

The Readiness of Micro-businesses in Building Networking, Partnerships, and Collaboration through the MSME Incubator Program

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Abstract

Micro-businesses face persistent resource constraints that make networking, partnerships, and collaboration essential for improving competitiveness. While prior studies have documented the benefits of collaboration for small and medium-sized enterprises, empirical evidence on collaborative readiness at the pre-collaboration stage among micro-businesses remains limited. This study examines the readiness of micro-business actors to develop networking, partnerships, and collaboration following a learning-based intervention delivered through an MSME incubation program. Using a descriptive quantitative approach with an exploratory design, data were collected through structured questionnaires and pre-test and post-test instruments to assess changes in conceptual understanding, attitudes, and collaborative intentions. Data were analyzed using descriptive and simple comparative techniques, complemented by thematic analysis of open-ended responses. The findings show a clear increase in participants' understanding of networking, the role of collaboration as a transitional step toward partnerships, and the use of digital tools for building business networks. Improvements in collaborative attitudes and short-term action intentions were also identified. However, the translation of readiness into formal partnerships remains limited due to structural barriers, including constrained capital, operational capacity, and digital literacy. The study concludes that collaborative readiness among micro-businesses can be strengthened through learning-based interventions and constitutes a critical transitional phase toward sustainable partnerships.

Keywords: *Micro-businesses; Networking, Partnership; Collaboration; Business incubation;*

INTRODUCTION

Micro-businesses are a dominant part of the national economic structure, but at the same time face significant limitations in terms of business capital, managerial capacity, digital literacy, and access to markets and supporting resources. These limitations highlight the importance of networking, partnerships, and collaboration as strategies to overcome internal resource shortages by leveraging external relationships with fellow entrepreneurs, communities, and supporting actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Various recent studies show that networking and collaboration play an important role in increasing business resilience, innovation, and the sustainability of MSMEs, especially in a dynamic and uncertain business environment (Audretsch et al., 2024; Farrukh & Sajjad, 2024).

However, at the micro-business level, the significant potential for collaboration is not always followed by structured and sustainable partnership practices. A number of studies show that micro-businesses generally have a positive attitude towards collaboration and resource sharing, but are often unable to implement it strategically due to limitations in capacity, experience, and understanding of partnership mechanisms (Melander & Wallström, 2023; Bataineh et al., 2024). This condition indicates a gap between collaborative intentions and the realization of formal partnerships, which is a crucial challenge in micro-business development.

Preliminary empirical findings from a questionnaire distributed to 26 MSME actors during mentoring activities reinforce this picture. Most respondents expressed confidence that joint branding and collective promotion within the MSME community could increase the appeal and sales of products, and indicated their willingness to engage in joint promotional activities both offline and online. However, these responses reflect collaborative attitudes and intentions rather than actual experience in establishing structured partnerships. This shows that the collaborative orientation of micro-business actors is relatively strong, but has not yet been fully converted into sustainable partnership practices.

This phenomenon reinforces criticism of the tendency in the literature to still place collaboration as an established practice or as a variable directly linked to business performance. This approach tends to ignore the initial phase before collaboration is formed, namely the readiness of micro-businesses to

understand, accept, and intend to engage in networking and partnerships. In fact, entrepreneurship and organizational literature emphasizes that attitudes and intentions are important prerequisites before collaborative behavior can be consistently realized (Mishra et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2024). Without cognitive and intentional readiness, collaboration has the potential to remain at a normative level and be sporadic in nature.

Recent developments in the literature also show a shift in perspective that places networking and partnership as learnable capabilities, not merely as a result of business size or maturity level. Business networks are understood as social learning spaces that enable micro-businesses to develop the ability to select partners, build trust, and share knowledge adaptively through cross-actor interactions (Baranova, 2022; Calza et al., 2021). This perspective is relevant for micro-enterprises that generally do not yet have formal partnership experience but have the potential to build collaborative capacity through structured learning processes.

The urgency of collaboration readiness is growing stronger in line with the development of digital technology and sustainability demands. Digitalization not only affects how micro-enterprises market their products, but also reshapes communication patterns, interactions, and business network development. Strategic communication practices and the use of digital technology have been proven to play a role in strengthening relationships between actors, increasing trust, and facilitating collaboration in the context of value chains and the circular economy (Civera et al., 2025; Tseng et al., 2022). However, at the micro-enterprise level, the use of digital technology is still often operational in nature and not yet fully directed towards building sustainable partnerships.

In this context, MSME incubator programs serve as a strategic learning intervention space. Incubators not only function to improve technical skills, but also to shape the mindset, strategic orientation, and collaborative readiness of micro-businesses. Preliminary findings from the questionnaire indicate a gap between high collaborative intent and limited understanding of networking and partnership mechanisms, highlighting the importance of incubators as facilitators of collaborative learning. This is in line with research showing that training and mentoring-based interventions tend to have an initial impact on understanding, attitudes, and intentions before directly impacting business performance (Goodman et al., 2017; Shashi et al., 2020).

The novelty of this research lies in the positioning of collaborative readiness as a separate transitional phase that needs to be examined empirically, especially in the context of micro-enterprises. Unlike previous studies that tend to assume collaboration as an ongoing practice or directly link it to business performance, this study explicitly focuses its analysis on changes in the understanding, attitudes, and collaborative intentions of micro-business actors after incubator learning interventions, without requiring the existence of established partnerships. Thus, this study fills a gap in the literature on the pre-collaboration stage, which has received little attention.

Based on these conditions, this study aims to examine the readiness of micro-business actors to build networking, partnerships, and collaboration after receiving learning interventions through MSME incubator programs. This study specifically examines changes in conceptual understanding, attitudes, and collaborative intentions, as well as identifying the main obstacles in converting this readiness into more institutionalized partnership practices. Using an exploratory approach based on pre-test and post-test data, this study provides an empirical picture of the early stages of collaboration readiness, which is an important foundation for the development of sustainable partnerships.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive quantitative approach with an exploratory design to describe the readiness of micro-businesses in building networking, partnerships, and collaborations after receiving learning interventions through MSME incubator programs. An exploratory approach was chosen because this study was not intended to test causal relationships or measure business performance impacts directly, but rather to understand the phenomenon of collaboration readiness in the early stages based on available empirical data. This approach is in line with the latest literature that places readiness, attitude, and intention as initial constructs in the process of forming collaboration and developing micro-business capabilities (Audretsch et al., 2021; Baranova, 2022; Farrukh & Sajjad, 2024).

The research population consists of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) involved in business mentoring and incubation activities. The study involved two complementary groups of subjects. The first group consisted of micro-business actors who were respondents to an initial questionnaire to describe their collaborative attitudes and intentions regarding joint branding, collective promotion, and cooperation between business actors. This group served as the initial empirical context for identifying collaboration potential and strengthening the basis for selecting the research focus. The second group consisted of micro-businesses who participated in the MSME incubator program on networking and partnership, who were the main subjects in measuring changes in conceptual understanding, attitudes, and collaborative intentions through pre-test and post-test instruments. All research subjects were micro-enterprises with limited business scale, a small number of employees, and a basic level of digital adoption.

The selection of research subjects was conducted purposively by considering the active involvement of business actors in incubator activities and the suitability of business characteristics with the research objectives. The purposive sampling approach is considered appropriate in exploratory research because it allows researchers to gain a deeper contextual understanding of the learning process and readiness for collaboration in micro-businesses (Melander & Wallström, 2023). This strategy is also relevant to studies that emphasize the importance of context and social interaction in developing the collaborative capabilities of small-scale businesses (Baranova, 2022).

Data collection was conducted using two main instruments. First, a structured questionnaire was distributed to micro-businesses to describe their attitudes, beliefs, and collaborative intentions regarding networking, joint branding, and collective promotion. Second, pre-test and post-test instruments used in MSME incubator activities to measure changes in conceptual understanding, attitudes, and intentions of micro-businesses towards networking and partnerships before and after learning interventions. The instruments were designed in the form of a Likert scale to capture response tendencies, and were supplemented with open-ended questions to obtain reflections on action plans and obstacles encountered. The use of a combination of closed and open-ended questions is in line with research recommendations that assess the readiness for collaboration and organizational learning processes in micro-enterprises (Calza et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2023).

Data analysis was conducted descriptively and comparatively by comparing pre-test and post-test response tendencies. Quantitative data were processed to identify dominant changes in the level of understanding, attitudes, and collaborative intentions of micro-business actors after the incubator intervention, without using inferential statistical tests. The results of the analysis are presented in the form of categorical summaries, comparison tables, and graphical visualizations to facilitate the interpretation of findings. Meanwhile, qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of obstacles and action plans formulated by micro-business actors. Thematic analysis was used as a complement to enrich the interpretation of quantitative findings, as recommended in exploratory research that emphasizes understanding the process and dynamics of collaboration (Shashi et al., 2020; Tseng et al., 2022).

This study has several methodological limitations that need to be considered. First, the sample size is relatively limited and non-random, so the findings are not intended to be generalized broadly. Second, the measurements focused on the cognitive and intentional readiness of micro-businesses, rather than on economic impact or long-term business performance. Third, the research design did not involve a control group, so the changes identified are understood as preliminary empirical indications, not as evidence of a causal relationship. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the value of this study as an exploratory study that contributes conceptually and empirically to the understanding of micro-business collaboration readiness in the context of MSME incubators and strategic communication.

Research Conceptual Framework

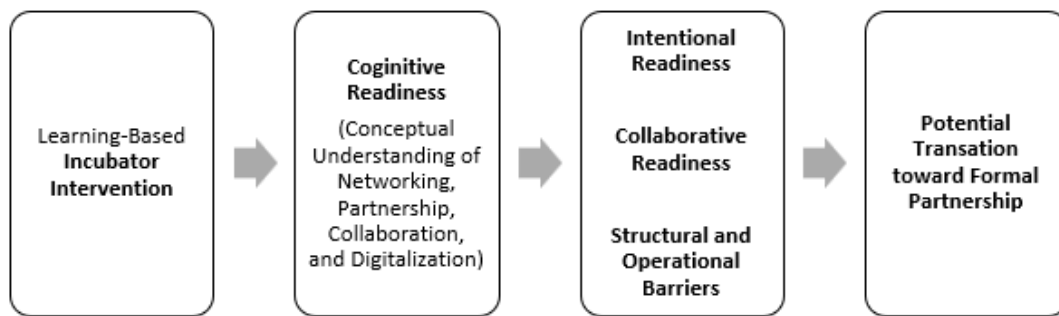


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Collaborative Readiness Development among Micro-Businesses

To guide the analytical focus of this study, a conceptual framework was developed to position collaborative readiness as a transitional phase between learning-based incubator interventions and the potential formation of formal partnerships among micro-businesses (Figure 1). The framework conceptualizes readiness as comprising cognitive and intentional dimensions, which are shaped through training and facilitation activities. At the same time, the framework acknowledges the presence of structural and operational barriers that may constrain the translation of readiness into actual partnership practices. This framework serves as an analytical lens rather than a causal model and informs the selection of research instruments and the interpretation of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Context and Micro-business Characteristics

This study involved micro-business owners who participated in an MSME incubator program on networking and partnership. Most respondents were in the culinary sector with micro-scale businesses, a limited number of employees, and a basic level of digital adoption. The most commonly used digital media were instant messaging applications and social media for promotional and customer communication purposes. These characteristics indicate that respondents are in the micro-business phase, which still relies on personal relationships and informal communication in conducting business activities.

This context is relevant for understanding collaboration readiness because the literature confirms that micro-businesses with limited resources tend to utilize social networks as an initial mechanism for accessing information, market opportunities, and potential collaborations (Audretsch et al., 2021; Melander & Wallström, 2023). Therefore, the results of this study are positioned to understand the dynamics of collaboration readiness in the context of micro-businesses that are in the process of learning and mentoring, not to generalize the conditions of MSMEs broadly.

Table 1. Comparison of Micro-Business Actors' Understanding and Collaborative Readiness Before and After the Incubation Intervention

Assessed Aspect	Pre-Test Condition	Post-Test Condition	Direction of Change
Understanding of the importance of networking	Dominated by disagreement to neutral responses	Dominated by agreement to strong agreement responses	Increased
Understanding of collaboration as a pathway toward partnerships	Neutral and fragmented	More structured and positive	Increased
Understanding of the role of digitalization in networking and partnerships	Partially understood	Largely understood at a conceptual level	Increased

Confidence in applying networking strategies	Low to moderate	High	Increased
Commitment to undertaking collaborative actions in the short term	Unclear	Emerging	Increased

Micro-business Actors' Initial Understanding of Networking and Partnership

Referring to Table 1, the pre-test results indicate that prior to the incubator intervention, micro-business actors' conceptual understanding of networking and partnership was relatively limited and predominantly characterized by neutral to uncertain orientations. Many respondents had not yet developed a clear conceptual distinction between informal collaboration and structured partnerships, nor a coherent understanding of the strategic steps required to build sustainable business networks. This condition reflects a limited level of conceptual preparedness rather than the absence of collaborative interest.

Nevertheless, most micro-business actors expressed positive beliefs regarding the potential of collaboration and partnerships to enhance business competitiveness. This finding points to a noticeable gap between favorable collaborative attitudes and a more structured understanding of networking and partnership mechanisms. Similar patterns have been reported in prior studies, indicating that micro-businesses often demonstrate normative support for collaboration while lacking sufficient conceptual and strategic literacy to implement it effectively (Bataineh et al., 2024; Farrukh & Sajjad, 2024).

Incubator Interventions Improve Micro-business Actors' Conceptual Understanding

As shown in Table 1, the post-test results reveal a consistent improvement in conceptual understanding following participation in the incubator program. Micro-business actors demonstrated a clearer understanding of the importance of networking, the role of collaboration as a transitional pathway toward partnerships, and the relevance of digitalization in supporting business network development. The dominant response tendencies shifted toward more structured and positive orientations, indicating an enhanced level of collaborative readiness.

These findings suggest that the incubator intervention functioned as an effective learning environment for strengthening conceptual literacy rather than immediately producing formal partnerships. This interpretation aligns with existing literature that conceptualizes networking and partnership as learned capabilities developed through structured learning processes and cross-actor interactions, rather than as outcomes solely driven by business size or accumulated experience (Baranova, 2022; Calza et al., 2021). In this context, MSME incubators play a critical role in shaping micro-business actors' mindsets to view business relationships as strategic assets for future development.

Changes in Attitudes and Collaborative Intentions after Intervention

In addition to increased understanding, the results of the study also showed positive changes in the attitudes and collaborative intentions of micro-business actors. The majority of respondents expressed greater confidence in implementing networking strategies and began to identify potential business partners. Commitment to taking collaborative steps in the short term also emerged dominantly, although it was still in its early stages and unstructured.

Respondents' reflections showed that collaboration was perceived as a means to open up market opportunities and improve business quality. However, the action plans formulated were generally still general in nature and did not yet lead to the formation of formal partnerships. This condition indicates that the changes that have occurred are still at the level of cognitive and intentional readiness. Entrepreneurship literature emphasizes that attitudes and intentions are important prerequisites before collaborative behavior can be realized, especially in micro and small businesses (Mishra et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2024).

Barriers to Converting Collaboration Readiness into Partnership

Table 2. Key Barriers to Implementing Networking and Partnerships among Micro-Businesses

Type of Barrier	Pattern of Occurrence	Analytical Meaning
Limited business capital	Dominant	Structural barrier
Limited digital literacy	Frequently observed	Capability-related barrier
Limited access to and clarity of potential partners	Moderately observed	Network-related barrier
Limited time and operational capacity	Moderately observed	Operational barrier

Referring to Table 2, despite the observed improvement in collaborative understanding and intentions, micro-businesses continue to face multiple barriers in translating collaborative readiness into actual networking and partnership practices. Limited business capital emerged as the most dominant barrier, indicating that structural constraints remain a primary challenge in sustaining collaborative initiatives. In addition, limited digital literacy was frequently reported, suggesting that capability-related barriers still restrict the effective use of digital tools for networking and partnership development.

Beyond structural and capability constraints, network-related and operational barriers were also evident. Several micro-business actors reported difficulties in identifying and accessing suitable partners, as well as uncertainty regarding potential collaboration mechanisms. Moreover, limited time availability and operational capacity were commonly mentioned, reflecting the practical constraints faced by micro-businesses in balancing daily operations with collaborative activities. These findings indicate that collaborative readiness is shaped not only by individual motivation and understanding but also by broader structural, network, and operational conditions.

This pattern is consistent with prior studies showing that micro-businesses often struggle to convert collaborative readiness into formal partnerships due to resource constraints, imbalanced power relations, and regulatory complexity (Bourlès & Cozarenco, 2018; Hagqvist et al., 2021). In this context, the role of facilitators such as business incubators, cooperatives, and local governments becomes critical in bridging capacity gaps and guiding collaborative readiness toward more structured and institutionalized partnership practices.

Collaborative Readiness as a Transitional Phase for Micro-businesses

Overall, the results and discussion show that micro-business actors experienced an increase in readiness to build networking, partnerships, and collaboration after receiving learning interventions through MSME incubator programs. This readiness is reflected in increased conceptual understanding, positive attitude changes, and the emergence of intentions to take collaborative action. However, this readiness is still in a transitional phase and has not been fully converted into formal partnership practices due to structural barriers.

These findings confirm that the main challenge of micro-business collaboration does not lie in the resistance of business actors, but in the transition process from cognitive and intentional readiness to the implementation of sustainable partnerships. By placing readiness as a crucial phase, this study reinforces the argument that learning-based interventions, strategic communication, and structured mentoring are important prerequisites in developing an adaptive, collaborative, and sustainability-oriented micro-business ecosystem (Civera et al., 2025; Tseng et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that micro-businesses show increased readiness to build networking, partnerships, and collaborations after receiving learning interventions through MSME incubator

programs. This increased readiness is reflected in a stronger conceptual understanding of the importance of networking, the role of collaboration as a transitional stage towards partnership, and the function of digitalization in building and expanding business relationships. This change in understanding was followed by a shift towards a more positive collaborative attitude and intention, as demonstrated by the increased confidence of micro-businesses in implementing networking strategies and the emergence of an initial commitment to take collaborative steps in the short term.

However, this study also shows that this cognitive and intentional readiness has not been fully converted into the practice of sustainable formal partnerships. Micro-business actors still face significant structural barriers, particularly limitations in business capital, operational capacity, and digital literacy, which limit their ability to realize structured partnerships. These findings confirm that the main challenge for micro-business collaboration does not lie in the resistance of business actors, but rather in the transition process from readiness to the implementation of institutionalized partnerships.

Overall, this study positions collaboration readiness as a crucial transitional phase in micro-business development. Learning-based interventions through incubator programs have proven to play an important role in shaping the mindset, strategic orientation, and collaborative readiness of micro-business actors. Therefore, strengthening incubator designs that integrate collaborative learning, strategic communication, and ongoing mentoring is important so that the readiness that is formed can develop into concrete, sustainable partnerships that have a real impact on micro-business development.

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