist with informal norms. The qualitative insights highlight that policy design must reflect this context, embedding transparency mechanisms that resonate with local social realities. When institutional reform is localized and participatory, it fosters an entrepreneurial culture rooted in community trust and shared responsibility, consistent with Scott's (2014) framework of institutional pillars.

Ultimately, situating the findings within these propositions emphasizes that building an entrepreneurial culture in Uganda requires more than technical reforms—it requires establishing trust-oriented, transparent, and learning-focused institutional ecosystems that empower citizens to innovate sustainably.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study concludes that entrepreneurial culture in Uganda develops through active interactions among institutional frameworks, educational systems, and policy coherence. Institutional predictability builds trust and lowers uncertainty, creating a stable environment for entrepreneurial activity. Transparent, consistent, and fair regulatory systems reduce the perceived risks of business engagement and foster the confidence needed for long-term investment and innovation. Education plays a critical role, acting as a transformative tool that cultivates creativity, resilience, and the ability to recognize opportunities. The country's entrepreneurial culture thrives where curricula include practical learning, mentorship, and exposure to real-world business contexts. Finally, consistent socioeconomic policies act as the glue that aligns incentives, resources, and institutional commitments toward entrepreneurial growth. Fragmented policy frameworks can weaken momentum and sustainability, while coordinated strategies enhance the ecosystem's ability to innovate and create jobs.

Therefore, entrepreneurial culture should not simply be seen as the result of individual attitudes or isolated behaviors. Instead, it should be understood as a systemic and socially embedded phenomenon shaped by multiple institutional, educational, and policy environments. This study emphasizes that entrepreneurship in Uganda is not just an act of individual initiative but a relational process influenced by trust, learning, and collective adjustment. This systemic perspective challenges narrow views of entrepreneurship that focus only on personal qualities or market incentives, highlighting instead the significance of institutional growth, educational reform, and policy integration.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, the study builds on institutional and human capital theories by showing how trust in institutions and the ability to adapt in education jointly influence policy effects on entrepreneurship in developing areas. Institutional theory has often cantered on formal rules and enforcement, but the findings indicate that how people perceive institutional fairness and predictability is also crucial in shaping entrepreneurial motivation and behavior. Entrepreneurs interpret and internalize institutional signals—like property rights protection and regulatory efficiency—as signs of stability, which then affect their willingness to innovate and grow.

The study also develops human capital theory by framing education as a cultural process that instils entrepreneurial values in communities, not just as skill acquisition. Entrepreneurship education that combines hands-on learning, mentorship, and real-life problem-solving nurtures not only technical skills but also the psychological readiness and social networks needed for business creation. The merging of these two theoretical areas—trust-based institutionalism and adaptive learning—offers a broader framework for understanding entrepreneurship as a socio-institutional system.

Additionally, the study contributes to the literature on policy learning and systems theory by showing how coordinated policies enhance institutional legitimacy and educational relevance. Policies that are cross-sectoral and responsive—adjusting based on feedback from entrepreneurs and educators—tend to create stronger, self-sustaining innovation systems. As a result, the Ugandan experience highlights the need for an integrated theoretical approach that connects macro-structural governance with micro-level learning to explain the evolution and endurance of entrepreneurial cultures.

Practical Implications

For policymakers and practitioners, the findings stress the importance of systemic reforms that strengthen institutional integrity, promote entrepreneurial education, and enhance policy coordination.

First, improving institutional transparency and simplifying regulatory frameworks should be prioritized to lower administrative barriers and corruption risks that deter startups. Streamlined licensing procedures, digital registration systems, and accessible legal information can significantly improve entrepreneurial participation and trust in governance structures.

Second, promoting entrepreneurial learning across all levels of education—from primary schools to universities—is vital. This shift must move away from rote, exam-based teaching toward experiential and inquiry-driven learning models that foster creativity, risk-taking, and problem-solving skills. Collaborations between educational institutions, businesses, and local communities can help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical business experience.

Third, enhancing policy coordination among ministries and implementing agencies will reduce duplication, fragmentation, and inefficiencies that often affect development initiatives. Establishing inter-ministerial task forces or innovation councils can ensure that entrepreneurship policies in trade, finance, education, and technology are aligned and mutually supportive. A cohesive policy ecosystem ensures that funding, training, and infrastructure support reach entrepreneurs in a comprehensive manner rather than through disconnected programs.

These recommendations indicate that nurturing Uganda's entrepreneurial culture requires moving beyond isolated interventions toward a holistic approach, where institutions, educators, and policymakers work together as interconnected actors within a shared innovation framework.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study offers valuable qualitative insights into the socio-institutional factors shaping entrepreneurship in Uganda, several limitations should be acknowledged. Relying on qualitative data from a limited number of regions and participants may restrict the general applicability of findings across all sectors of the Ugandan economy. However, this design was intentional, aimed at capturing the subtle meanings, narratives, and lived experiences that quantitative surveys often miss.

Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal or mixed methods approaches. Longitudinal studies could explore how institutional reforms or policy changes unfold over time and how they affect the evolution of entrepreneurial norms and practices. A mixed-method design that combines survey data with qualitative interviews could allow researchers to validate patterns with broader empirical evidence. Comparative studies between Uganda and other Sub-Saharan African countries with different institutional structures could also provide insights into how contextual factors influence the formation of entrepreneurial culture.

Furthermore, future investigations could examine the gendered and regional aspects of entrepreneurial culture, looking at how institutional trust, access to education, and policy alignment differently impact women, youth, and rural entrepreneurs. Such research would offer a more inclusive understanding of entrepreneurship and inform development strategies that promote equity.

Summary

In summary, this study highlights that fostering entrepreneurship in Uganda involves not just encouraging individual initiative but also reconfiguring the larger socio-institutional ecosystem. A vibrant entrepreneurial culture arises when institutions are trustworthy, education is transformative, and policies are coherent and adaptable. By shedding light on the interconnections among these systems, the study provides both theoretical and practical pathways for building resilient and innovative entrepreneurial communities in developing economies.

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