

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Crisis management strategies: The relevance of organizational resilience for very small enterprises in the Covid-19 context**

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**The aim of this study is to highlight the relevance of the concept of organizational resilience as a strategy for enterprises to adopt in order to address the various crises that arise in their environment. To achieve this, a qualitative study was conducted among 64 Very Small Enterprises (VSEs) in Cameroon. The companies surveyed were selected using the convenience sampling method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the VSEs' owners/managers, using Bertaux's life story method (1976). The content analysis method, based on the interpretive logic of the verbatims, was employed. The results show that VSEs withstood the COVID-19 crisis due to various dimensions of organizational resilience. These dimensions include several strategies, such as alliances and downsizing, the development of new skills, the expansion of existing activities, and versatility through learning. However, enterprises of other sizes were not considered, and the results pertain only to VSEs in a single region (the West region) of Cameroon. Extending the study to include enterprises of different sizes and other regions would increase its scope.**

**Key words:** Crisis, Covid-19, organizational resilience, strategy, very small enterprises (VSEs).

## **INTRODUCTION**

The world has always faced new upheavals caused by various types of crises. Among them, one can refer to security, economic, financial, and health crises. Literature (Schmitt et al., 2010; Mishi et al., 2023; Nokuphila and Utete, 2024) presents the crisis situation not only as a threat but also as an opportunity for the survival of enterprises. As a threat, the crisis impacts financial aspects by potentially leading to a decrease in revenue and profits, an increase in costs, and a rise in the number

of unpaid bills, which disrupts the enterprise's financial balance. It also affects the social aspect due to structural and environmental upheavals. However, the crisis also represents a source of opportunities for enterprises, as it allows them to review managerial practices (Muller, 2009; Borje and Henschel, 2022; Yoowoo et al., 2024). In the same vein, the crisis presents an opportunity for managers to give meaning to their enterprise (Roux-Dufort, 2000).

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With the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the activities of enterprises were profoundly affected, particularly those of very small enterprises (VSEs), which are generally financially fragile due to their low economic power. Our contribution raises the issue of crisis management strategies for enterprises, especially VSEs, due to their financial and organizational vulnerability. While some VSEs have simply disappeared, others have endured the crisis, particularly because their strength lies in their ability to adapt, unlike large enterprises, which have significant resources but suffer from a certain inertia (Marchesnay, 2008).

Holling's seminal works (1973) proposed the concept of organizational resilience as a way to deal with crises, aiming to examine a system's capacity to respond to potential risks from the environment. Resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedback (Walker et al., 2004). Since then, the concept of resilience has evolved considerably. However, few studies have addressed the issue of small business resilience in the context of a pandemic. To face an increasingly aggressive environment, it is becoming urgent for all organizations to implement a risk management system (Zobo, 2022; Zodwa and Breggie, 2022; Mondino et al., 2023; Riepl et al., 2024). The majority of small businesses have demonstrated resilience by opting for temporary solutions, such as the partial unemployment of their employees or the closure of their premises (Kabore, 2022).

Thus, our study highlights the relevance of this concept in resolving crises faced by enterprises. The Covid-19 pandemic has strongly impacted companies in their strategies and forced them to think about a business continuity plan (Frimousse and Peretti, 2020). This article fits into the theoretical framework of strategic risk management for small businesses. Its originality and significance lie in the fact that the concept of organizational resilience is tested in the particular context of the Covid-19 crisis, within the specific environment of VSEs. This contribution seeks to answer the following question: *What is the relevance of the concept of organizational resilience as a strategy to be adopted to resist crisis? In other words, in what measures does organizational resilience constitute a relevant strategy to crisis management?*

The study is conducted in a specific environment, that of VSEs. The focus on this category of enterprise is primarily motivated by the fact that, at the time the pandemic occurred, VSEs in Cameroon represented approximately 79.2% of the economy and constituted a major source of wealth creation, jobs, income, and tax revenue (INS, 2020). The aim of this study is to highlight the relevance of the concept of Organizational Resilience as a strategy to be adopted by enterprises to address the various crises that arise in their environment.

Investigations were conducted specifically within VSEs in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework is built around the concepts of VSEs, crisis, and organizational resilience. Additionally, some previous works have focused on organizational resilience as a strategy for companies to adopt in order to face crises.

#### ***VSEs: A multidimensional design***

There is no unanimity regarding the definition of VSEs. However, the number of employees is the most commonly used criterion in defining a VSE. The European Commission defines a VSE as a company with 0 to 9 employees. INSEE (2007) proposes several thresholds, including very small industries (with between 9 and 19 employees). Hernandez (1997) focused on African companies and, according to him, a VSE is one that employs fewer than 10 people. Additionally, several studies (Marchesnay, 2003; Mamboundou, 2003; Camilleri and Vinsonneau, 1996; Paché, 1990) consider VSEs, particularly African VSEs, as companies primarily characterized by individual management by the owner, a low level of specialization, and employees who are often versatile. Certain general characteristics are proposed (Foliard, 2010) to better clarify the concept of VSEs, regardless of their geographical location: responsibility is concentrated in the hands of a single person, the strategy is intuitive and not highly formalized, and management is focused on the entrepreneur. In the same vein, other works (Simen, 2018) have emphasized the characteristics attributable to VSEs: the predominance of intuition over formality (Planeand Torres, 1998), and the omnipresence of the manager (Jaouen and Tessier, 2008).

#### ***Concept of crisis and the Covid-19 health crisis***

In the Chinese ideogram, the word "Crisis" represents both the sign of danger and the sign of opportunity. It is an event that occurs suddenly, causing destabilization and a loss of direction, whether at an organizational or individual level (Hermann, 1963). According to Koselleck (2023), crisis is analyzed as a fundamental historical concept that operates both over time and in its multiple uses. Thus, this concept spans various fields, including legal, theological, medical, economic, and environmental. A crisis is understood as a situation that threatens the functioning, objectives, and values of an organization (Hermann, 1963) and necessitates the formulation of new practices (Milburn et al., 1983).

The Covid-19 pandemic has been the global crisis of our time and the greatest challenge humanity has faced

since the Second World War. It is a health crisis caused by the spread of a deadly virus known as the Coronavirus, referred to as Covid-19. Therefore, identifying the pandemic linked to the Covid-19 virus as a crisis seems to be unanimous (Coibon et al., 2020).

### **Organizational resilience and crisis management**

The word "Resilience" was first used in the 19th century to describe the ability of Japanese society to recover from the December 1854 earthquake (Alexander, 2013). In the field of management sciences, the concept of organizational resilience emerged in the context of research on crisis management. A subject of controversy, it remains little studied in the social sciences (Marquis, 2018). Organizational resilience is defined by Holling (1973) as the capacity of a system to absorb stresses from outside, or its capacity to foresee and anticipate the changing nature of risk, and to defend itself against it before adverse consequences occur. According to Cyrulnik (2009), resilience is defined as the ability to develop, nonetheless, in environments that should have been dilapidated. This definition better illustrates the crisis, especially since a company in such a situation—where all its weaknesses are exposed—demonstrates its ability to resist and even take advantage of the turmoil, provided it is aware of what such a situation can bring. To survive and foster future success, organizations must develop risk and resilience capacities that enable them to respond adequately to unexpected events (Giancotti, 2020). It is in this context that resilience is considered a key success factor in managing crises (Duchek, 2020). Therefore, organizational resilience can be seen as a strategic response by which companies manage crises to ensure success and future organizational continuity (Elmahfoudi and Tajabrite, 2023).

Very recent work (Cheggag and Mokhlis, 2024) specifies that research on organizational resilience has led to mixed results, complicating the development of a referential framework for responding to crisis situations. Nevertheless, the analytical framework in this study is built around the three dimensions of organizational resilience according to Weick and Sutcliffe (2007). These dimensions, which enable optimal crisis management, include:

1. Absorptive capacity, which assumes that the company can cope with shocks while avoiding collapse. This requires not only the existence of resources but also a desire for continuity among managers. Thus, according to Cyert and March (1963), to resist shocks and survive the consequences that result from them, the company must be able to mobilize available resources.
2. The capacity for renewal, through which the company seeks either to develop new activities, rethink existing ones, or experiment with new ways of doing things. This

capacity aligns with work on the entrepreneurial orientation of the firm (Miller, 1983).

3. The capacity for appropriation, which allows the organization to learn lessons from the shocks it has faced in order to emerge from them and learn for itself (Christianson et al., 2009). According to Thorne (2000), taking advantage of failures means recognizing their contribution to learning rather than ignoring them.

This is how the present study attempts to answer the question of how organizational resilience constitutes a relevant strategy for crisis management.

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

### **Context of the study and sampling**

From the second quarter of 2019, the world underwent the Covid-19 pandemic. This crisis turned into an economic crisis, putting the commercial activities of all sizes and sectors on hold. While the global economy experienced a recession, the Cameroonian economy in particular felt the full impact of this crisis, especially as the pandemic emerged in an economic context already weakened by insecurity in the English-speaking regions of the North-West and South-West. The study was conducted in the West region of Cameroon. According to the Ministry of Public Health, between April 31 and May 20, 2020, three regions were most affected: the Center, the Coast, and the West. The choice of this region is relevant, as it not only suffered from the Covid-19 pandemic like all other regions but also received a large number of internally displaced persons who were victims of armed conflicts in the North-West and South-West regions. As a result, the West region was more exposed to insecurity, given its position at the intersection of the two warring regions. The study was carried out in the towns of Bafoussam (an economic hub) and Dschang (a university town bordering the South-West region).

The VSEs studied were selected using the convenience sampling method based on easy access to the business and the owner/manager's willingness to participate. Initially, to avoid the reluctance of owners, a network of personal contacts was used to integrate the first enterprises. Subsequently, other structures were contacted through a snowball effect. In total, 64 VSEs were selected (25 from the town of Dschang and 39 from the town of Bafoussam). Dschang is the second-largest city in the Western region of Cameroon, with around 300,000 inhabitants, while Bafoussam is the largest, with over 500,000 inhabitants. This is the reason the study sample size is larger in Bafoussam than in Dschang. The VSEs operate in the following sectors: handicrafts (traditional dressmaking), trade, agrifood, tailoring, hairdressing, and car mechanics (garage). The sample is considered representative because it mirrors the one compiled by Ngok-Evina (2007), who notes that the sectors of activity, as outlined by statistics and the National Accounts Directorate, are included. A detailed description of the sample is presented as follows:

### **Activity codes**

- 1 = Handicrafts (traditional dressmaking)
- 2 = Trade
- 3 = Agrifood
- 4 = Tailoring
- 5 = Hairdressing
- 6 = Car mechanics (garage)

**Table 1.** Sample summary of TPE, activities, location and workforce.

| No. of VSEs | Activity codes | Town codes | Workforce | No. of VSEs | Activity codes | Town codes | Workforce |
|-------------|----------------|------------|-----------|-------------|----------------|------------|-----------|
| 1           | 2              | 1          | 6         | 33          | 6              | 2          | 7         |
| 2           | 3              | 2          | 8         | 34          | 2              | 1          | 4         |
| 3           | 1              | 1          | 6         | 35          | 6              | 1          | 5         |
| 4           | 3              | 1          | 5         | 36          | 3              | 2          | 7         |
| 5           | 2              | 2          | 9         | 37          | 4              | 2          | 5         |
| 6           | 4              | 2          | 4         | 38          | 6              | 2          | 6         |
| 7           | 3              | 2          | 6         | 39          | 1              | 2          | 5         |
| 8           | 2              | 2          | 7         | 40          | 5              | 1          | 4         |
| 9           | 3              | 1          | 6         | 41          | 6              | 2          | 7         |
| 10          | 2              | 1          | 5         | 42          | 2              | 2          | 8         |
| 11          | 5              | 2          | 4         | 43          | 5              | 2          | 3         |
| 12          | 1              | 1          | 3         | 44          | 3              | 2          | 10        |
| 13          | 6              | 1          | 6         | 45          | 2              | 2          | 5         |
| 14          | 2              | 2          | 7         | 46          | 1              | 1          | 4         |
| 15          | 5              | 1          | 3         | 47          | 4              | 2          | 3         |
| 16          | 3              | 1          | 5         | 48          | 2              | 1          | 4         |
| 17          | 6              | 2          | 5         | 49          | 3              | 2          | 6         |
| 18          | 3              | 2          | 5         | 50          | 2              | 2          | 7         |
| 19          | 2              | 1          | 6         | 51          | 6              | 2          | 7         |
| 20          | 3              | 2          | 8         | 52          | 2              | 1          | 4         |
| 21          | 1              | 1          | 6         | 53          | 6              | 1          | 5         |
| 22          | 3              | 1          | 5         | 54          | 3              | 2          | 7         |
| 23          | 2              | 2          | 9         | 55          | 4              | 2          | 5         |
| 24          | 4              | 2          | 4         | 56          | 6              | 2          | 6         |
| 25          | 3              | 2          | 6         | 57          | 1              | 2          | 5         |
| 26          | 2              | 2          | 7         | 58          | 5              | 1          | 4         |
| 27          | 3              | 1          | 6         | 59          | 6              | 2          | 7         |
| 28          | 2              | 1          | 5         | 60          | 2              | 2          | 8         |
| 29          | 5              | 2          | 4         | 61          | 5              | 2          | 3         |
| 30          | 1              | 1          | 3         | 62          | 3              | 2          | 10        |
| 31          | 6              | 1          | 6         | 63          | 2              | 2          | 5         |
| 32          | 2              | 2          | 7         | 64          | 1              | 1          | 4         |

Source: Author.

**Location codes**

1 = Dschang  
2 = Bafoussam

Table 1 presents the structure of the sample study.

**Data collection and analysis**

Data were collected using Bertaux's (1976) life story method. This is a qualitative approach that consists of semi-structured interviews, during which interviewees freely recount their experiences in relation to the means that enabled them to guarantee the survival of their activities (strategy adopted), despite the Covid-19 pandemic. These interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. At the start of each interview, the purpose of the study was explained, and interviewees were reassured that the information provided would only be used for scientific purposes. Overall, the interviewees were skeptical about the recordings, so the data were recorded through quick, albeit tedious, notes. The interviews were conducted using

an interview guide based on themes relating to the dimensions of organizational resilience selected as a framework for analysis according to Weick and Sutcliffe (2007). These dimensions concern the ability to absorb shocks to avoid collapse, the ability to renew and develop new activities, and the ability to learn from shocks. The response rate obtained was 100%, as the managers interviewed were selected for convenience, based on their willingness to participate in the study.

The data were analyzed manually (Simen, 2017) using an interpretative approach (Sanseau, 2005) and a verbatim comprehension approach (Léger-Jarniou and Kalousis, 2015). This is a method of thematic content analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which allows raw information to be divided into themes and associated with categories of meaning. This practice led to in-depth readings, where verbatims were reviewed multiple times to detect text fragments directly related to the resilience strategies adopted during the Covid-19 period. Each element perceived as part of a category of meaning was linked to a theme from the interview, as shown in Table 2. The methodological framework is summarized in Table 3.

**Table 2.** Themes and categories of meaning.

| Themes (strategies adopted to avoid collapse) | Categories of meaning  |
|---|--|
| Absorptive capacity                           | Alliances<br>Workforce management (dismissal)<br>Management of remuneration<br>Working time management |
| Capacity for renewal                          | Development of new skills<br>Expansion of existing activities  |
| Capacity of appropriation                     | Learning   |

Source: Sonkeng and Naboundou (2024).

**Table 3.** Summary of the methodology.

| Areas of activities                        | Handicrafts, trade, agrifood (restaurant, bar), sewing, hairdressing, car mechanics (garage)  |
|--|---|
| Total number of interviews: 64             | Locations: Town of Dschang (25); Town of Bafoussam (39)   |
| Enterprise selection criteria              | Ease of access to the enterprise, willingness of the manager to accept the study within their structure                                   |
| Response rate                              | 100% (acceptance of managers to participate in the study)   |
| Data collection                            | Semi-structured interviews using Bertaux's life story method (1976)   |
| Data processing: Thematic content analysis | In-depth reading of data<br>Interpretation and understanding of verbatims<br>Detection of text fragments related to resilience strategies |

Source: Adapted from Apitsa and Amine (2014).

## RESULTS

The results show that the dimensions of organizational resilience in response to Covid-19 can be observed at the level of HRM (Human Resources Management) practices, even though VSEs are characterized by the absence of a structured human resources function. These dimensions serve as a framework for analysis. At the conclusion of this analysis, a discussion of the results is presented.

### **Absorptive capacity: Alliances and redundancies as resilience strategies**

This dimension of resilience is characterized by the owners' or managers' determination for continuity and survival. The VSEs studied resisted the Covid-19 crisis in various ways. Some VSEs adopted the alliance strategy to reduce their fixed costs. This was the case for VSEs operating in sectors such as sewing and handicrafts. An example of this is an alliance formed in Bafoussam between a craftsman (initially displaced from the North-West due to political and security conflicts) and a tailor:

"It seems nature has unleashed against me. I have lost a considerable number of my stock because of the war. As

the violence of the secessionists increased since 2017, I moved with my entire family, as many others in the village did. Gradually, I was able to settle down. But with the appearance of Covid, my activities decreased and I could no longer afford the rent of the shop. Fortunately for me, this tailor, with whom I sympathised upon my arrival here, let me expose my products in his workshop and we decided to pay the rent and electricity bills together. Without this alliance, I do not see how I could cope if I had continued alone where I was" (Owner of very small craft enterprise, Bafoussam).

According to the managers of these two allied VSEs (sewing and crafts), the savings made through the considerable reduction in fixed costs (rent and electricity bill) have enabled them to reduce cash flow pressure and increase their profit making, which is a guarantee of survival. Moreover, a certain synergy has been created, the beneficial effects of which can be felt in the extension of working hours:

"...since I've rented the same premises as my tailor friend, I stay in the workshop longer, as long as it's open. When I was on my own, I used to close earlier. Some days I wouldn't even open, especially at the beginning of the week like Monday or Tuesday" (Handicraft VSE owner, Bafoussam).

For other VSEs, the strategy adopted to avoid collapse was to reduce the workforce by firing certain employees. Such is the case of commercial VSEs:

“Covid forced me to fire two of my four employees. Sales have dropped by more than the half. Working with four employees means to go straight to my financial death. For the moment, I'd rather get rid of them, even if they'll have to come back later if they don't run into trouble elsewhere” (owner of a trading enterprise, Dschang).

Same situation for a bar owner who claims to have reduced his number of employees: *“I let go of a waitress and the young man who helped me with some deliveries. I'm currently managing with the three others who remained. This has allowed me to continue my business despite the Covid-19 crisis”* (said the bar owner, Bafoussam).

For VSEs who did not opt for layoffs, the adopted measure has been to reduce salaries in an attempt to weather the Covid- 19 crisis:

“...After their training, Louis-Marie and Franck stayed and continue to work with me because they don't yet have the funds to open their own garages. But I gave each of them CFA 65,000 a month. With the crisis, their salaries have been cut in half, but they understand themselves that it's very difficult and that I couldn't do anything other than lower their pay” (said a garage owner, Bafoussam).

### **Capacity for renewal: From the development of new skills to the expansion of existing activities**

The resilience of VSEs in the face of Covid- 19 crisis also stemmed from their capacity for renewal. Through this dimension, some VSEs developed new skills, while others expanded their existing activities. Regarding the development of new skills, the most striking example concerns the vehicle disinfection service initiated by several VSEs in the automotive sector. These businesses now automatically offer all customers who come to repair their cars a cleaning and disinfection of the entire vehicle (inside and out) using hydro alcoholic solution. In most cases, customers have welcomed this new service, for a flat fee of CFA 1,000. In this regard, the owner of a garage in Bafoussam states: *“... With Covid, even spare parts are very rare on the market. Our suppliers say that ships no longer arrive regularly due to travel suspensions. Now, by disinfecting the repaired cars, I try to supplement my income a bit.”* This new skill has gradually developed among several other mechanics who found it a way to resist the pandemic. In certain sectors such as agrifood, the new skills developed relate to the diversification observed in restaurant activities. In this respect, a restaurant owner in the town of Dschang asserts: *“...with the arrival of many war displaced people*

*from the neighboring South-West, I quickly learned to make traditional dishes from their region to further diversify the menu. This has allowed me to slightly increase my daily sales.”* Similarly, the development of new skills has been felt in other fields, including tailoring and hairdressing. The following statements illustrate this: *“before the crisis, I was specialized in men's clothing. Now I also try to design clothes for women. It's true that I haven't fully adapted yet, but I'm gradually improving”* (said the tailoring workshop owner, Bafoussam). This situation is similar in the hairdressing field:

“For some time now, I've also been doing women's hair like some hairdressers in the town. With the lock down during Covid, clients became very rare, and there's no way for me to continue only catering to men. My competitors who also style women's hair quickly understood this” (said a hairdressing salon, Bafoussam).

As for the expansion of existing activities, this concerns the development of related activities. We can mention as an illustration tailoring, automotive mechanics, and catering fields. In tailoring, beyond the classic clothing production, several tailors have also engaged in the production and sale of face masks:

“I realize that a making face mask is quite quick and even brings me more profit than sewing clothes. At CFA 200 each, I sell several dozen masks a day. You see, for something that cost me a maximum of CFA 100 to make, I make a great profit from this activity, even if the sale's price of each mask is small. While I wait for my clothing customers to return progressively, selling masks helps me survive the crisis” (said a tailoring workshop owner, Bafoussam).

In addition: *“The Covid crisis forced me to broaden my activities. I also started decorating party venues. These are just some of the services I can offer to increase my profits”* said the owner of a tailoring shop in Bafoussam. In the same vein, the auto sectors have seen an extension into engine oil change: *“...Now, I also do oil changes in addition to regular vehicle repairs. Then I take the opportunity to sell engine oils.”* said the garage owner, Bafoussam. The same trend can be observed in the Food industry sector: *“...Before the crisis, I was selling food only, but now I also sell drinks to increase my profits”* (said a restaurant owner, Dschang).

### **Capacity of appropriation: the diversity of learning**

It is through this dimension of resilience that VSE is learning lessons from the impact of the health crisis, which has now become an economic crisis. At this level, failing has helped to make learning possible:

“...during the strict lock down I hardly worked at all. I

used the time to learn from my sister how to do braid with attachment. I'm planning to perfect this and also add manicure/pedicure to make myself more complete and versatile. These are just some of the services I can offer in the long run to increase my profits" (said the owner of a hairdressing salon in Dschang).

These comments were reiterated by the owner of a tailoring shop in the town of Bafoussam: *"my employees are also gradually learning to sew traditional outfits. Now that we are in the same workshop, why not take the opportunity to consolidate their learning?"* The result of this learning phenomenon is a certain diversity of activities. To stick to the above, the impact of the lock was cancelled out by the learning of new activities (braiding and possibly manicure/pedicure). This is much closer to the previous dimension, the capacity for renewal, which is characterised by the development of new skills and the expansion of existing activities.

In addition, the capacity for appropriation has led some VSE owners to rethink their commercial policy and, in particular, their pricing policy:

"Before Covid-19, I used to sell my meals for an average of 500 francs, a price that students in the city could easily afford. But since business has slowed down, I've started offering meatless meals for 250 francs. I am aware that this policy has increased my income somewhat, as many new customers, including students, are increasingly interested in this new price. Secondary school students are also benefiting. Some of them even prefer to eat two meatless dishes for 500 francs instead of one with meat" (said a restaurant owner, Dschang).

## DISCUSSION

It may be noted that the results related to absorptive capacity align with Cyert and March's (1963) logic of mobilizing available resources through alliances. Although this alliance strategy may have strengthened the resilience of the VSEs, it should not overlook the fact that the alliance between the owner of the handicraft enterprise and the owner of the sewing enterprise may encounter difficulties linked to culture shock. These two enterprises come from different geographical areas with distinct ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is essential to implement human resources diversity management, which involves getting individuals with heterogeneous cultural identities to work together effectively (Verrier, 2012).

However, even though business activities have overall decreased in intensity, the layoffs mentioned may lead to demotivation among the remaining staff. Employees who stay may see their workload increase, which could, in turn, increase absenteeism. This justifies the need to implement motivational strategies, such as salary

reevaluation, to reduce absenteeism. Nevertheless, salary is a limited lever for increasing motivation, and other alternatives must be considered, as suggested by Leibenstein (1957). Therefore, VSE owners could enhance motivation by promoting employee involvement (Allen and Meyer, 1990).

The layoffs highlighted as a resilience strategy in this study align with the results of the survey conducted by INS (2020) and Nsegbe et al. (2020). To emphasize the scale of the crisis, these authors showed that 82% of companies experienced a drop in production, and consequently, 58% reduced their workforce. In the same vein, job losses were particularly pronounced among small businesses, with approximately 54.3% affected, according to Eka (2021). This trend was further exacerbated by the confinement, which increased layoffs and raised unemployment (Rajput et al., 2021).

Regarding the capacity for renewal, despite the threats posed by the Covid-19 crisis to business activities, there were some glimmers of hope in the form of new skills development and the expansion of existing activities, such as vehicle disinfection and mask production, among others. These new skills and activities will persist, even if the Covid-19 pandemic seems eradicated. This outcome aligns with the entrepreneurial orientation of the firm as defined by Miller (1983).

It is important to emphasize that the interviewees did not mention teleworking in the VSEs studied, unlike large companies or small and medium-sized businesses, which adopted teleworking as a strategy to address the issue of absenteeism caused by social distancing (Sonkeng and Naboundou, 2024).

Regarding the capacity for appropriation, whether in the case of the hairdressing or sewing businesses, the learning capacities observed during the pandemic demonstrate that the learning capacity of small businesses lies in their agility and flexibility, as described by Fouejieu et al. (2021). Versatility through learning also extends to marketing, with the diversification of the product range and price adjustments accompanying this new commercial policy. For example, the catering sector has seen a change in the quality of dishes and the introduction of new prices for students in the city of Dschang. This policy refers to the concept of organizational agility as defined by Tankpe et al. (2024). As a result, organizational agility is considered a strategic tool for organizations (Marie, 2020) and is introduced as a strategic and organizational response to environmental fluctuations, according to Barzi (2011).

The dimensions of organizational resilience in terms of absorptive capacity and capacity for renewal seem to be encompassed within the capacity for appropriation. These three dimensions are interconnected and all contribute to the learning process, by which businesses learn independently and emerge stronger, as described by Weick and Sutcliffe (2007).

The strategies varied depending on the types of

**Table 4.** Summary of the strategies adopted by the businesses studied.

| Businesses and numbers (64)  | Strategies adopted                                     | Businesses concerned                                     | Dominant strategies  |
|--|--|--|--|
| Handicrafts: 8;<br>Trade: 18;<br>Agrifood: 15;<br>Sewing: 5;<br>Hairstyle: 7;<br>Garage: 11. | Alliance   | Sewing<br>Handicrafts                                    |  |
|  | Dismissal  | Trade<br>Agrifood  | Alliance and Dismissal   |
|  | Reduction in remuneration<br>Extension of working time | Garage<br>Handicrafts                                    |  |
|  | Development of new skills                              | Handicrafts<br>Garage<br>Agrifood<br>Sewing<br>Hairstyle | Development of new skills and expansion of existing activities |
|  | Expansion of existing activities                       | Sewing<br>Garage<br>Agrifood                             |  |
|  | Versatility through learning                           | Hairstyle<br>Sewing                                      | Learning   |
|  | Supply diversification and readjustment of prices      | Agrifood   |  |

Source: Author.

activity. In summary, the different strategies adopted by the companies studied are presented in Table 4.

## Conclusion

This article examines crisis management strategies for companies, with a particular focus on VSEs. The objective is to highlight the relevance of the concept of organizational resilience as a strategy to adopt in times of crisis. A qualitative study was conducted among VSEs in Cameroon. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with owners/managers of small businesses, using the life story method. The content analysis method, based on an interpretative approach to verbatim responses, was employed.

The results indicate that organizational resilience in VSEs is reflected through various human resources management practices and strategies: alliances and downsizing, development of new skills and activities, versatility through learning, and expansion of existing operations. Thus, the concept of organizational resilience, which has been the subject of pioneering research (Holling, 1973), fully comes to life when it refers to the strategy companies adopt to cope with environmental changes, particularly crises.

The contribution of this research lies in its extension of

the work of Weick and Sutcliffe (2007), who defined organizational resilience as a strategy for companies to withstand various crises. It is clear that very small businesses are capable of adapting to unstable environments, just like companies of other sizes. Due to their financial fragility, very small businesses may focus their resilience strategy more on managing their human resources, with skill development taking priority. Their resilience strategy can also extend to marketing, enabling them to diversify their products and adjust prices. Given that small businesses account for 90% of the global economy (United Nations, 2024), government authorities should consider measures to further support this category of businesses, including financial assistance to help them strengthen their competitiveness and better withstand future crises.

This study exclusively addresses VSEs, leaving companies of other sizes outside its scope. Additionally, financial aspects were not explored, and the research focused on only one of the ten regions in Cameroon. These limitations present opportunities for further exploration to expand the scope of the study.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.



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