International Journal of
Economic Policy
(IJECOP)

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CARI Journals

International Journal of Economic Policy

ISSN: 2788-6352 (Online)

Vol. 6, Issue No. 3, pp 1 - 17, 2026 www.carijournals.org

Filling the Void: Strategic Communication and Corporate Partnerships as Resilience Mechanisms for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Tariff-Disrupted African Markets

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Accepted: 17th August, 2026, Received in Revised Form: 25th August, 2026, Published: 5th September, 2026

Abstract

Purpose: Trade disruptions caused by shifting tariff regimes are placing significant pressure on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across Africa. While policy responses are often proposed as the primary solution, the reality in many African markets is that formal institutions are too slow, too weak, or too inconsistent to provide meaningful support when SMEs need it most. This paper examines how, in the absence of effective policy responses, strategic communication and corporate partnerships function as the primary resilience mechanisms for SMEs operating in tariff-disrupted African markets.

Methodology: Drawing on institutional void theory (Khanna & Palepu, 1997, 2010) and Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, and using Nigeria as a focal context, the paper examines how SMEs have historically relied on relational and communicative capabilities to weather trade disruption rather than waiting for government intervention. The paper adopts an integrative literature review methodology, drawing on existing empirical literature and practitioner evidence from corporate communications and partnership contexts across Nigeria and the wider African market to synthesize a unified conceptual framework.

Findings: The findings suggest that strategic communication is not simply a support function but a core resilience capability, and that corporate-SME partnerships serve as substitute infrastructure where formal institutions fall short.

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy: The paper concludes with practical implications for SME practitioners, corporate partners, and policymakers seeking to build more durable resilience frameworks in emerging economies.

Keywords: *SME Resilience, Tariff Disruption, Institutional Voids, Strategic Communication, Corporate Partnerships*

JEL Codes : *M13, M14, F13, O55*

International Journal of Economic Policy
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1. INTRODUCTION

Tariffs and trade policy have always shaped the fortunes of businesses. But for small and medium-sized enterprises in Africa, the consequences of trade disruption are rarely abstract. They show up as rising input costs, shrinking margins, lost contracts, and in many cases, the decision to close.

Africa's SMEs are not short of challenges. They account for 80% of employment across the continent, yet they remain among the most exposed to external economic shocks (UNCTAD, 2024). When global tariff regimes shift, as they have done repeatedly in recent years, African SMEs bear a disproportionate share of the burden. Unlike large corporations, they do not have the capital reserves, legal teams, or political access to absorb disruption or lobby for relief (Rynarzewska & Mao, 2026). They need support, and they need it quickly.

The conventional assumption is that this support should come from the government. Policy responses, trade agreements, and regulatory frameworks are typically positioned as the first line of defense for businesses navigating trade turbulence. In practice, however, many African governments operate within institutional environments that are too fragmented to deliver timely or effective responses. Weak regulatory systems, bureaucratic delays, and inconsistent implementation mean that by the time a formal policy response arrives, many SMEs have already absorbed the damage (Khanna & Palepu, 2010; Mair & Marti, 2009).

This paper starts from a different premise. It argues that when policy falls short, African SMEs do not simply wait. They build. They build relationships with corporate partners who can provide access to networks, resources, and market stability. And they use strategic communication to hold those relationships together, signal credibility to the market, and maintain the trust of suppliers, clients, and stakeholders under pressure.

These two capabilities, strategic communication and corporate partnerships, are rarely discussed together in the resilience literature. They tend to appear in separate conversations: one in the field of organizational communications, the other in business strategy and institutional economics. This paper brings them into the same frame and argues that together they form a practical resilience infrastructure that operates independently of formal policy support.

Using Nigeria as the primary context, and drawing on institutional void theory and stakeholder theory as the analytical foundation, the paper examines how this dynamic plays out in one of Africa's most complex and instructive business environments. Nigeria is not a perfect case study, but it is an honest one. Its institutional gaps are well documented, its SME sector is vast, and the gap between policy intent and policy delivery is wide enough to make the argument clearly.

Before proceeding, it is worth clarifying how three core terms are used in this paper. Strategic communication refers to the deliberate management of information and relationships with key stakeholders, including partners, clients, suppliers, and employees, in ways that support an organization's goals and sustain trust over time. It is distinct from general marketing or advertising and is concerned primarily with how organizations communicate through complexity and uncertainty. Corporate partnerships, as used here, refers to formal or semi-formal collaborative arrangements between SMEs and larger corporate entities that provide access to resources, networks, or market infrastructure that the SME could not generate independently. SME resilience refers to an organization's capacity to absorb the impact of external disruption, maintain core functions, and recover or adapt without losing the confidence of its key stakeholders. These definitions frame the analysis that follows.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 describes the methodological approach. Section 4 presents the theoretical framework. Section 5 develops the analysis and argument. Section 6 discusses implications and recommendations for practitioners, corporate partners, and policymakers. Section 7 concludes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Tariffs, Trade Disruption, and SME Vulnerability in Africa

African SMEs operate within some of the world's most challenging trade environments. While the continent offers growing markets and high investment returns, SMEs, which provide 80% of employment across Africa, are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks. In 2023, 32% of African firms cited limited access to financial tools as a major obstacle to growth, with currency volatility further straining small businesses reliant on foreign currency transactions (UNCTAD, 2024).

The relationship between trade policy and SME performance on the continent is far from straightforward. Empirical research drawing on World Bank Enterprise Survey data across 27 African countries found that while enabling tax administration and business licensing regulations improve SMEs' performance, trade facilitation actually impedes African SMEs' performance, and the institutional context of competition from foreign firms worsens this impact further (Hansen-Addy et al., 2023). Hansen-Addy et al. (2023) suggest this counterintuitive finding indicates that tariff and trade liberalization policies, designed ostensibly to support business, may in practice expose under-resourced African SMEs to competitive pressures they are ill-equipped to absorb.

Compounding this, tariff disruptions increase production costs and weaken Africa's position in the global market. Countries like Nigeria face increased trade barriers that limit their access to key markets, slowing industrialization, worsening trade imbalances, and impeding economic growth (IMF, 2025). For SMEs operating within these national economies, the downstream consequences of such disruptions are acute and often existential.

2.2 Institutional Voids and the Policy Response Gap

To understand why formal policy responses so frequently fail African SMEs during trade disruptions, institutional void theory provides the critical analytical lens. Pioneered by Khanna and Palepu, institutional voids are defined as absent or inefficient market-supporting institutions required to consummate transactions in an economy, underdeveloped structures that hamper market interactions, increase transaction costs, and cause economic inefficiency (Khanna & Palepu, 1997, 2010).

Critically, emerging markets are characterized by institutional voids in which firms must respond to unpredictable but predictably frequent shocks, including political instability, macroeconomic fluctuations, and trade disruptions, without the benefit of specialized intermediaries that can analyze market information, facilitate transactions, and provide signals of credibility (Khanna & Palepu, 1997). In such contexts, the state cannot reliably serve as the backstop institution that SMEs require during crises.

Research on Nigerian SMEs confirms this pattern. SMEs, which are critical to Nigeria's economy, faced considerable supply chain disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic and had to rely on their relational capabilities because, unlike some other countries, institutional support in Nigeria during the crisis was limited (Ashiru et al., 2022). The Nigerian experience is not an anomaly but a case study in how institutional voids force SMEs to develop alternative resilience mechanisms, a pattern replicated across the continent.

Scholars have noted that the contributions of network support systems and external stakeholders, including inter-organizational collaborations, knowledge-sharing channels, and capacity-building initiatives, are critical to navigating these challenging institutional landscapes (Ashiru et al., 2022). It is precisely in this space that strategic communication and corporate partnerships emerge as functional substitutes for absent policy infrastructure.

2.3 SME Resilience: Beyond the Policy Framework

The academic literature on SME resilience has increasingly moved beyond policy-dependent frameworks toward capability-based explanations. Research identifies four fundamental elements that support SME resilience during crises: entrepreneurial orientation, networks, digital literacy, and adaptability. These competencies maintain company continuity and enhance SMEs' strategic agility in managing future challenges (Saezow & Sukhabot, 2025).

Notably, networks, the relational architecture of an SME, feature prominently as a resilience driver independent of formal institutional support, particularly for SMEs with limited resource capital that must rely on external connections rather than internal capacity alone.

This framing is significant. It positions resilience not as a product of policy design alone, but as something that organizations can actively construct through strategic relationships. For African SMEs facing institutional voids, this distinction is not merely academic; it is operational.

2.4 Strategic Communication as a Resilience Mechanism

Strategic communication has historically been conceptualized as a tool for reputation management or external positioning. However, emerging scholarship repositions it as a core organizational capability with direct implications for resilience. Research on Nigerian SMEs found that digital communication technologies activated SME resilience through four key drivers: facilitating connections and bonding with staff, clients, and suppliers; enabling collaborations; activating process diversification; and enhancing supply chain flexibility (Ashiru et al., 2022).

This finding is theoretically significant. Communications, in this reading, is not merely the transmission of information but the mechanism through which partnerships are activated, trust is maintained, and market confidence is preserved during periods of disruption. It functions as the connective tissue of resilience.

Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory provides the normative foundation for this argument. Strategic communication management functions include strategic thinking, openness, and the cultivation of fruitful relationships among stakeholders, with key elements encompassing strategic communication planning, relationship building, objectives management, and strategic communication research (Friedman & Miles, 2004). In the context of tariff disruption, these functions translate directly into the capacity to sustain partnerships, manage uncertainty, and signal institutional credibility in the absence of formal policy support.

2.5 Corporate-SME Partnerships in Weak Institutional Contexts

Where institutional voids prevail, corporate-SME partnerships have emerged as a documented mechanism for filling the gaps that policy leaves behind. Firms operating in emerging markets may choose to compete or collaborate, and engaging in joint ventures or partnerships with local partners can help overcome institutional voids by providing access to resources, capabilities, and credibility otherwise unavailable (Khanna & Palepu, 2010).

In the Nigerian context specifically, recent evidence confirms the growing reliance on such partnerships as a substitute for institutional support. Partnerships with financial institutions, development finance institutions, and agencies allow SMEs to access funding without traditional collateral, using cooperative and guarantee-based structures. These interventions are described not just as financial tools but as vehicles for creating an environment where SMEs can think beyond survival and begin to scale (CSIS, 2022).

At the continental level, institutional coordination, including alignment between government, banks, and the private sector, is identified as critical, with policy consistency and investor confidence being necessary preconditions for SME resilience (African Development Bank, 2025). Yet where such coordination is absent, the literature suggests that corporate-led partnerships increasingly perform this coordinating function, stepping into the institutional space that governments vacate.

Taken together, the literature identifies a clear but undertheorized pattern: in tariff-disrupted African markets, the resilience of SMEs does not depend primarily on formal policy responses but

International Journal of Economic Policy
ISSN: 2788-6352 (Online)
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on the informal architectures of strategic communication and corporate partnership that firms construct in their absence. This paper advances that argument.

2.6 The Gap This Paper Addresses

The five bodies of literature reviewed here each contribute something important. Research on tariff disruption establishes the scale of the problem for African SMEs. Institutional void theory explains why formal policy responses so often fall short. The resilience literature identifies the relational and communicative capabilities that help SMEs survive disruption. The strategic communication literature repositions those capabilities as core organizational functions rather than peripheral ones. And the corporate partnership literature documents how SMEs in weak institutional environments use inter-organizational relationships to access what policy cannot provide.

What the literature does not do is examine these two capabilities together. Strategic communication and corporate partnerships appear in separate scholarly conversations and are rarely analyzed as a combined resilience mechanism. No study identified in this review has examined how the two interact in the specific context of tariff-disrupted African markets, or argued that together they constitute an informal resilience infrastructure that substitutes for absent institutional support. That is the gap this paper addresses.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study adopted an integrative literature review design. The design was selected because the paper brings together evidence from trade policy, institutional theory, SME resilience, strategic communication, and corporate partnership research to develop a unified conceptual explanation. Rather than estimating a causal effect from primary observations, the study synthesized published empirical findings and relevant practitioner evidence to identify recurring mechanisms and relationships.

Target population and data sources

The target population comprised published studies, institutional reports, policy documents, and documented corporate-partnership cases concerning SMEs, trade disruption, institutional voids, resilience, strategic communication, and inter-organizational collaboration in Africa, with particular attention to Nigeria. Data sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, reports from international and regional organizations, and credible practitioner or policy publications. The sources cited in the review were selected for their direct relevance to the research question, geographic applicability, conceptual contribution, and recency.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

A purposive, criterion-based sampling approach was used to select sources for inclusion in the review. Sources were sampled because they addressed the research question directly, provided evidence relevant to African SMEs or Nigeria, contributed to the theoretical framework, or offered credible institutional and practitioner evidence on trade disruption, resilience, communication, or corporate partnerships.

Data collection and validation

Relevant sources were identified through a focused review of the literature and reference chaining from the core theoretical and empirical works. Each source was assessed for topical relevance, methodological or institutional credibility, and its ability to illuminate the relationship between formal institutional support, strategic communication, and corporate partnerships. Evidence was triangulated across academic studies, government and multilateral reports, and documented business cases. No human participants or confidential datasets were used.

Data analysis and presentation

The evidence was analyzed thematically. Findings were coded around four analytical categories: the effects of tariff and trade disruption on SMEs; the institutional conditions that create support gaps; the role of strategic communication in sustaining stakeholder relationships; and the contribution of corporate partnerships to access, credibility, and continuity. The results are presented narratively and integrated with institutional void theory and stakeholder theory to develop the paper's conceptual argument.

Scope and limitations of the method

Because the study is an integrative review rather than a systematic review with a registered protocol or a primary empirical investigation, its conclusions are conceptual and interpretive. The analysis therefore does not claim statistical generalizability. Instead, it offers a theoretically grounded framework and identifies propositions that can be tested through future sector-level and cross-country research.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is anchored in two theoretical frameworks: institutional void theory and stakeholder theory. Taken individually, each offers a useful but incomplete picture of how African SMEs survive trade disruption. Together, they provide the analytical foundation for the central argument of this paper.

4.1 Institutional Void Theory

Institutional void theory, developed by Khanna and Palepu (1997, 2010), begins with a straightforward observation: markets work better when there are functioning institutions to support them. These institutions include regulators, legal systems, financial intermediaries, and information networks that help businesses transact with confidence. In advanced economies, these structures are largely taken for granted. In many emerging economies, they are absent, weak, or unreliable.

Khanna and Palepu (1997) describe these gaps as institutional voids and argue that firms operating in such environments cannot rely on the same strategies that work in well-functioning markets. Instead, they must develop alternative approaches that compensate for what formal institutions cannot provide. This insight is directly applicable to African SMEs facing tariff disruption. When government policy fails to respond adequately, SMEs are not left with nothing. They are left with a problem to solve, and the way they solve it reveals a great deal about where resilience actually comes from.

This paper uses institutional void theory to explain the structural conditions that make strategic communication and corporate partnerships necessary. The voids are not incidental. They are the reason why African SMEs cannot afford to wait for policy solutions, and why they have learned, often by necessity, to build their own resilience infrastructure.

4.2 Stakeholder Theory

Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory offers the second analytical lens. The theory holds that organizations do not exist in isolation. They are embedded in a web of relationships with employees, customers, suppliers, partners, regulators, and communities, and their ability to create and sustain value depends on how well they manage those relationships.

For the purposes of this paper, stakeholder theory illuminates why strategic communication is not simply a marketing or public relations function. It is the mechanism through which SMEs manage the relationships that keep them viable during disruption. When trade conditions shift, the ability to communicate clearly, honestly, and consistently with key stakeholders, including corporate partners, supply chain actors, and clients, determines whether those relationships hold or break.

4.3 The Intersection

The two theories are more complementary than they might initially appear. Institutional void theory identifies the structural problem: formal support is absent. Stakeholder theory points toward the relational solution: build and maintain the networks that formal institutions would otherwise provide. Strategic communication and corporate partnerships are the practical expression of that solution. They are how SMEs fill the void.

This paper does not claim that communications and partnerships replace policy. They do not. What it argues is that in the African context, where policy delivery is inconsistent and often slow, these two capabilities have become the primary tools through which SMEs sustain themselves. Understanding them as resilience mechanisms, rather than simply as operational functions, is the first step toward building more durable support systems for SMEs across the continent.

5. ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENT

5.1 The Policy Gap in Practice: Nigeria's Trade Disruption Context

Nigeria offers one of the clearest illustrations of what it looks like when trade policy fails SMEs in real time. In April 2025, the United States imposed a 14% tariff on Nigerian exports, while Nigeria maintained a 27% tariff on American goods. This tariff imbalance threatened to increase costs for importers, weaken the Naira, and disrupt established supply chains. The Naira had already lost approximately 82% of its value throughout 2024, and a stronger US dollar resulting from tariff pressure would further decrease the competitiveness of Nigerian exports in global markets (IMF, 2025).

For large corporations, disruptions of this scale are painful but manageable. They have legal teams, foreign currency reserves, and political access to lobby for relief or renegotiate contracts. SMEs have none of these. Research confirms that SMEs experience larger trade policy shocks because they are smaller and have weaker negotiation abilities than multinational corporations. Large corporations can negotiate rebates, shift manufacturing sites, or absorb expenses in ways that are simply not available to smaller firms (Rynarzewska & Mao, 2026).

The expected first line of defence in such situations is government. Yet in Nigeria, the institutional reality makes this expectation difficult to meet. While application and enforcement of trade-related regulations remain uneven, and opportunities for public comment and input into proposed regulations rarely occur, SMEs are left to absorb the impact of shifting tariff regimes with little practical guidance or protection (United States Department of State, 2025). The WTO's trade policy review of Nigeria further noted that Nigeria has bound only 19.7% of its tariff lines, with an average bound rate of 120%, creating a volatile and unpredictable regulatory environment for businesses operating within its borders (WTO, 2024).

This is not simply a failure of will. It is a structural problem. Institutional voids, the absent or weak market-supporting systems that Khanna and Palepu describe, mean that even when government intends to respond, the machinery to deliver that response quickly and effectively is often not there. Nigerian SMEs have known this for a long time. And they have adapted accordingly.

5.2 Corporate Partnerships as Substitute Infrastructure

When formal policy support is slow, unreliable, or absent, African SMEs have turned to corporate partnerships to fill the gap. This is not simply a workaround. In many cases, it has become the primary resilience strategy.

The logic is straightforward. Corporate partners, particularly larger firms with regional reach and established networks, can provide what institutions cannot: access to supply chains, market intelligence, financial guarantees, distribution capacity, and credibility with clients and investors. For an SME trying to survive a tariff shock, access to these resources through a corporate partner can make the difference between closing and continuing.

The digital economy provides one of the most visible examples of this in the African context. The formation of Ringier One Africa Media (ROAM) through a joint venture between Ringier Africa and One Africa Media brought together leading classifieds platforms across Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Senegal, creating a structure that allowed SMEs to access significantly extended market reach and a new range of products (Ringier Africa, 2017). What this partnership did, in practical terms, was give thousands of small businesses access to infrastructure they could not have built individually, at a time when regulatory and currency instability made standalone market operations increasingly difficult.

This pattern repeats across sectors. Experts have noted that Nigeria may need to reassess its trade strategy, explore new economic partnerships, and strengthen regional and global alliances to counterbalance the effects of trade policy shifts (IMF, 2025). At the SME level, this recommendation translates directly into the need for structured corporate partnerships rather than policy-dependent solutions.

The point here is not that corporate partnerships are perfect. They come with power imbalances, dependency risks, and alignment challenges. But in environments where institutional voids are deep and policy responses are slow, they function as the closest available substitute for the support structures that formal institutions fail to provide.

5.3 Strategic Communication as the Connective Tissue

A corporate partnership, however well-structured, does not sustain itself. It requires active management, consistent communication, and the ongoing cultivation of trust among all the stakeholders it touches. This is where strategic communication enters not as a peripheral function but as a core capability.

Research on Nigerian SMEs makes this connection explicit. Digital communication technologies enabled SME resilience through four key drivers: facilitating connections and bonding with staff, clients, and suppliers; enabling collaborations; activating process diversification; and enhancing supply chain flexibility (Ashiru et al., 2022). Each of these drivers depends not just on having the right relationships in place but on the ability to communicate through them effectively, especially under pressure.

This matters more during disruption than at any other time. When tariffs shift, supply chains tighten, or currency values fall, stakeholders want information. Suppliers want to know whether payments will continue. Clients want to know whether commitments can be kept. Corporate partners want to know whether the SME they are working with remains a viable operation. Strategic communication is the mechanism through which an SME answers all of these questions simultaneously, not just through formal announcements but through the ongoing quality of its stakeholder relationships.

Research in the Nigerian context confirms that transparent communication strengthens stakeholder trust, while proactive crisis communication mitigates reputational risks. Digital communication tools further amplify engagement and brand perception, with strategic corporate communication found to significantly improve organizational effectiveness by enhancing internal information flow, aligning employee performance with corporate goals, and fostering a collaborative work environment (Ofosu-Boateng et al., 2025).

For SMEs facing institutional voids, this is particularly significant. In the absence of third-party institutions that can verify credibility, signal quality, or enforce contracts, an SME's communications become its primary tool for establishing trust with the market. An SME that communicates clearly and consistently during a crisis is signalling something that no government policy can signal on its behalf: that it is a reliable partner worth staying with.

5.4 The Two Capabilities Together

Strategic communication and corporate partnerships are most powerful when they work in combination. Neither is sufficient on its own.

A corporate partnership without strategic communication is fragile. The SME may gain access to networks and resources, but without the ability to manage stakeholder relationships, communicate value clearly, and signal stability during turbulence, that partnership is at risk the moment conditions become difficult. Partners need to feel informed and confident. Clients need to understand what they are getting. Employees need a credible narrative about the organization's direction. Without communications, a partnership is just a contract, and contracts alone do not build resilience.

Strategic communication without a corporate partnership is limited. An SME can communicate brilliantly, but if it does not have access to the resources, networks, and market infrastructure that corporate partnerships provide, its communications are signals without substance. Trust built on communication alone is fragile if the underlying operational capability is missing.

Together, however, they form something more durable. Research shows that SMEs with higher levels of collaborative supplier relationships demonstrate greater resilience to tariff shocks, as measured by recovery time and the preservation of profit margins (Rynarzewska & Mao, 2026). When those collaborative relationships are sustained and managed through deliberate strategic communication, the resilience is compounded. The SME becomes not just a business that survived a disruption but one that retained the trust of its partners, clients, and supply chain through it, and is therefore better positioned for the next disruption when it comes.

This is the pattern that institutional void theory predicts and stakeholder theory explains. Where formal institutions cannot provide the infrastructure of trust, credibility, and market stability that businesses need, organizations build it themselves through relationships and communication.

African SMEs facing tariff disruption have not simply waited for governments to act. They have built, and continue to build, the informal architectures that policy has not provided.

5.5 Counterarguments and Limitations

The argument made in this paper is not without its critics, and intellectual honesty requires that they be addressed directly.

The first challenge is to the premise that formal policy responses consistently fail African SMEs. Scholarship on Central African economies suggests that while acknowledging challenges such as fiscal deficits and increased competition for local industries, these issues can be effectively managed with appropriate policy measures. Strengthening domestic revenue systems, investing in infrastructure, and providing targeted support for SMEs can mitigate the challenges of trade disruption, and regional cooperation through multilateral frameworks can enhance intra-regional trade and provide stability against global market fluctuations (WTO, 2023). This is a fair point. The paper does not claim that policy has never worked in Africa. What it argues is that in the Nigerian context specifically, and in many African markets more broadly, policy delivery is too inconsistent to be relied upon as a primary resilience mechanism. Where policy does work, it should be strengthened, not replaced.

The second challenge concerns the risks of corporate partnerships. Research on corporate partnerships in African contexts shows that larger organizations can shape research agendas and policy outcomes in ways that prioritize their own interests, often creating dynamics where the smaller partner's needs are secondary to those of the dominant corporate entity (Abdool Karim et al., 2025). This is a legitimate concern and one the paper takes seriously. Corporate partnerships in the African context are not automatically beneficial for SMEs. An SME that enters a partnership without clear terms, shared communication channels, or mutual accountability may find itself more exposed, not less. The recommendation in this paper is therefore not simply that SMEs should pursue corporate partnerships, but that they should pursue them strategically and with full awareness of the power dynamics involved.

The third challenge is directed at institutional void theory itself. Recent scholarship argues that African SMEs operate across dual layers of formal and informal governance, with formal institutions that are gradually improving through regulatory harmonization, tax digitization, payment rails, and regional trade corridors, alongside informal and semi-formal governance systems built on network brokerage, personal trust, and hybrid compliance (Andrews, 2025). This is an important nuance. Institutional voids are not static. Africa's institutional landscape is changing, and a framework that was highly applicable a decade ago may need to evolve as formal institutions strengthen. The paper acknowledges this and suggests that as institutions develop, the relationship between policy, communications, and partnerships as resilience mechanisms will need to be reassessed.

Finally, strategic communication is not a guaranteed solution. Communication can fail, be misread, or be used to project a stability that does not exist operationally. An SME that communicates confidently through a crisis it cannot actually manage risks damaging the very stakeholder trust it is trying to preserve. Communications is a capability, not a guarantee, and its effectiveness depends entirely on whether the underlying operational and relational infrastructure supports what is being communicated.

These limitations do not undermine the central argument of this paper. They refine it. The claim is not that strategic communication and corporate partnerships are perfect substitutes for policy. It is that in contexts where policy is absent or inadequate, they are the most accessible and documented resilience mechanisms available to African SMEs, and that understanding them more clearly is a necessary step toward building more comprehensive support systems.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The argument made in this paper has practical consequences for three groups: SME practitioners, corporate partners, and policymakers. Each has a role to play, and none can deliver durable resilience alone.

6.1 For SME Practitioners

The most immediate implication is a shift in how African SMEs think about their own capabilities. Resilience is not something that arrives from outside, through a government programme or a trade agreement. It is something that organizations build, deliberately and continuously, through the relationships they invest in and the ways they communicate through them.

Stakeholder trust is the bedrock upon which successful organizations build enduring relationships with their various constituencies, including customers, employees, investors, suppliers, and the broader community. Trust is a fragile yet invaluable asset that can be cultivated over time but can also be eroded quickly if not carefully nurtured (Coombs, 2007). For SMEs, this means treating strategic communication as an operational priority before disruption arrives, not only in response to it.

The evidence on crisis preparedness supports this directly. Research on SME crisis management consistently finds that how an SME enters a crisis, its level of relational and communicative preparedness, determines the strategic options it has available once the crisis is underway (Klyver & Nielsen, 2024). Practitioners must engage in strategic and proactive crisis management to minimize damage when such crises inevitably occur, with crisis management understood as an ongoing process encompassing prevention, preparation, response, and revision rather than a reactive intervention (Coombs, 2007). Waiting until a crisis to communicate is, by that point, already too late.

It also means being intentional about corporate partnerships. Effective SME partnerships are not transactional arrangements. Research on blended finance and SME support in sub-Saharan Africa confirms that partnership support must be a true collaboration with the SME, tailored to its specific operational challenges and environment, rather than a generic or one-directional intervention (CSIS, 2022). SMEs that treat partnerships as emergency measures rather than ongoing relationships will find them less reliable precisely when they are most needed.

6.2 For Corporate Partners

Larger corporations operating in African markets have both an opportunity and a responsibility here. SMEs that are well-communicated and well-connected are more stable supply chain partners, more reliable distribution networks, and more sustainable business relationships. Investing in the communicative and relational capacity of SME partners is therefore not philanthropy. It is smart business.

Global policymakers and private sector leaders have increasingly recognized that public-private partnerships are central to facilitating capital and unlocking the potential of SMEs, with leading financial institutions and corporations identifying partnership frameworks as essential tools for strengthening SME resilience in turbulent economic times (ITC, 2025). Corporate partners who take this seriously, by sharing market intelligence, creating open communication channels, and building the kind of trust that survives disruption, are investing in the long-term stability of the relationships that sustain their own operations.

6.3 For Policymakers

The findings of this paper should not be read as an argument against policy. They are an argument for better policy. If African SMEs are already building resilience through communications and partnerships in the absence of effective institutional support, policymakers have an opportunity to amplify what is already working.

The African Union's strategy for SME development explicitly calls for placing SMEs at the centre of private sector-led development and developing policy instruments and measures that facilitate the operation of SMEs and their access to the resources and partnerships they need to grow (African Union, 2019). Translating this into practice means creating regulatory environments that make it easier for SMEs to form, maintain, and benefit from corporate partnerships, rather than frameworks that treat partnerships as supplementary to policy rather than integral to it.

Investment in business development services infrastructure, fostering collaboration, and creating a supportive regulatory environment are identified as essential for enhancing SME resilience to economic shocks, with the most effective interventions being those that are responsive, flexible, and integrated into the specific conditions SMEs actually face (UNDP, 2024). Strategic communication capacity and partnership development should be explicitly included in these frameworks, not treated as secondary concerns behind finance and regulation.

6.4 Consolidated Recommendations

The evidence supports three linked recommendations. SMEs should institutionalize stakeholder communication and crisis preparedness before disruption occurs, diversify and formalize corporate partnerships, and negotiate transparent terms that address dependency and power imbalance risks. Corporate partners should share market intelligence, maintain open communication channels, and invest in the operational and relational capacity of SME partners. Policymakers should strengthen predictable trade administration and create regulatory and business-development environments that enable responsible corporate partnerships, while treating communication and partnership capabilities as complements to—not substitutes for—effective public policy.

7. CONCLUSION

The reviewed evidence indicates that, when policy support is inconsistent or delayed, African SMEs rely heavily on corporate partnerships and strategic communication to sustain operations and stakeholder confidence. In the absence of reliable policy support, SMEs tend to rely on two capabilities: corporate partnerships, which provide access to the resources and networks that formal institutions cannot deliver, and strategic communication, which sustains the stakeholder trust and relational infrastructure those partnerships depend on. This is not a perfect system, and the paper has not argued that it is. Corporate partnerships carry power imbalances and dependency risks. Communications can fail or be used to project a stability that does not exist operationally. The absence of formal policy support remains a structural problem that these capabilities cannot fully resolve. What the evidence does suggest, however, is that in contexts where institutional support is inconsistent or slow, strategic communication and corporate partnerships are the most accessible and documented resilience mechanisms available to African SMEs.

This paper contributes a unified conceptual framework that treats these capabilities as an interconnected resilience infrastructure and identifies propositions for future empirical testing. By grounding that argument in institutional void theory and stakeholder theory, and using Nigeria as the focal context, the paper offers both a conceptual framework and a basis for future empirical work. Future research should examine specific sector-level cases in greater depth, with attention to how this combination of capabilities performs across different institutional contexts within Africa. There is also scope to examine how digital transformation is changing both the nature of corporate-SME partnerships and the communications tools available to smaller firms navigating trade disruption. What the literature makes clear is that African SMEs have responded to institutional gaps through relational and communicative means. Understanding this pattern more precisely, and designing policy and business support systems that build on it rather than around it, represents a productive direction for both scholarship and practice.

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