Proceedings of Book Series PBS -Vol 43, pp.8-15 Emerging Approaches in Modern Business

The Ecosystem Frontier: Strategic Paradigms and the Rise of the Post-Colonial African Enterprise

Samia Abdelouafi[#1], Imane Ghazlane[#2], Badr Touzi,[#3]

[#]*LARCEPEM, Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences Souissi, Mohammed V University in Rabat*
Rabat, Morocco
abdelouafisamia@gmail.com

***Abstract*— Dominant strategic paradigms, from industry positioning to business ecosystems, rest on an implicit assumption: that the markets, intermediaries and complementors a firm needs already exist. This chapter questions that assumption from the vantage point of post-colonial African enterprises, which frequently compete where such institutions are absent or fragmented. Drawing on an integrative review of strategy, institutional and postcolonial management research published between 2015 and 2025, it develops a conceptual framework termed the ecosystem frontier. The chapter makes three moves. First, it shows that existing ecosystem theory treats complementors as given and coordination as the central strategic problem. Second, it proposes a typology crossing the depth of institutional voids with the interdependence of the value proposition, which identifies ecosystem architecture as a distinct strategic mode in which firms must create the partners they later orchestrate. Third, it derives four testable propositions linking institutional voids, orchestration capability, relational legitimacy and regional integration to cross-border scale and resilience. The chapter concludes that African enterprises are not late adopters of ecosystem strategy but a source of theory about its limits, and that ecosystem creation, rather than ecosystem alignment, is the defining strategic challenge at the frontier.**

***Keywords*— business ecosystems, institutional voids, postcolonial management, African enterprises, strategic paradigms, AfCFTA**

I. Introduction

Over the past decade, the business ecosystem has become one of the most influential constructs in strategic management. Adner [1] defined the ecosystem as the alignment structure of the multilateral set of partners that must interact for a focal value proposition to materialise. Jacobides, Cennamo and Gawer [2] explained why ecosystems emerge, locating their origin in unique and supermodular complementarities that neither markets nor hierarchies govern efficiently. Kapoor [3] broadened the locus of value creation beyond the firm, Shipilov and Gawer [4] integrated ecosystem research with the older literature on interorganisational networks, and Hou and Shi [5] distinguished ecosystem-as-structure from ecosystem-as-coevolution. Work on digital platforms reinforced the shift, showing that competitive advantage increasingly depends on governing complementors rather than owning assets [6], [7].

In parallel, management research on Africa has grown in volume and ambition. Zoogah, Peng and Woldu [8] showed that institutions and resources jointly shape organisational effectiveness on the continent. George et al. [9] called on scholars to bring Africa into the core of management research, and Barnard, Cuervo-Cazurra and Manning [10] argued that African business can serve as a laboratory for theory-building because it combines extreme conditions, new phenomena and alternative paradigms of social relationships. Yet a systematic review by Kolk and Rivera-Santos [11] found that this research remained limited and uneven in coverage, and studies of African entrepreneurship show how strongly organisational forms are shaped by context-specific features such as informality and poverty [12].

A third stream concerns institutional voids and the decolonisation of management knowledge. Doh et al. [13] reviewed how firms respond to missing market institutions, while Bothello, Nason and Schnyder [14] warned that the void concept implicitly benchmarks emerging economies against Western institutions and called for an epistemological rupture. Banerjee [15] and Jammulamadaka et al. [16] extended this critique, arguing that mainstream management theory carries colonial assumptions about what counts as a normal market and a normal firm. Empirical work on mobile money in Kenya illustrates what is at stake: an infrastructure built largely by a private firm produced measurable long-run reductions in poverty [17].

These three literatures rarely meet. Ecosystem theory has been developed mainly in settings where complementors exist and need coordinating. Africa-focused research documents voids but seldom theorises

Copyright © 2026
ISSN: 2961-6611

ecosystem strategy. Decolonial critique, in turn, has rarely produced testable strategy constructs. This chapter therefore asks: **how do post-colonial African enterprises build and orchestrate business ecosystems under institutional voids, and does this practice constitute a distinct strategic paradigm?** Its contribution is threefold: a reading of strategic paradigms through their hidden institutional assumptions, a typology that isolates ecosystem architecture as a distinct strategic mode, and a framework with four testable propositions. Section II sets out the theoretical background, Section III the method, Section IV the framework, Section V the comparison with prior work, and Section VI concludes.

Interim conclusion. *Ecosystem theory, Africa-focused management research and decolonial critique each offer part of the answer, but none explains how firms compete when the ecosystem itself has to be built. That gap defines the frontier examined here.*

II. Theoretical Background

A. From the Firm to the Ecosystem

Strategic management has repeatedly widened its unit of analysis. Industrial organisation located advantage in industry structure and positioning [18]; the resource-based view moved it inside the firm [19]; dynamic capabilities explained how firms sense, seize and transform in changing environments [20], [21]; and ecosystem research, anticipated by Moore [22], shifted attention to constellations of partners [1], [2]. Fig. 1 summarises this evolution and adds the row that is usually left implicit: the institutional assumption on which each paradigm depends.

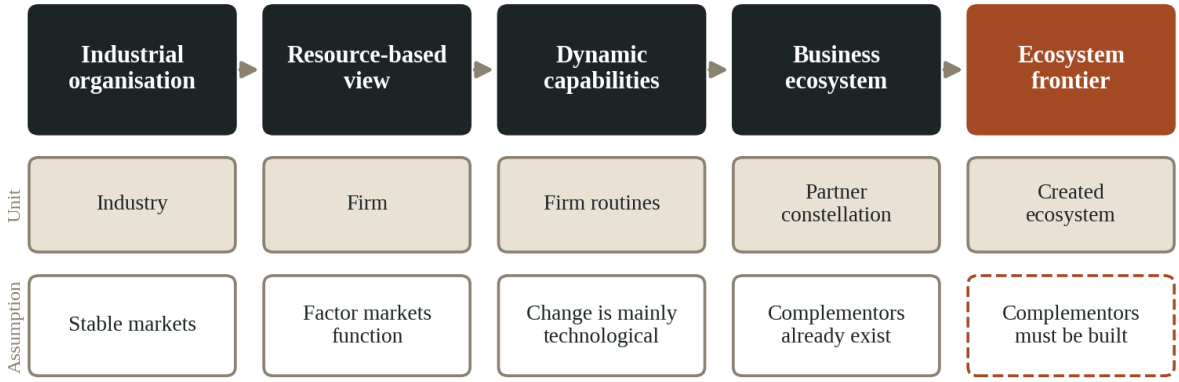


Fig. 1. Evolution of strategic paradigms, their unit of analysis and their implicit institutional assumption. The final column is the extension proposed in this chapter.

Commentary on Fig. 1. Each paradigm widened the lens without questioning its institutional foundations. Even the ecosystem view, the most relational of the four, assumes that complementors already exist and that the strategic problem is to align them. The dashed box marks the point where this assumption breaks down.

B. Institutional Voids and the Postcolonial Lens

Khanna and Palepu [23] showed that in emerging markets the absence of specialised intermediaries pushes firms to internalise functions that markets provide elsewhere. Mair, Martí and Ventresca [24] demonstrated that actors can actively work such voids by building market infrastructure, and Cuervo-Cazurra and Genc [25] found that firms from developing countries can convert familiarity with weak institutions into an advantage in similar markets. A postcolonial lens adds a further step. Nkomo [26] showed how "African" management has been constructed through Western categories, while Mbembe [27] described the postcolony as a regime with its own logic rather than a deviation from a Western norm. Following Bothello et al. [14], voids are treated here not as deficits but as conditions that call for different strategic forms.

Copyright © 2026
ISSN: 2961-6611

Proceedings of Book Series PBS -Vol 43, pp.8-15 **Emerging Approaches in Modern Business**

Interim conclusion. *The paradigms reviewed widen the unit of analysis but keep one institutional assumption constant. Combining the void literature with a postcolonial lens turns that assumption into a variable, which is the conceptual move on which the framework rests.*

III. Methodology

The chapter adopts a conceptual research design. Following Jaakkola [28], it combines a *typology* approach, which organises strategic modes along explicit dimensions, with a *model* approach, which specifies relationships among constructs in the form of propositions. The evidence base is an integrative review of peer-reviewed research published between 2015 and 2025 in three streams (ecosystem strategy, Africa-focused management, and institutional voids and decolonial management), complemented by seminal works published earlier [databases searched and number of sources retained]. The analysis proceeded in three steps: identifying the institutional assumption of each paradigm, deriving the two dimensions of the typology, and specifying propositions linking antecedents, ecosystem strategy and outcomes. The framework was assessed against Whetten's [29] criteria for theoretical contribution: what factors are involved, how they relate, why the relationships hold, and under which conditions.

Interim conclusion. *A conceptual design is appropriate because the phenomenon is under-theorised. The framework is intended to generate testable propositions, not to report empirical estimates.*

IV. Results: The Ecosystem Frontier Framework

A. A Typology of Strategic Modes

The first result is a typology built on two dimensions (Fig. 2). The horizontal axis captures the *depth of institutional voids*, meaning the extent to which intermediaries, enforceable contracts and market infrastructure are missing. The vertical axis captures the *interdependence of the value proposition*, meaning the extent to which value depends on complementary products, services or actors [1], [3].

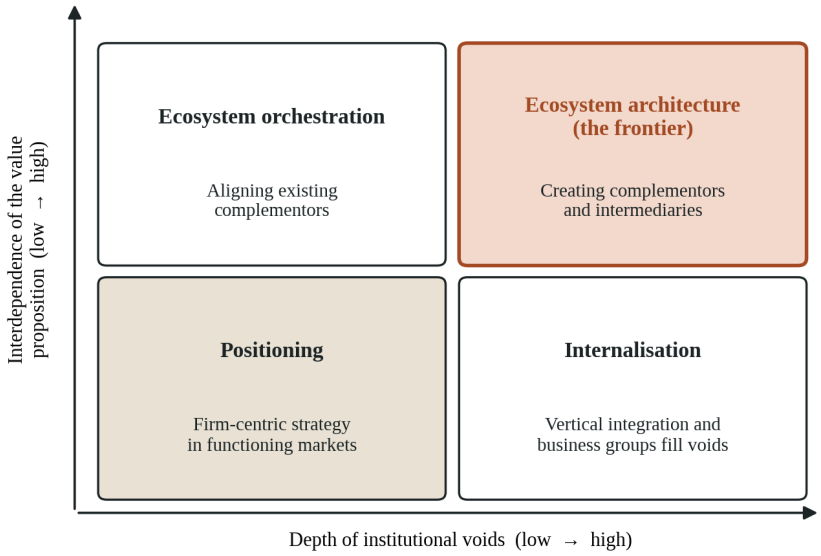


Fig. 2. Typology of strategic modes by depth of institutional voids and interdependence of the value proposition.

Commentary on Fig. 2. Three quadrants correspond to established theory. Positioning fits low voids and low interdependence [18]. Internalisation, through vertical integration and business groups, fits high voids and low interdependence [23]. Ecosystem orchestration fits low voids and high interdependence, the setting assumed by most ecosystem research [1], [2]. The fourth quadrant, *ecosystem architecture*, has no clear home in existing theory: firms face deep voids and a highly interdependent value proposition, so they must create the complementors and intermediaries they will later orchestrate. This quadrant is the ecosystem frontier.

Copyright © 2026
ISSN: 2961-6611

B. Integrative Framework and Propositions

The second result is an integrative framework that explains how firms move into the frontier quadrant and with what consequences (Fig. 3). Antecedents push firms toward ecosystem architecture; three strategic mechanisms carry it out; outcomes follow; and contextual moderators shape the strength of the relationships.

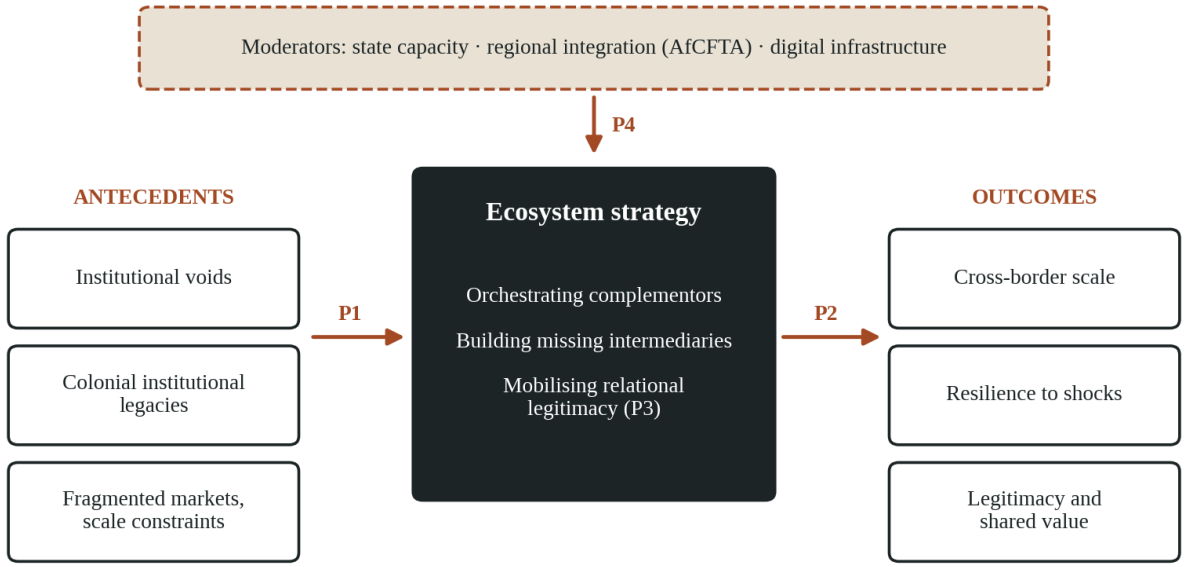


Fig. 3. The ecosystem frontier framework. Arrows indicate Propositions P1 to P4.

P1 (Necessity). The deeper the institutional voids in a firm's home and host markets, the more likely it is to pursue ecosystem-building rather than firm-centric strategies. This follows from the void literature [23], [13] once interdependence is high: internalisation alone cannot supply complementors the firm does not control.

P2 (Orchestration). Ecosystem orchestration capability mediates the relationship between institutional voids and cross-border scale-up. Orchestration is understood here as a dynamic capability [21] applied to building and aligning a partner base [2].

P3 (Legitimacy). Where contracts are weakly enforced, relational and communal legitimacy substitutes for formal alignment mechanisms in attracting and retaining complementors [10], [8].

P4 (Integration). Regional integration, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area [30], positively moderates the returns to cross-border ecosystem strategies by reducing the cost of replicating an ecosystem across markets.

Mobile money in Kenya illustrates the logic. The provider built its own agent network before the service could function, and the resulting infrastructure enabled household risk-sharing [31] and long-run welfare gains [17]. Table I translates each proposition into a mechanism and candidate indicators for future empirical tests.

TABLE I
PROPOSITIONS, MECHANISMS AND CANDIDATE INDICATORS

Proposition	Mechanism	Candidate indicators
P1 Necessity	Voids plus interdependence make ecosystem-building necessary	Governance indicators of home and host markets; share of value-chain functions built in-house or with created partners
P2 Orchestration	Orchestration capability converts void-filling into scale	Number of complementors onboarded; number and speed of cross-border market entries
P3 Legitimacy	Relational ties substitute for weak contract enforcement	Share of non-contractual partnerships; community and diaspora ties of the focal firm

Copyright © 2026
ISSN: 2961-6611

Proceedings of Book Series PBS -Vol 43, pp.8-15 **Emerging Approaches in Modern Business**

Proposition	Mechanism	Candidate indicators
P4 Integration	Regional integration lowers the cost of replicating ecosystems	AfCFTA implementation status by country; returns to cross-border expansion before and after implementation

Interim conclusion. *The typology isolates ecosystem architecture as a distinct strategic mode, and the framework specifies why firms enter it and how its effects can be tested. Together they answer the first part of the research question.*

V. Discussion: Comparison with the State of the Art

Table II positions the framework against the main ecosystem models published between 2017 and 2021. The comparison focuses on three features: the core strategic problem each model addresses, its assumption about complementors, and the role it assigns to institutions.

TABLE II
Comparison with Prior Ecosystem Models

Model	Core strategic problem	Assumption about complementors	Role of institutions
Adner (2017) [1]	Aligning partners around a value proposition	Exist; must be aligned	Background condition
Jacobides et al. (2018) [2]	Governing non-generic complementarities	Exist; modular and specialised	Largely implicit
Kapoor (2018) [3]	Locating value creation beyond the firm	Exist; value is co-created	Largely implicit
Shipilov and Gawer (2020) [4]	Integrating network and ecosystem views	Exist; embedded in networks	Partly addressed
This chapter	Creating, then orchestrating, an ecosystem	Often absent; must be created	Central variable (voids, legacies, integration)

Commentary on Table II. The comparison shows a consistent pattern. Prior models differ in how they explain coordination, but all treat complementors as available and institutions as background. The present framework departs on both counts. First, it adds a prior strategic stage, ecosystem creation, that precedes alignment. Second, it moves institutions from the background into the model as antecedents and moderators. Third, unlike the void literature, which emphasises internalisation [23], it explains why internalisation is insufficient when value is highly interdependent. Fourth, it responds to decolonial critique [15], [14] by deriving constructs from African conditions rather than treating those conditions as deviations.

The framework also has practical implications. For managers, it clarifies when to join an existing ecosystem and when to invest in building one, and it reframes void-filling as a strategic investment rather than a cost. For policymakers, it suggests that private ecosystem builders perform quasi-public functions, which regional integration under AfCFTA can either amplify or constrain.

Interim conclusion. *Compared with the state of the art, the contribution lies in theorising ecosystem creation as a distinct stage and in making institutions an explicit variable. This answers the second part of the research question: ecosystem architecture is a distinct strategic mode, not a local variant of existing ones.*

VI. Conclusion

This chapter set out to explain how post-colonial African enterprises build ecosystems under institutional voids and whether this constitutes a distinct strategic paradigm. It showed that the main strategic paradigms share an untested assumption about existing complementors, proposed a typology that isolates ecosystem architecture as a distinct mode, and derived four testable propositions. The central conclusion is that African enterprises are a source of theory about the limits of ecosystem strategy, and that at the frontier the defining challenge is ecosystem creation rather than ecosystem alignment.

Copyright © 2026
ISSN: 2961-6611

Three limitations qualify these conclusions. The framework is conceptual and has not yet been tested empirically. The label "post-colonial" covers very different colonial histories and, in some cases, none, which calls for comparative designs. Finally, the measurement of institutional voids remains contested [14]. Future research should test P1 to P4 with panel data on cross-border African firms, examine informal enterprises and diaspora networks as ecosystem actors, assess AfCFTA implementation as a natural experiment, and compare African ecosystem builders with emerging multinationals from Asia and Latin America.

REFERENCES

[1] R. Adner, "Ecosystem as structure: An actionable construct for strategy," J. Manage., vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 39–58, 2017.

[2] M. G. Jacobides, C. Cennamo, and A. Gawer, "Towards a theory of ecosystems," Strateg. Manage. J., vol. 39, no. 8, pp. 2255–2276, 2018.

[3] R. Kapoor, "Ecosystems: Broadening the locus of value creation," J. Organ. Des., vol. 7, art. 12, 2018.

[4] A. Shipilov and A. Gawer, "Integrating research on interorganizational networks and ecosystems," Acad. Manage. Ann., vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 92–121, 2020.

[5] H. Hou and Y. Shi, "Ecosystem-as-structure and ecosystem-as-coevolution: A constructive examination," Technovation, vol. 100, art. 102193, 2021.

[6] C. Cennamo, "Competing in digital markets: A platform-based perspective," Acad. Manage. Perspect., vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 265–291, 2021.

[7] D. J. Teece, "Profiting from innovation in the digital economy: Enabling technologies, standards, and licensing models in the wireless world," Res. Policy, vol. 47, no. 8, pp. 1367–1387, 2018.

[8] D. B. Zoogah, M. W. Peng, and H. Woldu, "Institutions, resources, and organizational effectiveness in Africa," Acad. Manage. Perspect., vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 7–31, 2015.

[9] G. George, C. Corbishley, J. N. O. Khayesi, M. R. Haas, and L. Tihanyi, "Bringing Africa in: Promising directions for management research," Acad. Manage. J., vol. 59, no. 2, pp. 377–393, 2016.

[10] H. Barnard, A. Cuervo-Cazurra, and S. Manning, "Africa business research as a laboratory for theory-building: Extreme conditions, new phenomena, and alternative paradigms of social relationships," Manage. Organ. Rev., vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 467–495, 2017.

[11] A. Kolk and M. Rivera-Santos, "The state of research on Africa in business and management: Insights from a systematic review of key international journals," Bus. Soc., vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 415–436, 2018.

[12] M. Rivera-Santos, D. Holt, D. Littlewood, and A. Kolk, "Social entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa," Acad. Manage. Perspect., vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 72–91, 2015.

[13] J. Doh, S. Rodrigues, A. Saka-Helmhout, and M. Makhija, "International business responses to institutional voids," J. Int. Bus. Stud., vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 293–307, 2017.

[14] J. Bothello, R. S. Nason, and G. Schnyder, "Institutional voids and organization studies: Towards an epistemological rupture," Organ. Stud., vol. 40, no. 10, pp. 1499–1512, 2019.

[15] S. B. Banerjee, "Decolonizing management theory: A critical perspective," J. Manage. Stud., vol. 59, no. 4, pp. 1074–1087, 2022.

[16] N. Jammulamadaka, A. Faria, G. Jack, and S. Ruggunan, "Decolonising management and organisational knowledge (MOK): Praxistioners of the field, please stand up!" Organization, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 717–740, 2021.

[17] T. Suri and W. Jack, "The long-run poverty and gender impacts of mobile money," Science, vol. 354, no. 6317, pp. 1288–1292, 2016.

[18] M. E. Porter, Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors. New York, NY, USA: Free Press, 1980.

[19] J. Barney, "Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage," J. Manage., vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 99–120, 1991.

[20] D. J. Teece, "Explicating dynamic capabilities: The nature and microfoundations of (sustainable) enterprise performance," Strateg. Manage. J., vol. 28, no. 13, pp. 1319–1350, 2007.

[21] D. J. Teece, "Dynamic capabilities and entrepreneurial management in large organizations: Toward a theory of the (entrepreneurial) firm," Eur. Econ. Rev., vol. 86, pp. 202–216, 2016.

[22] J. F. Moore, "Predators and prey: A new ecology of competition," Harvard Bus. Rev., vol. 71, no. 3, pp. 75–86, 1993.

[23] T. Khanna and K. Palepu, "Why focused strategies may be wrong for emerging markets," Harvard Bus. Rev., vol. 75, no. 4, pp. 41–51, 1997.

[24] J. Mair, I. Martí, and M. J. Ventresca, "Building inclusive markets in rural Bangladesh: How intermediaries work institutional voids," Acad. Manage. J., vol. 55, no. 4, pp. 819–850, 2012.

Copyright © 2026
ISSN: 2961-6611

Proceedings of Book Series PBS -Vol 43, pp.8-15 **Emerging Approaches in Modern Business**

[25] A. Cuervo-Cazurra and M. Genc, "Transforming disadvantages into advantages: Developing-country MNEs in the least developed countries," J. Int. Bus. Stud., vol. 39, no. 6, pp. 957–979, 2008.

[26] S. M. Nkomo, "A postcolonial and anti-colonial reading of 'African' leadership and management in organization studies: Tensions, contradictions and possibilities," Organization, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 365–386, 2011.

[27] A. Mbembe, On the Postcolony. Berkeley, CA, USA: Univ. of California Press, 2001.

[28] E. Jaakkola, "Designing conceptual articles: Four approaches," AMS Rev., vol. 10, pp. 18–26, 2020.

[29] D. A. Whetten, "What constitutes a theoretical contribution?" Acad. Manage. Rev., vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 490–495, 1989.

[30] African Union, Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: African Union, 2018.

[31] W. Jack and T. Suri, "Risk sharing and transactions costs: Evidence from Kenya's mobile money revolution," Amer. Econ. Rev., vol. 104, no. 1, pp. 183–223, 2014.

Copyright © 2026
ISSN: 2961-6611