International Journal of Science and Business 2025, 47(1), 44-60
ISSN: 2520-4750 (Online) 2521-3040 (Print)
Journal: ijsab.com/ijsb

The Dynamics Behind Small Business Failures in Juba City in the Republic of South Sudan: An Empirical Investigation

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Abstract

Small businesses are vital contributors to Gross Domestic Product and job creation, serving as the backbone of the economy in the Republic of South Sudan. Despite their importance, approximately 45% of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in South Sudan fail within their first five years. This study explores the key factors driving the high failure rate of small businesses in Juba City, the country's commercial and capital hub. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) across three administrative blocks of Juba City. The findings identified several critical challenges: an unstable economic environment coupled with inflation, high operational costs, poor financial management and lack of business skills, insecurity and theft, unpredictable government regulations and harassment, limited access to capital and credit, inadequate infrastructure, market saturation with copycat competition, and lack of proper storage facilities leading to post-harvest losses. To address these challenges, the study recommends strengthening the enabling environment through macroeconomic stability and regulatory reforms; investing in strategic infrastructure to improve market access and operational efficiency; institutionalizing entrepreneurial training and financial literacy programs; expanding access to inclusive and performance-based microcredit and financial services; fostering a national innovation and business development ecosystem; promoting affordable digital transformation and media-based marketing; and reinforcing informal financial networks and cooperative structures.

ARTICLE INFO

Research paper
Received: 10 May 2025
Accepted: 12 July 2025
Published: 17 July 2025
DOI: 10.58970/IJSB.2604

CITATION

Ayii, I. A. & Adea, M. (2025). The Dynamics Behind Small Business Failures in Juba City in the Republic of South Sudan: An Empirical Investigation, *International Journal of Science and Business*, 47(1), 44-60.

***Keywords**: Small Business Failure, SMEs, Juba City, South Sudan, Entrepreneurial Challenges, Economic Environment.*

1.1. Introduction and background

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in economic development by generating employment, fostering innovation, and contributing significantly to national GDP (World Bank, 2020). Globally, around 20% of small businesses fail within their first year, and nearly 50% do not survive beyond five years (Latour, 2021). In South Sudan, this challenge is even more severe, with over half of small businesses failing within the first four years of operation (Arok et al., 2019; Amoah et al., 2021; Paul, 2022). Factors such as limited access to capital, poor financial management, and inadequate entrepreneurial strategies are major contributors to these high failure rates. Juba City, as the commercial and capital city of South Sudan, reflects the broader challenges faced by SMEs nationally. Therefore, studying the drivers of small business failure in Juba can provide insights applicable to the wider South Sudanese context. Despite the critical role SMEs play in economic growth, research on strategies to mitigate their high failure rates in South Sudan remains limited, creating a significant knowledge gap.

Recent research underscores the multifaceted nature of small business failure, highlighting both external systemic factors and internal entrepreneurial competencies. Contreras, Ghosh, and Hasan (2023) emphasize the critical role of financial institutions, noting that bank failures lead to a reduction in small business loans, which disproportionately affects lower-income entrepreneurs by constraining new business formation and job creation capacity. This financial exclusion exacerbates income inequality and economic vulnerability among small enterprises. Similarly, Mohamed (2022) identified internal management weaknesses such as ineffective marketing, poor business location, and lack of consultation with experienced professionals as primary causes of failure in Somaliland, reflecting challenges that resonate with the South Sudanese context. Gyimah, Appiah, and Lussier (2020) further validate the predictive power of key factors such as capital adequacy, economic timing, and marketing skills in determining SME success or failure in Ghana, suggesting the importance of entrepreneurial skill development and capital access. Dvorsky et al. (2021) highlight that entrepreneurs' risk perceptions and management strategies significantly influence SME resilience, particularly in volatile environments, pointing to the need for comprehensive risk management frameworks. Finally, Msimango-Galawe and Hlatshwayo (2021) illustrate the limited impact of business incubators in developing countries due to misaligned support services versus SME needs, advocating for tailored interventions focused on finance and market access. Collectively, these findings reinforce the complex interplay of financial access, entrepreneurial capability, risk management, and institutional support as critical to reducing small business failure rates in contexts like Juba City.

1.2. Problem statement

Small and Medium Enterprises are key drivers of economic progress through employment creation, innovation, and GDP contributions (World Bank, 2020). However, many SMEs in South Sudan struggle to survive beyond their initial years, with approximately 45% failing before reaching their fifth year (Arok et al., 2019; Amoah et al., 2021; Paul, 2022). The underlying causes include restricted access to finance, ineffective business management, and a lack of sustainable entrepreneurial strategies. This high failure rate poses a threat to the country's economic growth, job creation, and overall business sustainability. While SMEs have been acknowledged globally for their potential, the South Sudanese context lacks sufficient empirical research addressing unique entrepreneurial challenges and potential solutions. This gap leaves business owners and policymakers without adequate guidance to improve SME survival. Without targeted interventions, the continued failure of SMEs risks perpetuating economic instability, job losses, and diminished confidence among investors.

1.3. Research Objective

This study aims to investigate the underlying dynamics behind the high failure rate of small businesses in Juba City, specifically focusing on enterprises that have operated beyond five years. The objective is to identify entrepreneurial strategies that can improve business sustainability and inform policymakers and stakeholders to foster a stronger and more resilient SME sector in South Sudan.

2.0 Literature Review.

2.1 Schumpeter's Innovation Theory

Joseph Schumpeter's Innovation Theory posits that economic growth and business success are fundamentally driven by innovation. He identified five key types of innovation: product, process, market, supply chain, and organizational innovation, all of which enable businesses to create competitive advantages and adapt to dynamic environments (Schumpeter, 1942). In the challenging context of South Sudan, where financial constraints, market instability, and infrastructural deficiencies prevail, innovation serves as a critical survival mechanism. Entrepreneurs who develop new products, improve operational efficiencies, explore untapped markets, optimize supply chains, and restructure organizational models can differentiate their businesses and navigate volatile conditions more effectively.

Product innovation involves creating or enhancing goods and services to deliver superior customer value. Drucker (1985) argued that successful entrepreneurs identify market gaps and introduce products that fulfill unmet needs. For South Sudanese small businesses, locally producing affordable consumer goods such as soap, food items, and clothing reduces dependency on costly imports and provides a competitive edge. Process innovation, on the other hand, focuses on refining production and delivery methods to increase efficiency and reduce costs. Davis et al. (1990) emphasizes how process innovation boosts competitiveness by improving productivity. In South Sudan, adopting sustainable technologies—like solar-powered equipment—can reduce waste and operational expenses, making enterprises more resilient. Market innovation entails expanding into new customer segments or geographic areas to diversify income sources and mitigate risk (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Given South Sudan's unstable local economy, entrepreneurs can increase survival chances by targeting regional markets in East Africa, such as Uganda and Kenya. Supply chain innovation improves the sourcing, distribution, and payment processes. Chopra and Meindl (2019) highlight the benefits of leveraging digital platforms to streamline operations. In South Sudan, mobile money systems enable safer and more efficient transactions, reducing the risks tied to cash-based dealings.

Organizational innovation involves reshaping business structures for greater adaptability and resource sharing. Burns (2016) notes that flexible, cooperative models can enhance business resilience, especially in uncertain environments. Forming cooperatives allows South Sudanese SMEs to pool resources, access financing more easily, and negotiate better supplier terms. Bailey, Kleinhans, and Lindbergh (2018) extend Schumpeter's theory by examining how social enterprises, deeply embedded in communities, innovate organizationally to foster sustainable social and economic impact—a perspective relevant for SMEs in South Sudan where social networks are vital. Furthermore, Li et al. (2022) demonstrate that proactive personalities coupled with open innovation practices boost innovative work behaviors, suggesting that entrepreneurial mindset and organizational culture are key enablers of innovation. Tóth, Juhász, and Kálmán (2020) also underscore the role of human capital and higher education in enhancing innovation capacity, a challenge in South Sudan's developing educational infrastructure. However, Mulyana (2023) provides a critical view, arguing that Schumpeter's theory may overemphasize innovation in established industries with significant capital, potentially overlooking the realities of small-scale entrepreneurs who operate under traditional mindsets and limited resources. This critique is salient for South Sudan, where many business owners face severe resource constraints and risk aversion, underscoring the need to contextualize innovation frameworks within local economic and cultural conditions. Moreover, Schumpeter's innovation types offer a valuable lens to understand how South Sudanese SMEs might overcome systemic challenges. Nonetheless, effective innovation strategies must also consider local constraints, risk perceptions, and socio-economic realities to foster sustainable small business growth.

2.2 Drivers of High Failure Rates of Small Businesses

One of the leading causes of small business failure in both developed and developing countries is inadequate financial resources. According to Fatoki and Asah (2011), access to finance is a major constraint for small businesses, especially in developing economies where financial institutions impose strict collateral requirements. Limited funding restricts business growth, innovation, and market expansion, leading to eventual failure (Bodlaj et al., 2020). Even in developed countries, small businesses face financial constraints, particularly during economic downturns. Research by Coleman and Robb (2019) shows that despite advanced financial markets, many small businesses in the United States and Europe struggle to secure loans due to concerns about creditworthiness. The 2008 financial crisis further highlighted the vulnerability of small enterprises to economic shocks and liquidity shortages, contributing to high failure rates (Cesaroni & Sentuti, 2016).

Managerial incompetence and lack of entrepreneurial skills significantly contribute to small business failure. Kariyakarawana et al. (2023) found that many small business owners in developing countries lack formal business education, resulting in poor decision-making, ineffective marketing, and weak financial management. Entrepreneurs often struggle with cash flow management, inventory control, and customer relations, all of which negatively affect business sustainability. A study by Eton et al. (2021) in Australia revealed that businesses led by entrepreneurs with prior management experience have higher chances of success compared to those managed by inexperienced individuals. Poor strategic planning, lack of innovation, and weak leadership further contribute to business collapse (Simba et al., 2023).

Intense market competition is another major factor affecting small business survival (Hasyim & Bakri, 2024). Small businesses often struggle to compete with large corporations that possess better financial resources, established brand recognition, and economies of scale (Keelson et al., 2024). The rise of e-commerce and digital marketing has intensified competition, making it difficult for traditional small businesses to retain market share (Keelson et al., 2024). In developing countries, challenges in market access arise due to underdeveloped infrastructure, limited distribution networks, and reliance on informal markets. Yendra et al. (2024) note that small businesses in Africa face difficulties reaching broader consumer bases due to poor transportation systems and fragmented supply chains. Additionally, weak customer demand in low-income populations restricts business profitability, leading to high failure rates (Lockett & Lockett, 2018). Cant and Wiid (2013) highlight that small businesses encounter numerous barriers to penetrating competitive markets, especially where larger firms dominate distribution channels and benefit from greater economies of scale. These challenges are worsened by the inability of small businesses to conduct or afford detailed market research. Consequently, many fail to identify and meet customer needs adequately, resulting in low sales volumes and eventual business failure.

The regulatory environment significantly impacts small business sustainability. In many developing countries, complex bureaucratic procedures, high taxation, and excessive licensing requirements create barriers for small businesses (Yendra et al., 2024). Chambers and Munemo (2018) found that heavy regulatory burdens in developing economies discourage entrepreneurial activity, leading to business closures. Corruption and inefficient legal frameworks further complicate operations, making compliance difficult for small enterprises. While developed countries generally have more structured regulatory environments, compliance costs remain a major challenge for small businesses (Hoang et al., 2021). Van Stel et al. (2007) indicate that strict labor laws, environmental regulations, and high tax burdens in Europe and North America increase operational costs, reducing survival rates of small enterprises. Businesses with limited financial and human resources struggle to meet regulatory requirements, leading to failure (Laing et al., 2022).

Macroeconomic factors such as inflation, exchange rate fluctuations, and economic downturns also significantly impact small business survival (Lazar et al., 2023). Economic instability results in fluctuating consumer demand, increased costs of raw materials, and declining purchasing power. Egbunike and Okerekeoti (2018) note that small businesses in emerging markets are especially vulnerable to inflationary pressures due to limited financial reserves and weak pricing power. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, led to many small enterprise closures due to declining sales, supply chain disruptions, and lockdown restrictions (Fairlie, 2020). Economic recessions further contribute to small business failure as reduced consumer spending directly affects revenue and profitability.

Literature reveals that businesses failing to integrate digital solutions such as e-commerce, data analytics, and automation struggle to compete in dynamic markets (Omowole et al., 2024). Ismail et al. (2017) argue that digital transformation is essential for business survival, with those failing to adapt risking obsolescence. In developing countries, the digital divide remains a significant challenge. Limited access to technology, poor internet connectivity, and low digital literacy hinder business innovation and competitiveness. Many small businesses in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia lack resources to adopt modern technologies, limiting their ability to scale and compete globally (Mishrif & Khan, 2023).

Cultural perceptions of entrepreneurship influence business survival rates. In some developing countries, entrepreneurship is seen as a last resort for individuals unable to secure formal employment. Lim et al. (2017) found that businesses established out of necessity rather than opportunity have higher failure rates due to lack of innovation and growth ambition. Social support networks play a crucial role; entrepreneurs with strong family and professional networks are more likely to receive financial and strategic support, increasing their chances of survival (Arregle et al., 2015). Conversely, owners without access to mentorship and networking face greater challenges sustaining their enterprises (Peng et al., 2022).

Research also shows that inadequate planning is a frequent cause of SME failure in Africa. For instance, a study in Namibia identified poor planning as a primary failure factor (Termtimes). Scholars consistently emphasize ineffective managerial capabilities, restrictive regulations, limited finance access, and lack of formal training as causes of SME failure (Fatoki, 2020; Ligthelm, 2018; Abor & Quartey, 2020). Lim et al. (2017) describe planning as envisioning a preferred future and formulating strategic steps to achieve it. Nieman et al. (2018) view planning as an essential managerial activity involving goal-setting and structured action plans that help mitigate risks. Many SMEs focus excessively on sales without aligning strategies to customer demands, underscoring the need for customer-oriented planning (Muriithi, 2017). Lack of management training leads to poor planning, jeopardizing sustainability. Van Aardt et al. (2018) note that absence of clear objectives, market research, and strategic alignment results in operational confusion and missed opportunities. A solid business plan guides decision-making, resource allocation, and growth initiatives; without it, businesses become reactive rather than proactive, increasing failure risk amid competition or market shifts.

Another significant challenge constraining SME growth in developing countries is infrastructure deficits. Stable electricity, accessible roads, water systems, and reliable ICT services enable SMEs to operate efficiently and expand markets. However, these infrastructures are often underdeveloped or poorly managed, raising costs and limiting competitiveness (Eifert, Gelb, & Ramachandran, 2017). Power supply issues are especially critical; inconsistent electricity forces SMEs to rely on costly alternatives like generators, increasing overhead (Ariyo & Jerome, 2015). Frequent outages interrupt production, cause inefficiencies, and reduce revenue (Stein et al., 2019). The World Bank (2020) reports sub-Saharan African businesses experience on average 4.5 hours of power outages daily, a major burden for financially fragile SMEs.

Poor road infrastructure similarly poses logistical difficulties, increasing costs and time to reach markets or procure materials, reducing responsiveness and flexibility (Kapunda, 2021). Polonetsky et al. (2028) emphasize that inadequate roads limit SMEs' ability to scale and serve new markets, especially in rural areas where economic isolation is pronounced. ICT infrastructure is also insufficient in many developing regions. The digital divide restricts SMEs' access to digital tools essential for marketing, customer engagement, and productivity (Polonetsky, 2018). Limited internet penetration, high data costs, and low digital literacy further hinder adoption (Chavula, 2012). Governments often fail to prioritize SME-friendly infrastructure or foster public-private partnerships, limiting progress (UNIDO, 2015).

Informality remains a major challenge for SMEs. High costs and complexity of formalization—bureaucratic hurdles, corruption, and administrative fees—discourage registration, especially for micro and small enterprises (Yakubi et al.). Many operate informally, limiting access to finance, government support, and legal protections. Informal SMEs face exclusion from formal credit markets due to lack of legal enforceability and collateral. Without capital, growth and shock resilience are hampered. Informality also limits market access and excludes SMEs from government procurement and supply chains that require formal compliance. Though informality may offer short-term survival, it constrains long-term potential.

The informal sector distorts competition, as formal SMEs incur tax and labor costs not borne by informal rivals, discouraging formalization and undermining rule of law (Meagher, 2018). Informality also reduces productivity and public tax revenue, weakening public services and perpetuating underdevelopment. Worker protections are generally absent in informal businesses, exposing entrepreneurs and employees to precarious conditions and limiting skilled labor retention. Informality is especially common among women- and youth-led businesses, which face additional access barriers. Weak governance, corruption, and poor enforcement lead many entrepreneurs to choose informality as a rational adaptation to dysfunctional systems.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional qualitative research design grounded in the interpretivism paradigm, which facilitates an in-depth understanding of entrepreneurs' experiences and perspectives regarding small business failure in Juba City, South Sudan. The cross-sectional approach allowed data collection at a single point in time to capture the prevailing challenges faced by small business owners within three administrative blocks: Kator, Munuki, and Juba. Fifteen Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those with direct and relevant experience in small business operations were included. This approach enabled the inclusion of a diverse group of entrepreneurs across various sectors, ages, and genders. Data were gathered through six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), each comprising 6 to 8 participants, organized by business type and location to foster focused and open dialogue. In addition, fifteen

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with individual business owners, representing a range of trades such as retail, tailoring, electronics, and food services.

Data collection took place over four weeks. The FGD and interview guides were developed from a comprehensive literature review and pilot tested to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness. FGDs lasted approximately 90 minutes and were moderated by the researcher with support from a note-taker. These discussions were audio-recorded with participant consent and focused on exploring shared challenges, coping mechanisms, and perceptions related to small business sustainability. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, conducted face-to-face at locations convenient for participants, aiming to gather detailed personal accounts of business operations, failure factors, and institutional challenges.

All data collection tools were prepared in English and translated into local languages, such as Juba Arabic and Bari, where necessary. Bilingual research assistants supported the data collection process to ensure accurate communication and cultural sensitivity. Following data collection, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English when applicable. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Qualitative analysis software (NVivo) was used to facilitate systematic coding and organization of the data. Triangulation between FGDs and KIIs was employed to strengthen the credibility of the findings. To enhance trustworthiness and reduce bias, reflexive journaling and peer debriefing sessions were integrated throughout the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.0 Findings and Results

The landscape of small businesses in South Sudan is characterized by an unstable economic environment, poor infrastructure, insecure business environments, and weak institutional support systems. Drawing from both Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted across Juba City, Kator Block, Munuki, and Juba Block, this section synthesized the cross-cutting drivers contributing to the persistent failure of small enterprises.

Unstable economic environment and inflation

A dominant theme across all locations was the destabilizing influence of macroeconomic volatility. Participants repeatedly cited inflation, depreciation of the South Sudanese Pound (SSP), and erratic price fluctuations as major threats to business continuity. These factors not only diminish the purchasing power of consumers but also compress the profit margins of business operators, forcing many to operate at a subsistence level.
One respondent from Kator Block illustrated this predicament:

"There are many reasons, but the most serious one is the economy. Everything is expensive now—rent, goods, transportation. The prices of items keep changing every week, and it's difficult to explain this to customers. They think we are just being greedy. In reality, we are also struggling to survive."
— KII, Male, Retail Owner, Kator Block

Similarly, participants from Munuki pointed to the erosion of working capital due to unstable pricing structures:

"The South Sudanese Pound keeps losing value. When I started my shop, I could restock with 300,000 SSP, and that would last a month. Now, even 800,000 is not enough."

— KII, Male, Electronic Repairs, Munuki Block

This sentiment was echoed during FGDs in Juba block, where the cost of living and diminishing consumer spending were cited as barriers to sustainable operations:

“Even people with money don’t spend like before. They buy only what they really need, which affects our sales badly.” — Male, 41, Electronics Retailer, Juba Block, FGD.

These accounts show that the cumulative pressure from inflation and declining real incomes has created a market that is both fragile and challenging for micro-entrepreneurs.

High cost of doing business

The high cost of doing business is coupled with macroeconomic instability, with rent, utilities, and informal payments forming a triple burden for business owners. Across the three blocks, participants described how these operational costs consume most of their earnings, leaving little to no capital for reinvestment. One female tailor in Kator said:

“Rent is high—even for a small space—and sometimes you pay for water, security, and even informal taxes… I only made 210,000 SSP in sales, and 180,000 went into payments. That means I’m left with nothing once I restock.”
— KII, Female, Tailor, Kator Block

In Munuki Block, the issue of insecure tenancy agreements exacerbated this challenge:

“The landlord can just wake up and increase [the rent] without notice. They know there is no legal agreement and take advantage of us.” — KII, Female, Tailor, Munuki Block.

These financial constraints are further compounded by illegal levies and fees imposed by local actors, as described by a grocery retailer in Juba Block:

“I pay rent, then they tell me to pay garbage fees, market space fees, and health inspection fees… It’s like you are at their mercy.” — Male, 38, Grocery Retailer, Juba Block, FGD.

This constellation of burdens reflects the absence of regulatory protections and the exploitative nature of local-level governance structures.

Poor financial management and lack of business skills

While external economic factors are crucial, many failures were also traced to internal management deficiencies. Several participants admitted to lacking financial literacy, citing poor record-keeping, informal cash handling, and limited planning capacity.

“Some people don’t know how to keep records… If you don’t manage well, the business will collapse very fast.” — KII, Male, General Merchandise, Kator Block

A participant from Munuki provided insights on how poor financial discipline stagnated their business:

“We were using the shop as our bank—any problem at home, we would remove money from the till… we were only turning around the same capital again and again.” — KII, Male, Co-owner, Mobile Accessories, Munuki Block

This observation resonates with several accounts in which business and household finances were intermingled, making it difficult to assess profitability or reinvest wisely.

"I used to mix business money with home money. If my child fell sick, I would take from the shop without planning how I would recover it."
— KII, Female, Tailor, Munuki Block

These narratives reveal that without foundational business skills, even enterprises that initially perform well risk eventual collapse due to poor financial practices.

Insecurity and theft

The physical security of business premises emerged as another significant factor affecting continuity. Especially in Munuki and Juba Block, theft, burglary, and street crime were recurrent challenges, with little effective intervention from law enforcement agents. A restaurant operator from Kator recounted:

"We've been robbed two times in the past two years. The police response is slow… It took us six months to recover from that loss."
— KII, Male, Restaurant Co-founder, Kator Block

Beyond the direct losses, crime has also driven away customers and reduced operating hours:

"Thieves break into shops or snatch phones from customers near the shop… I lost two good customers who never came back." — KII, Male, Electronics Repairs, Munuki Block.

In some cases, fear of assault or robbery has directly curtailed income-generating activities, particularly for female vendors:

"Some women have even stopped selling in the evenings… Life is more important than business."
— Female, 29, Fruits & Vegetables Seller, Juba City Block, FGD

Such insecurity not only causes material losses but also psychologically discourages entrepreneurship in affected neighborhoods.

Harassment and unpredictable government regulations

The absence of transparent and predictable regulatory frameworks was another recurrent concern. Business owners frequently reported being subject to ad hoc demands by local authorities, often accompanied by threats and coercion.

"They come with all kinds of demands, licenses, 'cleaning fees,' inspection charges,' garbage collection fees…. We are not against paying, but let them follow the rules."
— KII, Male, Grocery Retailer, Kator Block

This regulatory unpredictability contributes to an environment of fear and uncertainty, inhibiting business planning and stability:

"*Today they say no tax, tomorrow they come demanding business license renewal… It's like you are doing business under threat."*
— KII, Electronics Co-owner, Munuki Block

In some cases, fees were extracted without receipts or accountability, further undermining trust in local institutions:

"They just come with a form and say you must pay 10,000 SSP. No receipt, nothing… It's like you're working for them, not for yourself." — Male, 47, Butcher, Kator Block, FGD

Lack of access to capital and credit
Limited access to formal financial services was another cross-cutting issue. Participants reported challenges in obtaining loans due to a lack of collateral, high interest rates, and rigid documentation requirements.

"Expanding or even maintaining the business is hard when banks require so many documents… If I had land, would I be struggling with a roadside stall?" — KII, Male, Catering Manager, Kator Block
The absence of accessible credit mechanisms leaves small businesses highly vulnerable to financial shocks:

"If I fall sick or have an emergency at home, the business suffers immediately. No one gives loans to people like us without big assets." — KII, Female, Tailor, Munuki Block.
Furthermore, some drivers of small business failure were location-specific factors such as infrastructure challenges, market saturation, and post-harvest losses that deepen vulnerabilities in particular regions. They thus form the structural backdrop against which all other localized challenges must be understood.

Poor infrastructure, notably in Munuki and Kator
Infrastructure, especially road access and electricity supply, emerged as a dominant concern in both Kator and Munuki Blocks. During the rainy season, poor road networks become almost impassable, delaying supply chains, damaging goods, and reducing customer foot traffic. Participants emphasized how inadequate infrastructure increases operational costs and exposes businesses to frequent disruptions.

In Kator Block, one Agro-vet shop owner expressed the seasonal fragility of his supply network: "During rainy seasons, delivery trucks can't reach me easily, especially when roads are flooded. I lose both customers and stock. Last year, my items stayed on the road for two days and got damaged."
— KII, Owner, Agrovet Shop, Kator Block
The infrastructural gap is not limited to roads. In Munuki, unreliable electricity was frequently cited as a barrier to service delivery, particularly for businesses dependent on power tools, charging systems, or refrigeration.

"Since I do phone and small electronics repairs, I need reliable electricity. Sometimes there's no power for hours, and I lose business. My customers go to competitors with solar setups."
— KII, Male, Electronic Repairs, Munuki Block
These testimonies underline how infrastructural bottlenecks intersect with economic constraints to deepen small business vulnerability, forcing entrepreneurs to seek costly workarounds or forfeit revenue during service outages.

Market saturation and copycat competition - mostly in Kator
Another significant location-specific driver is market saturation, especially in Kator Block, where commercial density has led to unproductive competition. With limited market differentiation and minimal innovation, businesses frequently replicate each other's offerings, leading to a rapid decline in profitability.

"The market is overcrowded now. Everyone is selling the same things. If you don't have a new idea or special connection with customers, your business dies quietly."
— KII, Female, Tailoring, Kator Block

This observation was reinforced by a fashion boutique owner from Munuki Block, who noted the rising trend of imitation:

"Many people are now opening shops with similar items. Some even copy your style or pricing. It's frustrating because there is no innovation—just duplication."
— KII, Female, Fashion Boutique, Munuki Block

In such contexts, saturation not only undermines pricing power but also accelerates burnout among entrepreneurs who struggle to sustain even a marginal competitive advantage. Moreover, the absence of entrepreneurial support services such as business training or innovation hubs limits the capacity of small enterprises to evolve or reposition their products.

Lack of storage facilities and post-harvest loss - noted in Juba and Munuki Block.
Post-harvest losses due to inadequate storage facilities, particularly for perishable goods, emerged prominently in both Juba City and Munuki. Vendors dealing in fresh produce lamented the absence of cold storage or sheltered market stalls, an omission that results in frequent and costly wastage. In Munuki, a produce seller painted a clear picture of the daily losses incurred:

"There's no cold storage, and when it rains, few customers come to the market. I lose tomatoes, Sukuma, and fruits almost every week. That's money going to waste." — KII, Fresh Produce Seller, Munuki Block.

A market vendor in Juba Block echoed similar frustrations, linking weather patterns to financial vulnerability:

"The rain spoils the tomatoes, and we have no shelter. Even buyers don't come when it's wet. I can lose 20,000 SSP worth of produce in just one storm."
— Female, 35, Market Vendor, Juba City Block, FGD

The perishability of goods, compounded by unpredictable rainfall and poor market infrastructure, not only threatens income stability but also deters long-term planning and inventory management. This problem is especially devastating for women vendors, who disproportionately dominate the fresh produce sub-sector.

5.0 Conclusion

This study found that the high failure rate of small businesses in South Sudan stems from a deeply interconnected set of structural, institutional, and internal challenges. Business collapse in this context is not merely the result of poor management or isolated inefficiencies; rather, it reflects a broader ecosystem shaped by economic volatility, institutional fragility, and a persistent lack of supportive infrastructure. At the core of this phenomenon lies a fragile national context characterized by macroeconomic instability, unreliable regulatory systems, and underdeveloped markets. Persistent inflation, currency depreciation, and erratic pricing dynamics undermine business viability, erode consumer purchasing power, and entrench subsistence-level operations that preclude long-term growth. These pressures are compounded by weak infrastructure, insecurity, and fragmented governance, all of which reinforce a cycle of vulnerability that small businesses are ill-equipped to withstand. Entrepreneurs in South Sudan operate in an environment where institutional support is minimal and regulatory frameworks are often incoherent or exploitative. The absence of transparent legal protections—particularly regarding tenancy, licensing, and taxation—has enabled the proliferation of informal levies, rent-seeking behaviors, and arbitrary enforcement practices. These dynamics not only distort market operations but also diminish trust in state institutions and discourage formal enterprise development. Compounding these structural and institutional constraints are significant internal challenges. Many business owners lack basic financial literacy, business planning capacity, and operational discipline. Though these internal gaps are often shaped by systemic exclusion and limited access to education or training, they further reduce resilience and amplify the impact of external shocks.

6.0 Recommendations

To address the high failure rate of small businesses in South Sudan, a multifaceted strategy is required. First, it is essential to strengthen the enabling environment through macroeconomic stabilization and regulatory reform. The government must implement sound fiscal and monetary policies to reduce inflation, stabilize the national currency, and maintain predictable pricing conditions. Simultaneously, business regulations must be streamlined and decentralized to eliminate bureaucratic bottlenecks. Simplifying licensing procedures, formalizing tenancy agreements, and eliminating informal taxation will reduce systemic constraints that currently hinder small business development.

Second, investing in strategic infrastructure is critical to enhancing market access and operational efficiency. Prioritized investments in roads, electricity, cold storage, and market facilities—particularly in densely populated commercial areas such as Munuki and Kator—are vital. Public-private partnerships should be mobilized to expedite the delivery of these infrastructural projects. Moreover, cooperative clusters at the market level should be encouraged and supported to enable businesses to pool resources for storage, transportation, and digital infrastructure. Third, the institutionalization of entrepreneurial training, financial literacy, and capacity-building programs is imperative. A national entrepreneurship development initiative should be introduced, offering training that is localized, practical, and accessible to entrepreneurs with limited formal education. Such programs should cover topics including inventory control, financial planning, and digital business practices, and should be delivered in local languages through workshops held in markets and community centers.

Fourth, expanding access to inclusive and performance-based microcredit is essential. The government, along with donor agencies and FinTech innovators, should design microcredit schemes and guarantee mechanisms suited to small entrepreneurs who lack traditional forms of collateral. Innovative lending models, such as those using mobile transaction histories or group-based lending systems like rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs), should be formalized and scaled up to enhance financial inclusion. Fifth, fostering a national innovation and business development ecosystem can boost competitiveness. The establishment of innovation hubs and business incubators across key towns would support product innovation, branding, and value addition. These centers should provide mentorship, technical assistance, co-working spaces, and prototyping tools tailored to the South Sudanese context. Additionally, local governments should institute Innovation Recognition Schemes to incentivize customer-driven and socially impactful business ideas.

Sixth, promoting low-cost digital transformation and media-based marketing is vital for market reach. The Ministry of ICT should collaborate with telecom providers to roll out digital literacy programs focusing on mobile platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and mobile money. At the same time, small businesses should receive subsidized access to traditional and digital media—such as local radio, community newspapers, and social media advertising—to improve brand visibility and customer acquisition. Finally, informal financial networks and cooperative structures should be strengthened and integrated into the formal financial ecosystem. A robust legal framework is needed to support the registration and operation of informal groups like ROSCAs and joint procurement associations. By linking these groups to banks and microfinance institutions, members can gain access to savings, credit, and insurance services. Strengthening these community-based financial systems will enhance financial resilience and provide a safety net for small entrepreneurs.

7.0 Limitation of the study

This study encountered a number of methodological limitations that may have influenced the scope, depth, and interpretation of the findings. These limitations arose from both contextual constraints and the inherent challenges of conducting research in a fragile economic and institutional environment such as South Sudan. Personal bias during data collection and interpretation was one of the key limitations. The qualitative component of the study required close interaction between the researcher and participants during interviews and focus group discussions. While efforts were made to remain objective, the researcher's background, beliefs, and presence may have subtly influenced how questions were asked or how responses were interpreted, potentially affecting the neutrality of the data. Challenges in interpretation across languages also posed a significant methodological constraint. Some qualitative data was collected in local languages and later translated into English. Although care was taken to ensure accurate translation, subtle meanings, cultural references, and emotional tones may have been lost or altered in the process. This could have affected the depth and authenticity of participants' narratives. Reluctance to share sensitive information was another notable limitation. Some respondents, particularly informal business operators, were hesitant to fully disclose details about their financial practices, taxation issues, or interactions with authorities. This withholding of information—often driven by fear of exposure or legal consequences—may have resulted in partial or incomplete responses, especially in areas related to regulation, income, and business ownership. Limited access to context-specific academic literature presented an additional challenge. The scarcity of published research focused on small business dynamics and entrepreneurial strategies within South Sudan constrained the empirical grounding of the study. As a result, the researcher had to rely heavily on regional and international literature to build the conceptual framework, which may have reduced the contextual precision of some analyses. Constraints related to financial literacy and comprehension among participants also emerged during the data collection phase. Some business owners exhibited difficulty in understanding or articulating certain business concepts such as profit margins, reinvestment, or innovation. This sometimes required the simplification or rephrasing of interview questions, which may have influenced the quality and uniformity of the data collected.

8.0 Areas for further study

Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to assess the evolving impact of entrepreneurial strategies on business survival in South Sudan. While this study identified a significant relationship between strategies such as media marketing, innovation, and personal development with business success, a cross-sectional design limits understanding of how these strategies perform over time. Longitudinal studies tracking businesses over several years would provide deeper insights into the sustainability of such approaches under changing economic conditions. Moreover, a sector-specific analysis of business failure and resilience is necessary. This study addressed small business challenges in general, but distinct sectors such as agriculture, retail, manufacturing, and services face unique operational dynamics. Disaggregating data by sector could help identify tailored entrepreneurial strategies and inform more effective policy and programmatic interventions targeting the most vulnerable industries within the South Sudanese economy. Another valuable area for exploration is the role of government and institutional frameworks in supporting small business resilience. The findings of this study highlight regulatory unpredictability and weak institutional backing as critical barriers. Future studies should evaluate how specific interventions—such as tax reforms, streamlined registration processes, public-private partnerships, or access to government-backed credit—can enhance the business environment and encourage formal enterprise growth. Gender-specific challenges in entrepreneurship also require dedicated attention. Although both male and female entrepreneurs participated in this study, their differing experiences were not examined in depth. Future research should explore how gender influences business failure, access to resources, and strategy adoption. Female entrepreneurs in South Sudan often encounter additional constraints, including insecurity, cultural limitations, and limited access to finance. A gendered lens would help design inclusive support mechanisms and policies tailored to women-led enterprises. Additionally, the influence of informal networks and social capital on business survival remains underexplored. Community trust, informal mentorship, and peer collaborations were noted in this study, but their full role in fostering resilience warrants deeper investigation. Understanding how entrepreneurs leverage family ties, community associations, and informal savings groups can inform capacity-building programs that work with—not around—existing community structures. Finally, future studies should examine digital transformation and technology adoption among small enterprises. While mobile technology and social media use were observed in this research, a broader analysis is needed to understand how digital tools such as e-commerce platforms, mobile money services, inventory software, and digital recordkeeping systems influence small business growth. Research in this area would be particularly relevant in identifying both opportunities and barriers to digital integration within South Sudan's resource-constrained and infrastructure-limited context.

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