



Building Integration Through
Entrepreneurship

DOING BUSINESS AS AFRICAN ENTREPRENEURS

Results from the BITE research among
African entrepreneurs in Europe and BITE participants



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Fondazione ISMU (www.ismu.org) is an independent research centre founded in 1991 and committed to conducting research as well as providing consultancy, training and education in the area of migration and integration. To develop a better understanding of these phenomena, it provides its expertise to research projects on all aspects of migrations in contemporary society. It works with national, European and international organizations and institutions both in the private and the public sectors. It is active in academic networks, cooperates with welfare and healthcare agencies, and collaborates with libraries and documentation centers in Italy and beyond.

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Introduction

The **BITE project** (Building Integration Through Entrepreneurship) is an EU-funded project that fosters the integration of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa by unlocking their entrepreneurial potential. Between 2018 and 2020 the project has selected 100 migrants between Italy, Sweden and Greece in order to train them and mentor them on how to start their own business in Europe and in their country of origin.

Dissemination is a core component of BITE and aims to make the project results available to different groups of stakeholders. With that in mind, partners developed a **handbook** that collects all the different components of the “BITE approach” and outlines the factors that could facilitate or hinder the impact of projects and programmes addressing migrant entrepreneurship.

The [BITE Handbook](#) results from a **six-month research** conducted in 2020 by Fondazione ISMU where the project was broken down into its components, analysed and reassembled as a model. Building on a desk research and a round of interviews with project partners as well as external stakeholders, Fondazione ISMU reviewed the BITE project along four dimensions representing key steps of the projects: outreach and selection of migrant participants; building entrepreneurial skills and shaping business projects; mentoring and financial inclusion; communication, dissemination and transfer.

The handbook is addressed to **two different groups of stakeholders** under specific objectives. On the one hand, it provides guidance to civil society organisations on how to design and implement effective projects with limited resources. On the other hand, it guides local authorities in delivering need-based and effective policies, programmes and funding schemes that can work as a framework for other public and non-public stakeholders.

In order to increase the relevance and empirical robustness of the BITE Handbook, Fondazione ISMU has designed and implemented a **second round of research in 2021** that aimed at collecting **data on entrepreneurship directly from entrepreneurs with an African background**. This type of research included a European-wide questionnaire that explored topics such as transnational entrepreneurship and access to finance (unfortunately yielding disappointing results) and a focus group with selected BITE entrepreneurs who could assess key aspects of the BITE project. This paper takes stock of the results of this research with the

aim of contributing to the state-of-art of migrant entrepreneurship and inform future programmes and projects.

Summary of the tools featured in the BITE Handbook

Outreach and selection of participants

BITE structured outreach and selection in two distinct workflows. On the one hand, it developed a **multimedia call for participants** that included a one-pager featuring relevant information on the project and the selection procedure, a series of videos showing role models in the field of migrant entrepreneurship, a series of info sessions and round of social media posts. On the other hand, it ran a **round of selection and skill assessment** that included remote screening of applications, qualitative assessment of applications (e.g. interviews) based on indicators on entrepreneurial skills, a series of skill assessment reports for candidates and a mapping report on the entrepreneurial skills of migrants.

Training

The BITE project adopted a fourfold approach to building entrepreneurial skills and shaping business models through the following sequential modules:

Module 1: How to Do Business in the EU. It aimed at helping participants familiarise with the main traits and distinctive features of the business culture and standards in European Union. Classes were mainly culture-based (i.e. aimed at developing the right mindset to be an entrepreneur in Europe) but also dealt with technical issues, providing an overview on administrative requirements, quality standards, payments to suppliers, taxes, customer care and family participation.

Module 2: Enhancing business skills. It allowed to present, debate and strengthen the core-skills that entrepreneurs should acquire and mobilise to launch a business. Skills developed related to leadership, negotiations and marketing. Classes dealt with issues such as leading people, business communication, sales management, and negotiation.

Module 3: Building sustainable business models. It helped participants familiarise with tools that are useful to designing sustainable businesses and refining their business ideas, e.g. through Business Model Canvas (BMC), on the fundamentals of businesses: value proposition, customer segmentation, customer relations, channels, key-activities, revenues and costs, break-even analysis, and social impact.

Module 4: Supporting initial business start-up. It focused on key financial issues that are relevant for starting up a business in a full and informed manner. As such, it aimed at helping participants register a business and define its financial needs. By the end of this module participants could identify the most suitable funding sources and could adapt and improve their financial strategies over time.

Mentoring

The BITE project structured mentoring mainly in a **1-to-1 format** to best address entrepreneurs' specific needs and expectations, while a number of meetings took place in **small groups or large groups** through workshops and interactive lectures. Mentorship was implemented through a twofold approach: **an analytical part** aiming at reviewing and examining data, figures, and information on the business to start up, and **a relational part** involving meetings, thematic visits, appointments, and mentor shadowing.

Mentoring focused on **business plan, accountancy, communication, access to credit, and general management** involving different professionals. Meetings focused, among other things, on setting up and organising the credit dossier with the relevant information for potential investors as well as the economic and financial/business plan, analysing the documentation and meeting with mentors, collecting missing information, and meeting with financial institutions or representatives of funding programmes.

Part 1 – Doing business according to African entrepreneurs

Results of the European-wide questionnaire

Methodology

In order to explore entrepreneurship among African entrepreneurs in Europe, Fondazione ISMU designed an online questionnaire in English, French and Italian using Google form. Questions related to socio-demographic aspects of respondents, the profile of their business, their habits in terms of past and ongoing training and networking, issues encountered, past and future financing, and the relation with countries of heritage.

The term “African entrepreneurs” indicates people having a country of heritage located in Sub-Saharan Africa and currently living in the EU27 plus the UK. As a result, the questionnaire was addressed to first- and second-generation migrants, people with one or two migrant parents and people identifying as having an African background.

The questionnaire was disseminated through partners’ and key stakeholders’ networks as well as on social media. It remained open between January and April 2021 and collected six responses (6) overall. The extremely low number of completed questionnaires makes the results obtained almost completely irrelevant from a statistical point of view and poorly informative. This is also due to the survey having been originally designed to take into account a sample size of at least 100 units. Notwithstanding these methodological limitations, it was decided to report the details of the answers received for narrative purposes.

Repondents’ features

The group of respondents is structured as follows:

- Sex: 4 women and 2 men
- Age: 2 entrepreneurs more than 50 years old, 1 entrepreneur between 40 and 50 years old, 2 entrepreneurs between 30 and 40 years old, 1 entrepreneur under 30
- Country of heritage: Democratic Republic of Congo (2), Cameroon (1), Eritrea (1), Senegal (1), Somalia (1)
- Current country of residence: France (3), Italy (1) and Greece (1)

- Year of arrival in the country of residence: 1990s (3), between 2000 and 2014 (1), after 2014 (2)
- Nationality of country of residence: with nationality (3), without nationality (3)

Profile of businesses

All businesses operated in the tertiary sector (commerce, tourism, sport, education, services, transport) except for one operating in the quaternary sector (technology and information, research and innovation). Two thirds were established between 2019 and 2021, have companies/professionals in the European country of residence as main suppliers and cater to citizens living in entrepreneurs' country of origin.

Ongoing training and networking

All but one entrepreneur **have already attended trainings on entrepreneurship in Europe**, namely organised by public authorities at national level, public authorities at local level, private stakeholders, academic institutions, and NGOs (each mentioned by one respondent respectively). Half of them **have attended refresher professional trainings** at least once in the last three years. One third of respondents **are part of an organization bringing together citizens of the same country of heritage**, while only one in six is part of an association/network of entrepreneurs.

Issues encountered

Access to funding is the main issue experienced by two thirds of entrepreneurs, followed by getting certifications and permits (one in three respondents) and the definition of a business plan (one in six respondents). Only one in three entrepreneurs applied for support through calls and tenders on entrepreneurial activities, mainly provided by NGOs and local authorities. However, none of them was able to obtain the funding/support proposed.

Financing

Financing for the start-up came mainly from personal savings (two thirds of respondents), followed by family loans/grants and bank loans (one in six respondents respectively). If entrepreneurs needed a loan to develop their business in the future, half of them **would turn to banks or to national/local public authorities**, one third would ask family members and only one in five would ask friends. In addition, one in two **respondents think they would get a loan with difficulty**, while one in six thinks he/she would not get it at all.

Relation with country of heritage

Half of respondents' businesses **mainly involved the country of heritage** by offering traditional products/services or by locating part of the activities in that country.

All but one respondent **plan to return permanently in their country of heritage in the future**. However, one in three would like to set up activities in both the country of heritage and the European country where they currently live. In case they do not return permanently, all entrepreneurs plan to start a business – or expand the current one – that involves their country of heritage in some way.

Most of entrepreneurs maintain strong ties with their country of heritage: two thirds have family members living there and all but one respondent are very interested in the social and political events of the country. For the most part, **they have sent less than 500€ “back home” in the last year**, with half of them **estimating that in the next year the amount of money sent will decrease**. Beyond your family members, all but one entrepreneur maintain a relationship with other people from their country of origin through phone calls, Whatsapp messages and other tools.

Finally, all but one respondent **took part in initiatives** - such as projects, fundraising, aid of various kinds - **aimed at supporting the development of their country of heritage**, all of which were promoted by organizations of fellow nationals.

Part 2 – Assessment of the BITE project among BITE entrepreneurs

Results of the focus group

Methodology

In order to integrate the BITE Handbook, Fondazione ISMU organised a focus group with the support of the other Italian partners. The focus group gathered five BITE entrepreneurs who participated in the project in the two venues, Milan and Padua. The table below sums up the socio-demographic data of the focus group participants.

Country of heritage	Sex	BITE venue	Age range	Business sector
Cameroon	W	Padua	40-50	Tertiary
RDC	M	Milan	60-70	Tertiary
Kenya	W	Milan	50-60	Tertiary
Senegal	M	Padua	30-40	Primary
Cameroon	M	Padua	40-50	Tertiary

Table 1 – Profile of focus group participants

Evaluation: outreach and selection

The focus group confirmed that **the outreach strategy should be holistic**, making use of different channels and tools - both online and in-person ones. **Social media and messaging platforms** – especially Facebook and Whatsapp - have surely played a critical role in disseminating information quickly within migrants' networks, but so have **partners' and migrants' networks**.

Some migrants, for instance, have learnt about the BITE project through **someone who was working for partners as project officer**, trainer or mentor, which confirms that partners and business experts can bring much to the table in terms of outreach and that their networks can greatly influence the success of the project from beginning to end. In some cases, early contacts were made as part of other trainings on business development and financial inclusion.

The approach to outreach and selection championed in BITE allowed for the **use of spontaneous applications**. The good number of applications received raise the question of **what factors have persuaded prospective entrepreneurs to apply** in the first place, considering the abundance of trainings and programmes on entrepreneurship that migrants have been offered in the past years.

The **narrative conveyed by BITE** in the outreach campaign was particularly convincing among potential candidates: training entrepreneurs from the African diaspora – especially the Sub-Saharan African diaspora – and assist them in launching or scaling up their business also in a transnational perspective. Many participants said **they strongly identified with this narrative**:

“On Facebook I saw the call for participants for people from Sub-saharan Africa who wanted to do business, not only here in Italy but also in relation to Africa...I related to that call” – Man, Senegalese

Another convincing factor was **BITE’s holistic, continuous and highly individualized training and mentoring**. Some participants said many of the trainings in which they had participated were fragmented and failed to consistently follow migrant trainees throughout the programme, especially in terms of mentoring.

The **composition of the partnership** played a key role in convincing candidates. More specifically, having a **local authority** like the Municipality of Milan and the **direct funding of the European Union** – whose logos were featured in all project communication, including the call for participants - gave BITE more credibility within the migrant community.

However, participants said that compared to programmes run by more mainstream stakeholders they did not know most of the BITE partners – other than the ones that facilitated early contacts – which can undermine proper outreach. For this reason, some BITE entrepreneurs recommended that **partners invest in marketing to make themselves known within migrant communities** before setting up initiatives and programmes.

All these pull factors were strong enough to **reduce the issue of geographical distance**. Although BITE offered training and mentoring sessions in Milan and Padua (respectively in the Lombardy and Veneto region), some selected entrepreneurs decided to commute from neighbouring regions, like Emilia Romagna, by train. Participants confirmed that, considering the high quality of the project, many fellow nationals would be willing to commute too should a new cycle of training and mentoring be organised.

The focus group clearly highlighted that **BITE entrepreneurs are ready and eager to act as multipliers in raising awareness on future programmes**. Participants reported a general **strong interest for entrepreneurship and self-employment** within their communities but also a lack of business skills and access to funding. Some also highlighted an underrepresentation of their migrant community among the selected candidates of BITE and would like the added value of business training and mentoring to be fully acknowledged.

“There are many migrants who have a strong will to do [something] but lack knowledge and funding. It hurt me to leave the city [where I live] to Milan and realise there were very few Congolese. It would be nice to shake the system so that people truly realise the importance and pay-off of mentoring people” – Man, Congolese

As for selection, participants said they appreciated the **use of supporting attachments**, such as the one on business idea, required under the call for participants as they allowed them **to organise their ideas ahead**, even for applicants who presented a business that was already running. They also appreciated the **assessment sheets provided at the end of selection**. Even in cases where the assessment was considerably low, participants could take stock of the critics provided on strengths and weaknesses and could work on them organically throughout training and mentoring.

Evaluation: training and mentoring

Generally speaking, participants said the BITE project provided them with **critical knowledge and competences to become entrepreneurs in Italy and worldwide**. The project has enabled them to clarify their business ideas by **offering a clear, coherent and sequential vision of entrepreneurship** and the main steps involved as well as by providing proper tools. All entrepreneurs had to do was apply this vision and these tools, also thanks to the coherence between the training and the mentoring phase:

“[BITE is] a nice project that showed me the way and offered me some tools that I used and were truly useful. I just had to make use of these tools” – Man, Senegalese

Applicability of tools and skills was deemed a key feature to positively assess the BITE project, especially considering there is an abundance of similar projects and programmes offered across Europe:

“There are no schools that are not worthy, there are just students who need to take what they are given and apply it to reality. People who studied in the Soviet Union – like many Congolese – may be just like people who studied in France. It all depends on what they make out of the knowledge and skills that are made available” – Man, Congolese

The **holistic approach of the BITE project** was particularly appreciated, namely the blend of communication, administrative, accounting and legal aspects addressed during training and mentoring by professionals in a highly personalized way. This approach enabled entrepreneurs to **work on the whole spectrum of their business ideas**, identifying criticalities and weaknesses and exploring specific and effective solutions.

“I could work on all the aspects of my project. (...) Today I know how to manage everything, from service programming to service provision” – Woman, Cameroonian

The tools provided during business training and mentoring **created a true mindset that remains within entrepreneurs** even beyond the project and spills over into other aspects of life. This becomes clear when looking at entrepreneurs who already had a business before participating in BITE:

“Of course, money is fundamental, but if you don’t have the right skills and training for narrowing down your work...it’s like being at square one” – Man, Senegalese

“It is true, I was an entrepreneur [before starting BITE] as I already had a restaurant in Bologna, but learning all the steps [through the training] helped me improve. I also understood what mistakes I used to make before! (...) With the tools I acquired through the training I now approach my business differently. Before [BITE] I used to come up with random prices for my catering services, but now I think more on how I offer these services” – Woman, Cameroonian

Working comprehensively and consistently on all aspects of their business **allowed entrepreneurs to focus**, which is something some of them struggled to do. Participants said their consistent commitment to their business is way for “paying the debt” vis-à-vis the project and its partners, knowing entrepreneurship is not a linear process.

“As a person I tend to struggle staying focused, I start tons of things but then abandon them or leave them aside, but with [the BITE project] I continue working and focusing on my business because I feel as if I had a debt with someone” – Woman, Kenyan

The idea of consistently and continuously get back on one's business idea shows a **strong feeling of empowerment** that people acquired through the project and for which are grateful. In this perspective, the **support provided** from outreach to mentoring through training was highly appreciated:

“In many of the business trainings I took part in I never had anyone pushing me, giving me confidence...I always felt as if I were left by myself, so I have never thought I could move forward. But with you, you gave me some food for thought and helped me believe in myself...believe that I could truly achieve something. Because I lack that self-confidence...and I eventually got it from you” – Woman, Kenyan

Beyond the soft skills and sense of empowerment developed during the training and the mentoring, the BITE project enabled entrepreneurs to **acquire more credibility vis-à-vis potential investors and other stakeholders** who are key for setting up and sustaining businesses. Entrepreneurs, including those who already had a business before joining BITE, thought the **business plan** was very important for introducing themselves anywhere:

“Wherever I go, if I bring along my business plan I gain more credibility...people take me more seriously because they can see data and figures. This is something I did not have before and that now I see is very useful – fundamental I would say – because wherever I go I have to show the project in all its small details” – Man, Senegalese

Finally, **the role of trainers and mentors was acknowledged and appreciated**. During training, the **personality** and **patience** of trainers allowed to address complex but fundamental topics in a functional and pleasant way, also by adopting situational techniques and practical case studies. As for mentors, their **continuous and flexible availability** was appreciated, from interactions in small groups to individual meetings and ongoing exchanges via email or other messaging tools. In both phases of the project, participants appreciated the **empathy and the ability to fully understand the background as well as the learning and entrepreneurial needs of each entrepreneur**, listening to their respective strengths and weaknesses.

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