



# ENTREPRENEURS' CREATIVE RESPONSES TO INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

Insider Perspectives  
from Sub-Saharan Africa

Emiel L. Eijdenberg and Neil A. Thompson

 EMERALD POINTS

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Insider Perspectives from  
Sub-Saharan Africa

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# FOREWORD

In Africa, the prospects for continued and even accelerated economic growth and development driven by entrepreneurs are more promising than ever. In the early throes of an entrepreneurial revolution, Africa's business landscape is fast evolving, reflecting improvements in governance, increased trade openness, better macroeconomic management and a rising middle class. The growing adoption of new technologies fueled by digitisation and smart materials supports these trends. At the end of 2019, more than 300 digital platforms, mostly indigenous, were already operating across the continent, as well as more than 400 high-tech hubs. Venture capital funding of African tech start-ups increased tenfold between 2012 and 2018. While many start-ups in Africa are due to necessity, lack of employment and social security, even more are driven by opportunity. Moreover, the proportion of high-growth firms in Africa is comparable to that in Europe.

This promise of entrepreneurially driven growth and development must be realised, and the momentum of recent years should be given a further boost by enacting the right policies and making informed investments. Herein, the scholarly community can contribute by presenting scientific

evidence on the dynamics of African entrepreneurship. We need to understand more about African entrepreneurship as a whole – not just about the obstacles that limit the entry of entrepreneurs or limit the scaling up of their firms but also about how entrepreneurs' broader social impact can be optimised. This understanding is even more crucial because, despite recent progress, the challenge of sustainable development in Africa remains daunting. Around 428 million people still live in absolute poverty (33% of the continent's population), inequality remains high and the region is expected to be the hardest hit by climate change. How can entrepreneurs thus best be supported to be of even greater benefit to both society and the environment?

To this crucial question, this book by dr. Emiel L. Eijdenberg and dr. Neil A. Thompson makes a welcome contribution. Focusing on the cases of entrepreneurs in Tanzania and Zambia, they depart from the understanding that the dynamics of African entrepreneurship – what they do, why and how they do it and how it impacts – is ultimately a function of the institutional environment (the 'rules of the game'). To unpack the relationship between institutional environment and the role of entrepreneurship in social and environmental development, they chose to observe several entrepreneurs at the coalface closely and relate their narratives. They carefully document 'a more nuanced and insider perspective of the everyday struggles of Tanzanian and Zambian entrepreneurs'. Their fascinating account, while confirming the promise of entrepreneurship-led development in the two countries (yes, entrepreneurs do contribute to sustainable development), also highlights the need for complementary interventions, such as environmental regulations,

environmental awareness promotion, better alignment of incentives and more comprehensive and robust social security systems.

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# PREFACE

Entrepreneurship is as old as humankind. Primitive hunter-gatherers explored niche advantages in the early marketplace. Assyrians had some sort of no-frills innovation and an army of knowledge workers. Phoenician merchants connected people in the Mediterranean through trade. Roman aristocrats let slaves run their businesses. Medieval marketplaces served as the centre of value-adding activities, goods and produce exchange, and regional trade. The Dutch East Indian Company is known as one of the first international corporations issuing public shares, allowing people the opportunity to create financial value while taking a degree of risk. Henry Ford's innovative assembly line allowed for mass production of automobiles, creating value for larger sets of people. Without entrepreneurship, much of our world as we know it today would look significantly different.

When we think of entrepreneurship today, businesses such as Apple, Microsoft and Tesla, founded and led by entrepreneurs Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Elon Musk, respectively, come to our minds. These well-known examples of large corporations started small in a garage but eventually grew to international scale, changing the way of how we live, work and travel. Adding value based on seizing opportunities by taking risk and radically innovating is key in changing the rules of the game of society.

Many previously mentioned examples of successful businesses and their entrepreneurs are from Western, developed countries and are undoubtedly important for both local economies and the world economy. In past decades, these types of businesses and entrepreneurs have increasingly attracted the attention of the scholarly community, resulting in research of this phenomenon from different perspectives and often using large quantitative data sets of international regulatory bodies (e.g. the World Bank) or consortia (e.g. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor). However, entrepreneurship takes place not only in Western, developed countries but also in less developed countries that make up more than a billion people living in poverty. With that said, an important aspect of research has largely been overlooked: the illustrative, personal stories of entrepreneurs from developing countries. This book revolves around this missing aspect.

From a personal note, we – the authors of this book – have been intrigued by entrepreneurship in developing countries for a long time. We both have visited, lived and worked in developing countries, as well as talked with hundreds of entrepreneurs in developing countries, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa, about their lives as entrepreneurs, including what drives, motivates, enables and hinders them. We have seen the large amount of entrepreneurial activity in countries such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe, for example, in the countless people making and selling goods on the streets, which were more often than not colourful homemade meals and beverages that enriched your senses. These people were practicing improvised forms of innovation such as drinking water purifiers, cell phone chargers made from dynamos on bicycles, and sandals made from car tires. They were often engaging in entrepreneurial activities to make a living, but some also enjoyed working independently and had a strong passion for the work they were doing. We have

seen entrepreneurs who started on one day but were gone the next, whereas others remained for a long time or even became very successful. Some entrepreneurs operated from ordinary brick-and-mortar stores, while others had self-made wooden-and-cardboard kiosks with creative – sometimes ironic – names such as ‘Copy Cat Business’.

Insider views are greatly needed to overcome the constraints of quantitative studies based on large data sets. Obviously, from a practical perspective, it is impossible to interview every entrepreneur from a developing country to ascertain a more complete understanding of each businessperson’s type of entrepreneurship. However, we have made an attempt in this book by presenting and discussing the findings from focus groups with 60 experts on entrepreneurship and experienced entrepreneurs from two developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Tanzania and Zambia. This effort showcases personal experiences and stories of everyday circumstances of Tanzanian and Zambian entrepreneurs in light of contemporary theories from entrepreneurship literature and with concrete takeaways for practitioners. We hope that the insider views in this book make entrepreneurship in developing countries come alive for you in the same way we have seen and experienced ourselves.

**Dr. Emiel L. Eijdenberg**  
**Dr. Neil A. Thompson**

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# ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CHALLENGING INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

## 1.1 ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INSTITUTIONS

Entrepreneurship has long been recognised as a vital socio-economic activity that creates the employment opportunities, innovation, productivity gains and wealth that are necessary for regional economic development. As such, research on entrepreneurship has increased in the past two decades (Bruton, Ahlstrom, & Obloj, 2008; Venkataraman, 1997). Although it has been defined in various ways, we ascribe to the definition of *entrepreneurship* as the ‘creation of [new] organizations’ (Gartner, 1988, p. 11) that generate economic and social value. By *organisation*, we mean creating organisation among previously disconnected sets of materials, resources, interests and people. When entrepreneurs successfully create and sustain organisations, new economic and social value is created by and for those involved, often with positive side effects for communities and regions. This opens



up the definition of entrepreneurship to include small business owners (Bewayo, 1995; Eijdenberg & Masurel, 2013) who create, manage and own the firm.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, research on entrepreneurship has aimed at generating theory that would explain the emergence and survival of entrepreneurship despite the context in which this process occurs. However, a growing area of research aims to recontextualise entrepreneurship by drawing attention to the context that enables and constrains entrepreneurial activities (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Bruton et al., 2008). A useful framework for conceptualizing how 'context' shapes entrepreneurship is institutional theory (Baughn, Bodie, & McIntosh, 2007; Campbell, 2007), which deals with the role of political, economic and social systems that surround firms (Baughn et al., 2007; North, 1990; Scott, 1995; Wright, Filatotchev, Hoskisson, & Peng, 2005). According to North (1991), institutions are formal and informal constraints that help to structure political, social and economic interactions. Formal constraints are constitutions, laws, property rights and informal rules, for example, traditions, customs and sanctions. Other scholars refer to these formal and informal constraints as public, centralised (government designed) institutions and private, decentralised (socially designed) institutions (Ingram & Silverman, 2000; Meek, Pacheco, & York, 2010). Davis, North, and Smorodin (1971) supported this understanding by describing the institutional environment as the fundamental political, social and legal ground rules that define the economic environment. In addition, along with the standard constraints of economics (North, 1991), institutions influence

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<sup>1</sup> In this book, the terms 'businesses', 'companies', 'corporations', 'enterprises', 'firms' and 'organisations' are used interchangeably, referring to the same definition of 'entrepreneurship' as outlined in this section.

human behaviour and impact economic performance, growth and development (Kherallah & Kirsten, 2002).

The notion of institutional embeddedness argues that the prevailing values, rules, expectations and material infrastructures in countries simultaneously provide individuals with entrepreneurial opportunities and set boundaries for their actions (Tolbert & Hiatt, 2010; Welter, 2011). Therefore, institutional theorists posit that entrepreneurs must conform to existing institutions to gain endorsement, legitimacy and resources from important referent audiences and stakeholders (Greenman, 2013; Jain & Sharma, 2013). Thus, considering the institutional context of entrepreneurship while examining entrepreneurial activities in developing countries is important (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Bruton et al., 2008; Jain & Sharma, 2013; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Wright et al., 2005).

A burgeoning area of scholarship examines institutional theory-led entrepreneurship in developed countries (e.g. Eijdenberg, Thompson, Verduijn, & Essers, 2019; Su, Zhai, & Karlsson, 2017). However, developing countries are thought to have less-developed institutional environments compared to developed countries (Belal & Cooper, 2011; Özen & Küskü, 2009). According to Hoskisson, Eden, Lau, and Wright (2000), these less-developed institutional environments might lead to entrepreneurs facing challenges due to the uncertainties caused by economic and political instability. Some scholars, such as Azmat and Samaratunge (2009), developed a contextual framework that attempts to explain the lack of responsible entrepreneurship in developing countries. They proposed that important contextual factors, such as the business environment (e.g. corruption and rule of law), socio-economic conditions or cultural traditions, influence socially responsible behaviour. Their findings and those of other scholars (e.g. Abdallah & Eijdenberg, 2019; Eijdenberg,

Thompson et al., 2019) can be used as groundwork to further investigate this research field.

## 1.2 ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In the past decade, many researchers have examined the impact of entrepreneurship on sustainable development (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Hall, Daneke, & Lenox, 2010; Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011). This is important because contemporary global issues such as climate change and social and economic inequality affect the entrepreneurial landscape, especially in developing countries that are vulnerable because of their limited economic resilience (Arndt, Asante, & Thurlow, 2015; Fayiga, Ipinmoroti, & Chirenje, 2018).

Although there is no single definition, the Brundtland Report defined *sustainable development* as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the future generations' ability to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). Scholars note that persistent market failures have led to social inequality and environmental degradation that call for solutions to restore economic and environmental sustainability (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Dean & McMullen, 2007). A growing area of entrepreneurship research has found evidence that entrepreneurship can succeed in combining profit with pro-social and environmental goals by developing innovative products and services (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011; Thompson, Kiefer, & York, 2011). Research has indicated that entrepreneurship may improve physical health, education opportunities, community cohesion and development, and self-reliance of individuals and societies. Moreover, it may help to reduce

deforestation and environmental degradation, counteract climate change, preserve ecosystems, improve agricultural practices and freshwater supplies, and maintain biodiversity (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011). This book follows Shepherd and Patzelt's (2011) definition of *sustainable entrepreneurship* as,

*...the preservation of nature, life support, and community in the pursuit of perceived opportunities to bring into existence future products, processes, and services for gain, where gain is broadly construed to include economic and non-economic gains to individuals, the economy, and society.*

(p. 137)

Within this context, research often refers to entrepreneurship as a 'panacea' for social and environmental issues (Hall et al., 2010, p. 439) by creating economic, social and environmental value (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Dean & McMullen, 2007; Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011). As stated by Elkington (1997), sustainability in the business context consists of a *triple bottom line* of economic, social and environmental performance (Collins, Roper, & Lawrence, 2010). Many firms try to address economic, social and ecological issues to contribute to sustainable development (Ameer & Othman, 2012; Lans, Blok, & Wesselink, 2014). Finally, because the institutional context highly influences entrepreneurial activities, the sustainable behaviour of entrepreneurs is also affected by the economic, political and cultural environments (Eijdenberg, Thompson et al., 2019). In many developing countries, ecological issues exist and are amplified due to global climate change (Adger, Huq, Brown, Conway, & Hulme, 2003). Smit and Pilifosova (2001) argued that developing countries will be hit hardest by the impacts of climate change and may be least able to adapt.

Because of the possibly limited ability of sub-Saharan African states to cope with climate change, management of social issues might deteriorate (Adger et al., 2003). For instance, climate change will lead to weather extremes that may cause agricultural production to decline (Smit & Pilifosova, 2001), putting food security in countries such as Tanzania and Zambia at risk (Jones & Thornton, 2003). Moreover, solid waste production and improper waste disposal are also severe problems in many developing countries (Guerrero, Maas, & Hogland, 2013; Mbuligwe & Kassenga, 2004; Minghua et al., 2009).

### 1.3 PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

We wrote this book for three reasons. First, research on entrepreneurship and institutions rarely incorporates the experiences of actual entrepreneurs when investigating the role of institutions. In general, institutional environments can be analysed at different levels: the micro level (e.g. the individual), the meso level (e.g. the sector) and the macro level (i.e. society) (Eijdenberg, Thompson et al., 2019). Most scholarly research studies focus on entrepreneurial behaviour in challenging institutional contexts at the macro level or the meso level (De Castro, Khavul, & Bruton, 2014; Stenholm, Acs, & Wuebker, 2013). Due to the difficulties in collecting person-centred data, the lack of research at the micro level translates into little knowledge about the personal experiences of entrepreneurs who operate in challenging institutional contexts (Eijdenberg, Thompson et al., 2019). Yet, institutions affect entrepreneurship the most at the micro level. Thus, more in-depth insights into the lives of entrepreneurs will help link their activities to a broader institutional context.

Second, much of the research on entrepreneurship and sustainable development has been conducted in developed countries (Dobers & Halme, 2009). Current research has already dealt with the ecological and social impact of multinational corporations (Ite, 2004; Kolk & Lenfant, 2013) and local organisations (Jiménez, Jawara, LeDeunff, Naylor, & Scharp, 2017) in developing countries. Whereas sustainability practices of larger companies in developing countries are often examined, the practices of smaller companies have received less attention (Choongo, van Burg, Paas, & Masurel, 2016; Spence & Rutherford, 2003). However, micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for 90% of all enterprises worldwide and account for the major type of employment at 50%–60% (Luetkenhorst, 2004). Clearly, the impact of SMEs on environmental and social well-being should not be neglected (Choongo et al., 2016; Revell, Stokes, & Chen, 2010).

Moreover, the contribution of entrepreneurship to sustainable development in developing countries is a fairly new field (Azmat & Samaratunge, 2009; Jamali & Mirshak, 2007) as research in developed countries exceeds research in developing countries (Dobers & Halme, 2009; Luken, 2006). Many scholars argue that sustainability practices in sub-Saharan African countries only refer to philanthropic issues (Amaeshi, Adi, Ogbachie, & Amao, 2006). Consequently, it remains to be seen if and when entrepreneurship can contribute to a more sustainable society, especially in non-Western contexts.

Third, the focus of entrepreneurship research has historically been centred on developed economies such as in North America and Europe (Bruton et al., 2008). Entrepreneurship in developing countries has not been examined extensively (Bruton et al., 2008; Kiss, Danis, & Cavusgil, 2012). Bruton et al. (2008) illustrated that there is a substantial lack of

entrepreneurship research in high-quality journals regarding sub-Saharan Africa. However, entrepreneurship in developing countries (Nabi, Liñán, Iakovleva, Kolvereid, & Stephan, 2011; Naudé, 2010) and in sub-Saharan Africa has recently gained more attention (Eijdenberg, Sabokwigina, & Masurel, 2019; Eijdenberg, Thompson et al., 2019; Kristiansen, 2002). Nevertheless, emerging economies need to be treated differently due to their distinctive characteristics (Bruton et al., 2008). Research about sustainability practices of entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa is limited (Demuijnck & Ngnodjom, 2013; Idemudia, 2014) even though sustainable practices are most needed there (Egri & Ralston, 2008; Kolk & van Tulder, 2010). Because fewer institutions provide social goods in developing countries than in developed countries, the need for sustainability activities is more pronounced (Dobers & Halme, 2009).

The purpose of this book is to use the in-depth personal experiences of entrepreneurs working in challenging institutional environments of two sub-Saharan African countries – Tanzania and Zambia – in a qualitative study to examine the institutional constraints and enablers that deter or lead to sustainable practices by these entrepreneurs.<sup>2</sup> According to Polkinghorne (1988), a narrative is a way of creating a meaning by recognizing the importance of personal experiences and stories. Everyday life stories also enable scholars to gain profound personal and contextual insights regarding the entrepreneurial experience (Rae & Carswell, 2001). In addition, personal stories are a helpful tool to explore entrepreneurial activities (Gartner, 2007). Thus, the use of narratives is

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2 In this book, we refer to 'developing countries' in the 'sub-Saharan Africa' region, focusing on Tanzania and Zambia. Although other terms such as 'factor-driven economies' and 'emerging economies' are also used, all of these terms refer to the Tanzanian and Zambian contexts.