

(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Building resilient startups in Africa: Integrating regulatory compliance and business innovation

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Magna Scientia Advanced Research and Reviews, 2022, 04(02), 033–040

Publication history: Received on 08 February 2022; revised on 12 April 2022; accepted on 15 April 2022

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/msarr.2022.4.2.0032>

Abstract

The African startup ecosystem has emerged as a dynamic driver of innovation and economic growth, addressing local challenges and contributing to global markets. However, African startups face unique hurdles, including funding constraints, infrastructural deficiencies, and complex regulatory landscapes. This paper explores strategies to build resilience among African startups by harmonizing regulatory compliance with business innovation. It highlights the importance of financial, operational, and cultural adaptability as key factors for sustainability, emphasizing the role of partnerships, technology, and supportive policy frameworks in fostering growth. Recommendations for policymakers include simplifying regulatory frameworks, promoting digital transformation, facilitating funding access, and fostering regional integration. By adopting a balanced approach to compliance and innovation, African startups can strengthen their capacity to navigate challenges and leverage opportunities, ultimately driving inclusive and sustainable development across the continent.

Keywords: African startups; Business resilience; Regulatory compliance; Innovation strategies; Policy frameworks; Sustainable development

1. Introduction

Africa's startup ecosystem has emerged as one of the fastest-growing innovation landscapes globally. This growth is driven by a young and dynamic population, increasing internet penetration, and the expansion of mobile technology (Many, 2020). These factors have fostered a surge in entrepreneurial activities across sectors such as fintech, health tech, agritech, and education technology. Startups in these fields are not only addressing local challenges but also creating solutions with global relevance, positioning Africa as a hub for groundbreaking innovations (Pollio & Cirolia, 2022).

However, the growth trajectory of startups in Africa is fraught with challenges. Access to capital remains a significant barrier, as traditional funding mechanisms often overlook early-stage businesses in developing markets. Infrastructure deficiencies, such as unreliable electricity and limited transportation networks, further complicate operations. Moreover, navigating fragmented regulatory environments presents hurdles, particularly for startups operating across multiple countries. These challenges necessitate a strategic approach to resilience and innovation to ensure long-term sustainability (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019).

Resilience is a cornerstone of business success, particularly in the volatile environments often encountered in African markets. Startups must develop the ability to adapt to shifting economic conditions, regulatory changes, and technological disruptions. Resilience involves financial and operational stability and the capacity to learn from setbacks

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and pivot strategies when necessary. For African startups, resilience also means addressing unique contextual challenges like political instability, currency fluctuations, and limited access to skilled labor (Zighan, Abualqumboz, Dwaikat, & Alkalha, 2022). Building resilience equips startups to weather external shocks and internal challenges, enabling them to maintain continuity in operations and scale effectively. In the African context, resilience is especially critical given the unpredictable nature of business environments and the competitive pressures from both local and global players (Saad, Hagelaar, Van Der Velde, & Omta, 2021).

Regulatory compliance and business innovation are often perceived as conflicting priorities. By its nature, compliance imposes boundaries and restrictions, while innovation thrives on flexibility and creative problem-solving. However, successful startups recognize the necessity of integrating these two dimensions (Institute, 2021). Regulatory compliance ensures that businesses operate within the legal frameworks of their respective jurisdictions, fostering trust among stakeholders, including investors, customers, and government agencies. On the other hand, innovation enables startups to differentiate themselves in crowded markets and respond to evolving customer needs. In Africa, innovation often takes the form of frugal solutions tailored to local contexts. For instance, mobile money platforms like M-Pesa have revolutionized financial inclusion by addressing gaps in traditional banking systems. By embedding compliance within innovative practices, startups can mitigate risks while scaling their operations sustainably (Lanto, 2021).

The integration of regulatory compliance and innovation also enhances a startup's credibility, attracting investment and partnerships. Regulators increasingly acknowledge innovation's value, with many African governments introducing startup-friendly policies and innovation hubs to foster growth. Startups that navigate the intersection of compliance and innovation effectively are better positioned to build resilient and scalable businesses (Reypens, Rückert, & Delanote, 2020).

This paper explores the critical role of resilience in the growth and sustainability of African startups, with a focus on integrating regulatory compliance and business innovation. The objective is to provide a conceptual framework for understanding how these elements interact to shape the success of startups in dynamic and often unpredictable markets.

The discussion begins by examining the opportunities and challenges within Africa's startup ecosystem. It then delves into the dual importance of compliance and innovation, offering insights into how these factors contribute to resilience. Finally, the paper proposes strategies for building resilient startups that can thrive amidst challenges while adhering to regulatory requirements and fostering innovative practices. By doing so, the paper aims to provide a generalizable framework that can be applied across various African sectors and geographies. The ultimate goal is to inspire both startups and policymakers to adopt integrated approaches that promote resilience and innovation, paving the way for sustainable economic growth and development on the continent.

2. The Landscape of Startups in Africa

2.1. Current Trends and Sectors Driving Startup Growth

The African startup ecosystem has witnessed remarkable growth over the past decade, driven by technological advancements, demographic trends, and entrepreneurial dynamism. Key sectors such as financial technology (fintech), health technology (health tech), agricultural technology (agritech), and educational technology (edtech) have emerged as frontrunners in the continent's innovation landscape (Peter, 2021).

Fintech, in particular, has been a major driver of startup activity, with companies like Flutterwave, Chipper Cash, and M-Pesa transforming financial services by addressing gaps in traditional banking systems (Flötotto, Gold, Jeenah, Kuyoro, & Olanrewaju, 2022). These startups provide digital payments, mobile banking, and financial inclusion solutions, catering to underserved populations across urban and rural areas. Similarly, health tech startups are leveraging technology to improve access to healthcare, with innovations ranging from telemedicine platforms to affordable diagnostic tools (Gaschler, 2021).

Agritech is another critical sector, where startups are developing solutions to enhance food security and optimize agricultural processes. Innovations such as precision farming, mobile-based agricultural advisory services, and e-commerce platforms for farmers are helping to modernize Africa's agricultural industry. Edtech startups, meanwhile, are addressing the continent's education challenges by creating digital learning platforms and tools tailored to local languages and curricula (Goh, 2022). These sectors reflect Africa's unique blend of challenges and opportunities, where entrepreneurs are motivated to create scalable solutions to address pressing social and economic issues. The rise of tech hubs across major cities like Nairobi, Lagos, and Cape Town further underscores the momentum of the startup

ecosystem. These hubs provide resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities, enabling startups to thrive in an increasingly interconnected global market (Giwa, 2019).

2.2. Key Challenges

Despite the promising growth, African startups face significant challenges that hinder their full potential. Access to funding remains one of the most critical barriers. While venture capital (VC) funding for African startups has increased in recent years, the allocation remains disproportionately small compared to other regions like North America or Europe. Many early-stage startups struggle to secure seed funding, as investors often perceive them as high-risk due to the region's economic volatility and limited historical data on returns (Hwang, Desai, & Baird, 2019).

Infrastructure challenges are another persistent obstacle. Unreliable electricity supply, limited internet connectivity in rural areas, and inadequate transportation networks complicate operations and scale-up efforts. For example, startups reliant on digital platforms or e-commerce face difficulties in delivering products to customers in remote locations due to poor road infrastructure (Kaiser & Barstow, 2022).

Market access is also a significant concern. African startups often operate in fragmented markets with varying consumer preferences, languages, and cultural norms. Trade barriers, differing regulatory frameworks, and currency fluctuations complicate cross-border expansion. Startups must navigate these complexities to scale effectively, which can be resource-intensive and time-consuming. Moreover, talent acquisition remains a challenge, as startups compete with established firms and multinational corporations for skilled professionals. The gap in specialized technical skills, particularly in fields like software development and data science, adds to the hurdles faced by startups aiming to innovate and expand (Friederici, Wahome, & Graham, 2020).

2.3. Regulatory Environments Across African Countries

Regulatory environments across African countries are highly diverse and often complex, presenting both opportunities and challenges for startups. Each country has its unique legal and administrative framework, making it difficult for startups to navigate compliance requirements, especially those operating across multiple jurisdictions (Kah, O'Brien, Kok, & Gallagher, 2022). In some countries, such as Rwanda and Mauritius, governments have established startup-friendly policies, offering tax incentives, streamlined registration processes, and innovation hubs to encourage entrepreneurship. These proactive measures have positioned such nations as attractive destinations for startup activity and investment. Rwanda, for instance, has gained international recognition for its ease of doing business, providing a model for other African countries to emulate (Guerrero, Liñán, & Cáceres-Carrasco, 2021).

However, regulatory systems can be cumbersome and inconsistent in other regions, deterring entrepreneurial growth. Lengthy approval processes, high registration fees, and opaque legal requirements hinder startups from formalizing their operations. For example, startups in sectors like fintech and health tech often face stringent licensing requirements, which can delay product launches and increase operational costs.

Another layer of complexity arises from the lack of harmonized regulations across the continent. While initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aim to promote trade and economic integration, startups still face significant regulatory disparities when expanding across borders. Differences in tax policies, intellectual property laws, and data protection regulations require startups to allocate considerable resources to legal compliance (Olayiwola, 2020). Furthermore, the regulatory landscape is evolving as governments seek to address emerging challenges such as cybersecurity, data privacy, and the ethical implications of artificial intelligence. While these developments are necessary, startups must adapt rapidly to changing legal frameworks. This dynamic environment underscores the importance of building regulatory literacy and fostering collaborations between startups and policymakers (Kuhlmann & Agutu, 2019).

3. Balancing Regulatory Compliance and Business Innovation

3.1. Understanding Regulatory Compliance

Regulatory compliance refers to adherence to laws, rules, and standards set by governments and regulatory bodies. For startups, especially in Africa, understanding and following these regulations is critical for maintaining legitimacy and fostering stakeholder trust. Compliance ensures that startups operate ethically and responsibly while safeguarding the interests of consumers, employees, and investors (Olatunji, 2020).

The benefits of regulatory compliance are manifold. First, it enhances the credibility and reputation of startups, particularly when seeking partnerships or investments. Investors are more likely to fund businesses that are committed to transparency and accountability. Second, compliance mitigates legal risks by helping businesses avoid fines, lawsuits, and operational disruptions caused by non-adherence. Third, it creates a foundation for sustainable growth, as startups that comply with regulations are better equipped to scale their operations without encountering legal obstacles (Butler & O'Brien, 2019).

Despite these advantages, regulatory compliance poses significant constraints, particularly for startups. Regulatory frameworks in many African countries are often complex and fragmented, making compliance costly and time-consuming. Startups may lack the financial resources or expertise to navigate these frameworks effectively. In some cases, regulations can stifle innovation, as overly stringent rules may discourage experimentation and the adoption of new technologies. For example, fintech startups often face high licensing fees and lengthy approval processes, which can delay product launches and limit their ability to compete (Shah & Konda, 2022). Moreover, the dynamic nature of regulations, especially in emerging sectors such as technology and e-commerce, requires startups to continuously adapt. This can strain resources and distract from core business activities. Nonetheless, a proactive approach to regulatory compliance can position startups for long-term success by fostering trust, stability, and resilience (Freij, 2020).

3.2. Role of Innovation in Addressing Local and Global Challenges

Innovation is the lifeblood of startups, enabling them to differentiate themselves in competitive markets and respond to evolving customer needs. For African startups, innovation often takes the form of creative problem-solving tailored to local contexts. This includes addressing challenges such as financial exclusion, limited access to healthcare, and agricultural inefficiencies through affordable and scalable solutions.

Globally, African startups are contributing to innovations that resonate beyond their borders. For instance, mobile money platforms like M-Pesa have become a benchmark for financial inclusion, inspiring similar initiatives in Asia and Latin America. Health tech startups leverage telemedicine and AI-driven diagnostics to bridge healthcare gaps in underserved regions. These innovations showcase the ability of African startups to turn local challenges into global opportunities (Sibanda, 2021).

However, innovation does not occur in isolation. It thrives in environments where entrepreneurs have the freedom to experiment and iterate. At the same time, innovation must align with regulatory frameworks to ensure safety, fairness, and ethical practices. Striking this balance is particularly important in sectors such as fintech, where innovations like cryptocurrency and blockchain intersect with fraud, security, and monetary stability concerns. In addition, innovation plays a crucial role in addressing global challenges such as climate change and food security. Agritech startups, for example, are pioneering sustainable farming methods and leveraging IoT devices for precision agriculture. By aligning innovation with regulatory priorities, startups can contribute to both local development and global sustainability goals (Desana, 2021).

3.3. Strategies for Harmonizing Compliance with Innovation

Balancing regulatory compliance with business innovation is a crucial yet challenging task for African startups striving to build resilience and scalability. Early engagement with regulators stands out as a proactive measure, enabling startups to align their operations with sector-specific requirements from the outset (Bank, 2020). Such dialogue reduces risks associated with non-compliance and fosters mutual understanding between innovators and regulatory bodies. Regulatory sandboxes further facilitate this balance, offering a supervised environment for startups to test innovative solutions while addressing compliance issues. Countries like Kenya and South Africa have successfully implemented these frameworks, particularly in fintech, to encourage innovation without compromising oversight.

Establishing internal compliance frameworks is another essential strategy. Startups can appoint compliance officers, adopt technology-driven monitoring tools, and integrate legal expertise into their operations. These measures ensure adherence to regulations and allow businesses to stay agile in a rapidly evolving regulatory landscape. Collaborating with industry associations also provides valuable support by offering access to resources, advocacy, and collective expertise. These networks often serve as intermediaries between startups and regulators, advocating for policies that promote innovation while safeguarding regulatory integrity (Bank, 2020).

Moreover, ethical innovation plays a pivotal role in harmonizing compliance with creativity. By prioritizing inclusivity, data protection, and environmental sustainability, startups can align their operations with regulatory expectations while enhancing their reputation and customer trust. Leveraging advanced technologies like AI for compliance monitoring and blockchain for transparency further simplifies adherence to complex regulations. Together, these

strategies empower startups to navigate the intricate interplay of compliance and innovation, fostering sustainable growth and contributing to economic transformation across Africa (Costa & Matias, 2020).

4. Building Resilience in Startups

4.1. Defining Resilience in African Startups

Resilience in the context of African startups refers to their ability to withstand challenges, adapt to evolving circumstances, and sustain growth despite the unique socio-economic and operational obstacles present across the continent. Given the volatility of African markets, resilience is not merely about survival but about thriving in dynamic and often uncertain environments.

For African startups, resilience encompasses the capacity to navigate complex regulatory landscapes, address infrastructural deficiencies, and adapt to market shifts. It also involves the agility to respond to external shocks, such as economic downturns, pandemics, or geopolitical instability. Startups that exhibit resilience are characterized by their preparedness, innovation, and ability to pivot when confronted with obstacles (Nwuneli, 2021).

Resilience is particularly crucial in Africa due to the interplay of factors such as fluctuating currency values, limited access to capital, and diverse regulatory environments. It enables startups to overcome these barriers, create sustainable business models, and contribute to the economic development of their communities. A resilient startup is one that not only survives but also leverages challenges as opportunities for growth and innovation.

4.2. Key Factors for Resilience

4.2.1. Financial Resilience

Financial resilience is foundational for the long-term success of startups. It refers to managing cash flow effectively, accessing funding, and sustaining operations during periods of financial stress. African startups often face funding challenges due to limited access to venture capital, high interest rates on loans, and risk-averse investment climates (Nkundabanyanga, Mugumya, Nalukenge, Muhwezi, & Najjemba, 2020).

To enhance financial resilience, startups must diversify their revenue streams, maintain lean operations, and build financial buffers. Diversification reduces dependence on a single source of income, making businesses less vulnerable to market fluctuations. For example, a fintech startup offering digital payments might expand into micro-lending or insurance to spread financial risk. Additionally, careful cost management ensures that startups can weather periods of reduced revenue.

Establishing relationships with diverse investors, including impact investors and development finance institutions, can also strengthen financial resilience. These investors often prioritize long-term sustainability over short-term returns, providing startups with the capital needed to navigate uncertain periods (Murinde, Rizopoulos, & Zachariadis, 2022).

4.2.2. Operational Resilience

Operational resilience refers to a startup's ability to sustain its core functions in the face of disruptions. For African startups, this includes overcoming challenges such as unreliable infrastructure, supply chain inefficiencies, and workforce constraints. Startups prioritizing flexibility and contingency planning are better positioned to address these issues.

Investing in technology can significantly enhance operational resilience. For instance, cloud-based platforms enable startups to maintain business continuity even during power outages or hardware failures. Similarly, supply chain digitization improves transparency and efficiency, reducing vulnerability to logistical disruptions. Operational resilience also involves workforce adaptability. Training employees to handle diverse roles and equipping them with problem-solving skills ensures that teams can respond effectively to unforeseen challenges. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, startups that pivoted to remote work and digital service delivery demonstrated strong operational resilience (Obrenovic et al., 2020).

4.2.3. Cultural Adaptability

Cultural adaptability is another critical factor in building resilience. Startups must be attuned to the cultural, social, and economic contexts in which they operate. This means understanding local consumer preferences, language nuances,

and community dynamics in Africa's diverse markets. A culturally adaptable startup engages with its customers and stakeholders in respectful and inclusive ways. For instance, an agritech startup might tailor its solutions to address the specific needs of smallholder farmers in different regions, offering services in local languages and integrating traditional practices.

Cultural adaptability also involves fostering an internal culture of resilience within the organization. Encouraging collaboration, continuous learning, and innovation empowers teams to overcome challenges collectively. Startups prioritizing diversity and inclusion are better equipped to leverage diverse perspectives, enhancing their ability to adapt and grow (Khurana, Dutta, & Ghura, 2022).

4.3. Role of Partnerships, Technology, and Policy Frameworks

Partnerships are essential for building resilience in African startups. Collaborations with governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and larger corporations provide access to resources, expertise, and networks that can help startups scale and sustain their operations. For instance, partnerships with NGOs can enable startups to reach underserved communities by leveraging existing outreach programs. Collaborations with multinational corporations can provide access to supply chains, mentorship, and funding opportunities. These relationships enhance a startup's ability to adapt to market changes and expand its reach (McIntyre, 2021).

Technology plays a transformative role in enhancing resilience. Digital tools enable startups to streamline operations, improve customer engagement, and scale efficiently. For example, artificial intelligence and data analytics allow startups to predict market trends, optimize decision-making, and identify growth opportunities. Technology also facilitates remote operations, particularly in regions with infrastructure challenges. E-commerce platforms, mobile applications, and cloud services help startups overcome geographical barriers, reaching customers across the continent.

Moreover, technology fosters innovation, enabling startups to create solutions that address Africa's unique challenges. For example, solar-powered technologies and IoT devices are helping agritech startups improve productivity and sustainability in rural areas.

Supportive policy frameworks are critical for fostering resilience in African startups. Governments and regulatory bodies are central to creating environments that encourage entrepreneurship and innovation. Policies that reduce bureaucratic hurdles offer tax incentives and provide funding for startups to enhance their ability to thrive. For example, Rwanda's startup-friendly policies, such as simplified business registration processes and innovation funds, have positioned it as a hub for entrepreneurial activity. Similarly, initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aim to harmonize regulations and promote cross-border trade, creating regional opportunities for startups to scale (Nel-Sanders & Thomas, 2022). Startups can also contribute to policy development by engaging with regulators and advocating for reforms that support innovation. Collaborative approaches between the private sector and policymakers ensure that regulations align with the realities of entrepreneurship, fostering resilience and growth.

5. Conclusion

Building resilient startups in Africa requires fostering innovation and adaptability in the face of unique challenges and abundant opportunities. The African startup ecosystem has demonstrated remarkable growth in fintech, agritech, health tech, and renewable energy sectors. Despite this progress, startups face persistent hurdles, including limited access to funding, fragmented and complex regulatory environments, infrastructural deficiencies, and restricted market access. These challenges necessitate strategies that balance resilience and innovation to ensure startups can thrive and contribute to sustainable development.

Resilience in African startups is multifaceted, encompassing financial stability, operational robustness, and cultural adaptability. Financial resilience involves effective resource management and income diversification, enabling startups to weather economic fluctuations. Operational resilience is vital for maintaining business continuity amid infrastructural and logistical disruptions. Cultural adaptability allows startups to align their offerings with the diverse socio-economic realities across the continent. Together, these elements enable startups to remain agile and responsive to the dynamic challenges of the African market.

Innovation is the transformative force that empowers startups to address local and global challenges creatively. From pioneering mobile money platforms to deploying AI-driven healthcare solutions, African startups demonstrate their ability to develop impactful solutions. However, fostering innovation must go hand in hand with ensuring compliance with regulatory frameworks to promote ethical practices, protect consumers, and ensure long-term sustainability. This

delicate balance requires startups to actively engage with regulators, leverage technology, and foster strategic partnerships.

Governments and regulators across Africa are critical in creating environments that enable startups to flourish. Simplifying regulatory frameworks, promoting regulatory sandboxes, and facilitating access to funding are essential steps. Investments in infrastructure development, particularly in underserved areas, and fostering regional integration through initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area can create larger, more accessible markets. Additionally, capacity-building programs that equip entrepreneurs with management, technology, and compliance skills are crucial for supporting resilient startups.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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