



Entrepreneurial Support and Its Impact on SME Performance: case of entrepreneurs supported by the Sfax-Innovation 2 Business incubator

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Received: April, 2025, Published: June, 2025

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Business incubators; entrepreneurial support; financial resources; SME performance; Support network

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Cite: Mourad Souissi. (2025).

Entrepreneurial Support and Its Impact on SME Performance: case of entrepreneurs supported by the Sfax-Innovation 2 Business incubator. *Int. Journal of Management and Data Analytics*, 5 (1), 149-160.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15514415>

ABSTRACT

Against a backdrop of economic globalization and constant change in the business environment, Tunisian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face a number of challenges, both structural and cyclical. Faced with increased competition, growing competitiveness requirements and limited resources, these companies need to rely on effective support mechanisms to ensure their development and sustainability. This article looks at the impact of entrepreneurial support on the performance of Tunisian SMEs, based on a qualitative study of eighteen entrepreneurs supported by the "Sfax-Innovation 2" business incubator. The aim is to examine the extent to which support schemes help to strengthen the ability of SMEs to improve their economic, organizational and strategic performance. The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews reveals two essential levers of this support: integration into support networks, on the one hand, and facilitating access to financial resources, on the other. These two dimensions appear to be decisive factors in structuring entrepreneurial projects, expanding business opportunities, professionalizing approaches and mobilizing appropriate financing. The results confirm that entrepreneurial support is a strategic lever, contributing to the development of project leaders' skills and the sustainability of their businesses. Drawing on this empirical data, this study enriches the debate on the role of support structures in developing countries, while proposing operational recommendations for public decision-makers, support institutions and economic development players.

1. INTRODUCTION

The boom in initiatives to promote entrepreneurship and the diversity of support systems in Tunisia play a key role in the sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The transition from a centralized economy to an entrepreneurial dynamic based on innovation reflects the growing interest in entrepreneurial support, as highlighted by several research studies (Messeghem, and al., 2013; Lemaire, and al., 2025). Since Schumpeter's seminal work (1929), which saw entrepreneurship as enabling the emergence of new economic opportunities, this transformation has accelerated with the rise of the start-up culture, making entrepreneurship a strategic lever for Tunisian economic development (Messeghem, and al., 2020).

Entrepreneurial coaching, defined by Schmitt and al. (2015) as assistance with the creation and development of businesses, aims to provide entrepreneurs with a secure framework for acquiring the skills they need to make their projects a success. It plays a decisive role in facilitating access to resources, stimulating the innovation process and reducing the entrepreneurial failure rate (Fongang, 2023). In Tunisia, the structuring of a veritable support "industry"

has resulted in the emergence of numerous players, whether incubators, accelerators, business incubators or even public structures such as the Agency for the Promotion of Industry and Innovation (APII) and the Bank for the Financing of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (BFPME). This proliferation illustrates the progressive recognition of support as a key element of entrepreneurial success (Cloutier, and al., 2014).

However, while Degeorge (2017) highlights the lack of consensus on the precise characteristics of coaching that influence business success, the central question of the effectiveness of coaching arrangements remains crucial (TOGOLA, and al., 2025). With this in mind, Maus and Sammut (2017) stress the need to adapt these structures to the specific characteristics of entrepreneurs. Indeed, entrepreneurial literature highlights, on the one hand, the diversity of support systems and, on the other, the evolving nature of the entrepreneurial process (Fayolle and Linan, 2015), still under construction and subject to continuous improvement (Théodoraki and Messeghem, 2015).

Beyond the consolidation of the local economic fabric, a recurring question concerns the measurement of the impact of support schemes on the performance of Tunisian SMEs. Although several studies have explored the links

between support and performance (Catanzaro and al., 2016; Biwolé, 2019), accurately assessing the performance of support structures remains a methodological challenge (Paturel and Maalel, 2016). Yet this issue remains topical, particularly in light of recent research (Jaouen, 2022; Hentic-Giliberto and Berger-Douce, 2017). While there is a great deal of research on entrepreneurial support in developed economies, it is striking that in Tunisia, work on this subject is still limited, despite the fact that the failure rate of SMEs there is a cause for concern. Indeed, some estimates suggest that around 66.67% of Tunisian SMEs do not survive beyond their first few years of existence (INS, 2023).

At a time when Tunisian public policies are stepping up their efforts to improve the entrepreneurial environment and promote a culture of support, it is becoming imperative to evaluate these schemes in terms of their real impact on SME performance. The aim is to optimize their effectiveness and ensure a better match between the support on offer and the needs of entrepreneurs. The central issue of this article can therefore be formulated as follows: What is the impact of entrepreneurial support on the performance of Tunisian SMEs in a global context? To answer this question, our paper is divided into three main parts: the first part presents the theoretical and conceptual framework, highlighting the role of entrepreneurial coaching in improving the performance of Tunisian SMEs; the second part outlines the methodological framework of the study; finally, the last part analyzes and discusses the results obtained.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The notion of entrepreneurial support*

Entrepreneurial support is a fundamental lever for the development and sustainability of SMEs, particularly in environments where structural challenges and limited access to resources can hamper entrepreneurial initiative. Messeghem and al, (2013) describe entrepreneurial coaching as a multidimensional concept, highlighting its complexity and multiple facets. According to Pluchart (2013), it is an evolving process that relies on interactions and mediations, inscribed within a temporal and spatial framework, to provide entrepreneurs with material resources and knowledge essential to the creation and development of their business. With this in mind, Messeghem and al (2020) emphasize that coaching plays a crucial role in structuring the entrepreneurial journey, providing entrepreneurs with a framework that fosters their legitimacy and notoriety within the economic ecosystem.

Entrepreneurial coaching is more than just technical or financial support. It contributes to strengthening the social capital of entrepreneurs, enabling them to expand their professional network, improve their cognitive skills and gain easier access to the strategic resources needed to grow their business (Bakkali and al., 2010). Dokou (2018)

highlights an even deeper dimension, presenting coaching as a process of knowledge co-construction, where the exchange of experiences and creativity foster entrepreneurial innovation. This approach is particularly relevant in transition economies, where entrepreneurs must constantly adapt their practices to a changing environment.

Bayad and al., (2010) identify three major dimensions of entrepreneurial support. The structural dimension highlights how the organization of support systems facilitates access to information on business opportunities, thereby reducing entrepreneurial uncertainty. The relational dimension focuses on how the quality of social interactions enables entrepreneurs to identify and mobilize strategic partners. Finally, the cognitive dimension plays an essential role in the acquisition and sharing of knowledge, creating a common vision that fosters cohesion and entrepreneurial success.

In a complementary approach, Cullière (2005) describes mentoring as a helping relationship in which the mentor transmits to the mentored the skills and knowledge essential to running the business. This transfer of knowledge proves to be Their results confirm that mentoring is a decisive lever for entrepreneurial performance, boosting entrepreneurial confidence and effective management. Furthermore, Nakara and Fayolle (2012) stress the importance of an approach that incorporates a moral and psychological dimension, which plays a key role in entrepreneurs' resilience in the face of market challenges.

Although some research (Bakkali and al., 2010) points to a trend towards standardization in support practices, the diversity of support structures and models remains a major asset. This variety makes it possible to adapt support to the specific characteristics of entrepreneurs and to the particularities of the economic and institutional context. With this in mind, SMEs need to take ownership of these systems and better understand the issues involved in this dynamic, in order to optimize their performance and capacity for innovation in an ever-changing competitive environment.

B. *Performance in SMEs*

The notion of performance is of vital importance in the analysis of entrepreneurial dynamics, particularly in the Tunisian context where SMEs play a key role in economic development. In management science, performance is a polysemous concept, influenced by the different perspectives of stakeholders (Mahamat and al., 2025). According to Bourguignon (1996), it can be understood in three main dimensions: performance-success, which is based on a subjective evaluation of success; performance-result, which is based on an assessment of the results obtained; and performance-action, which refers to the application of available skills. In an economic context

marked by strong competition, Issor (2017) considers performance to be the level of achievement of results as a function of the resources committed, while Diao (2022) stresses the importance of companies' ability to adapt to market constraints.

The analysis of SME performance must therefore take into account its multidimensional nature. Lamb and al (2022) see it as the result of a synergy between the strategic decisions of managers and the results obtained. In this vein, Kalika (1988) stresses the importance of organizational structures in measuring performance, while Bessire (1999) proposes a tripartite approach distinguishing between operational (short-term), strategic (long-term) and competitive (results influenced by the intensity of market rivalry) performance. Similarly, organizational performance, which focuses on the efficiency of management structures, is essential to the sustainability of SMEs, particularly in an unstable economic context such as Tunisia's.

Tagne and al (2025) propose a performance analysis grid based on four key principles. Effectiveness, which assesses the achievement of objectives; efficiency, which relates the results obtained to the resources used; coherence, which measures the harmony of strategic decisions; and relevance, which assesses the adequacy of objectives and resources to the constraints of the environment. Pigé (2015) also highlights the idea of performance as an imperative for continuous improvement, a logic that is particularly relevant for companies seeking to innovate in a competitive environment.

In the light of these elements, Soane (2025) describes performance as a "catch-all" because of its multiple meanings (economic, financial, social, environmental, competitive, etc.). For the purposes of this article, performance has been adopted as part of a global approach, in line with the work of Ferry and Jacquet (2025). The global approach encompasses economic, social and organizational dimensions, integrating both financial and non-financial indicators. This choice is justified by the fact that such performance takes into account the expectations of all the company's stakeholders. A key question then emerges: to what extent does entrepreneurial coaching contribute to improving the overall performance of SMEs?

C. Entrepreneurial support as a lever for SME performance

Entrepreneurial coaching, defined by Petri and al., (2025) as a practice that supports business creation and development, aims to secure entrepreneurs' careers by offering them a framework conducive to the acquisition of essential skills. Numerous empirical studies demonstrate that this coaching relationship plays a key role in business performance and enables entrepreneurs, whether in the

start-up or takeover phase, to increase their chances of success (Philippart, 2017; Gómez-Jorge and al., 2025). For example, St-Jean and Jacquemin (2012) highlighted the effect of mentoring on reducing entrepreneurial doubt by analyzing a sample of 362 mentored entrepreneurs from the Fondation de l'entrepreneuriat's business mentoring network in Quebec. Their results confirm that mentoring is a decisive lever for entrepreneurial performance by boosting entrepreneurs' confidence. For their part, Nakara and Fayolle (2012) used a qualitative approach based on life stories to examine the match between mentoring arrangements and entrepreneurs' expectations. Their work underlines the central role of family networks in removing obstacles to entrepreneurship, as well as the importance of the relationship of trust between coaches and entrepreneurs in psychologically vulnerable situations. Schmitt and al (2015) point out that entrepreneurship is intrinsically risky and that entrepreneurial success depends, among other things, on support for human capital development. In this perspective, Pluchart (2013), through an analysis of the trajectories of 37 MSE projects supported in the Île-de-France region, shows that the resources mobilized by support networks influence company sustainability. Her study highlights the evolving structure of networks: dense at launch, they contract and stabilize thereafter, notably due to the late recourse to support by some entrepreneurs. What's more, collective start-ups involving several partners benefit from more extensive networks than individual initiatives, an observation that is partly in line with the work of Grossetti and Barthe (2010). The latter emphasize that the support of influential people facilitates access to financing and thus increases the probability of entrepreneurial success. More generally, support is recognized as a factor in boosting business performance and sustainability. With this in mind, Bayad and al (2010) studied the effect of financial capital on the success of SMEs within the Club des Dirigeants Artisans de Lorraine and concluded that access to financial resources increases productivity and improves the chances of business survival. This approach ties in with the vision of Messeghem and al (2013), who see entrepreneurial support as a constantly evolving industry, constantly seeking to optimize its practices.

D. Dynamic resources and capabilities theory & Social capital theory

Entrepreneurial support plays a decisive role in SME performance, providing access to strategic resources and fostering the development of key skills. To analyze this impact, we draw on two complementary theoretical frameworks: the theory of dynamic resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991; Teece and al., 1997) and the theory of social capital (Bourdieu, 1980; Coleman, 1988).

1. The theory of dynamic resources and capabilities: A lever for SME performance

Barney's (1991) resource-based view (RBV) and its extension, the dynamic capabilities theory (Teece et al., 1997), offer a relevant analytical grid for understanding how SMEs benefit from entrepreneurial coaching. According to RBV, companies that develop internal resources that are rare, valuable, and difficult to imitate can gain a sustainable competitive advantage. In this context, coaching schemes provide SMEs with access to essential resources, such as mentoring, training, access to financial capital, and strategic support, which enhance their competitiveness. Dynamic capabilities theory goes further, explaining that the mere possession of resources is not enough: companies must be able to transform and adapt them in response to changes in their environment. Entrepreneurial coaching plays a key role here, stimulating organizational learning and encouraging entrepreneurial innovativeness. Through strategic advice, training, and management support, SMEs develop dynamic capabilities that enable them to adapt to market changes, identify new opportunities, and improve their resilience in the face of crises.

However, the RBV has been criticized for its limited consideration of external and contextual factors, such as institutional constraints and social dynamics, which are particularly significant in emerging economies like Tunisia. In resource-constrained environments, internal capabilities alone may not fully explain performance outcomes.

2. Social capital theory: the importance of networks in entrepreneurial support

Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1980; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995) provides a necessary complement to the RBV by emphasizing the role of relational networks in enhancing SME performance. Entrepreneurial support is not limited to the provision of tangible resources; it also relies on integrating entrepreneurs into support networks, fostering knowledge sharing, access to business opportunities, and trust-building mechanisms. Research by Grossetti and Barthe (2010) underlines that the support of influential individuals within these networks facilitates access to financing and improves SMEs' market positioning. Similarly, Nakara and Fayolle (2012) show that trust-based relationships with mentors or experts help entrepreneurs overcome psychological and strategic barriers, promoting decision-making and innovation. Entrepreneurial coaching thus contributes to the development of structuring social capital, which serves as a lever for resilience and long-term sustainability. It provides entrepreneurs with access to relational resources such as mentoring, strategic partnerships, and institutional

support that are essential for business consolidation and growth.

3. Synthesis and articulation of the two theories

The integration of dynamic resource and capability theory and social capital theory provides a comprehensive view of the impact of entrepreneurial coaching on SME performance. On the one hand, RBV and dynamic capabilities theory explain how companies transform the strategic resources derived from coaching into sustainable competitive advantage. On the other, social capital theory highlights the role of coaching networks in providing access to opportunities and strengthening entrepreneurial capabilities.

Thus, this research aims to examine how the integration of SMEs into support networks influences their overall performance. This problematic translates into the following hypotheses:

- *H1: The integration of Tunisian SMEs into support networks has a positive impact on their performance.*
- *H2: The provision of financial resources strengthens the performance of the Tunisian SMEs supported.*

By combining these two theoretical approaches, we propose an analytical framework that provides a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms linking entrepreneurial support to SME performance, and identifies the key success factors favoring their competitiveness and sustainability.

3. METHODOLOGY

A. Conceptual research framework

The conceptual framework of this research is based on the theory of dynamic resources and capabilities, and the theory of social capital, enabling us to analyze the impact of entrepreneurial support on the performance of Tunisian SMEs. In our model, entrepreneurial support is understood through two main dimensions: the integration of SMEs into support networks and the provision of financial resources. On the one hand, integration into support networks provides entrepreneurs with access to strategic advice, mentoring and collaboration opportunities, helping to improve managerial skills and optimize internal processes. On the other hand, the provision of financial resources enables supported SMEs to overcome financing constraints, invest in innovation and ensure their sustainability. Thus, our conceptual model (Figure 1) aims to test the direct effect of entrepreneurial coaching and the impact of the provision of financial resources on the performance of Tunisian SMEs receiving coaching.

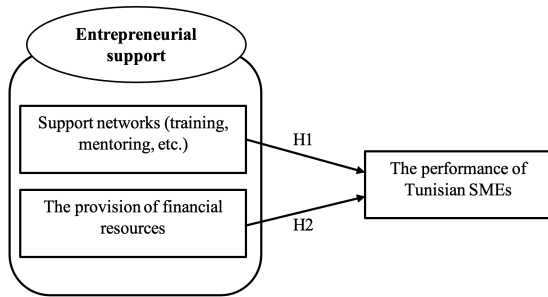


Fig. 1: Conceptual research model

B. Data collection

To answer our research question on the impact of entrepreneurial coaching on the performance of Tunisian SMEs, we chose an exploratory qualitative approach, which enables us to deal with complex phenomena. This method is particularly suited to understanding the interactions between the various factors influencing SME performance in a specific context, as Gavard-Perret and al., (2012) point out. Blumberg and al., (2014) confirm that the qualitative approach is ideal for exploring and shedding in-depth light on a given phenomenon.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eighteen entrepreneurs supported by the "Sfax-innovation 2" business incubator in Tunisia. As Zagre (2013) explains, this method provides rich qualitative information by offering entrepreneurs the opportunity to express their perceptions and experiences. We opted for a small, focused sample, in line with the recommendations of Igalens and Roussel (1998), who stress the importance of a small sample for in-depth exploration of the situations under study. Following the theoretical data saturation approach proposed by Hanko and al., (2021), we felt that a limited number of interviews was sufficient to achieve complete coverage of the themes studied.

The interview guide was structured around four main axes. The first explores the profile of entrepreneurs, focusing on their age, level of education and previous experience. The second focuses on entrepreneurs' perceptions of the benefits of entrepreneurial coaching. The third looks at the reasons why Tunisian SMEs seek support, and how this support is integrated into their development strategy. Finally, the fourth axis explores the role of entrepreneurial coaching for SME managers in their company's performance.

C. Interviews and data processing

As part of this research, we conducted interviews with entrepreneurs who had received support from the "Sfax-innovation 2" business incubator in Tunisia, using semi-structured interview guides. Interview duration varied between 50 and 70 minutes, in line with Gavard-Perret's (2012) recommendations for interviews lasting between 30 minutes and 2 hours. This data collection phase reached a saturation point after 18 interviews, when responses

began to repeat themselves. These interviews took place in January 2023 and were transcribed manually or recorded with the consent of the interviewees. To analyze the data collected, we used Nvivo v12 software, which offers in-depth, systematic analysis of the information.

D. Sample description

As part of this study, we conducted a survey of 18 entrepreneurs who had received support from the "Sfax-Innovation 2" business incubator in Tunisia, in order to explore the impact of entrepreneurial support on the performance of Tunisian SMEs.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics

Contractor description		Workforce	Percentage
Genre:	Men	14	77.8%
	Women	4	22.2%
	Total	18	100%
Age of respondent	Under 25	1	5.6%
	[25-35]	3	16.7%
	[35-45]	5	27.8%
	[45-55]	5	27.8%
	55 and over	4	22.1%
	Total	18	100%
Level of study	Primary	2	11.1%
	Secondary	6	33.3%
	University	10	55.6%
	Total	18	
Respondent's professional experience:	Less one year	1	5.6%
	[1-2]	14	77.7%
	2 years and over	3	16.7%
	Total	18	100%
Company description		Workforce	Percentage
Seniority	Less one year	12	66.7%
	[1-2]	4	22.2%
	2 years and over	2	11.1%
	Total	18	100%
Sector of activity	Industry	13	72.2%
	Services	5	27.8%
	Total	18	100%
Dominant forms accompaniment	Mentoring	1	5.6%
	Training	3	16.7%
	Help in finding financing	5	27.8%
	Networking	4	22.2%
	Partnerships	3	16.7%
	Sponsorship	2	11%
	Total	18	100%

This survey was followed by a descriptive analysis, which yielded the main results highlighted in table 1 above.

The distribution of respondents by gender reveals a significant male predominance, with 77.8% men (14 entrepreneurs) and only 22.2% women (4 entrepreneurs). The age of respondents varies, with a concentration in the 35–45 and 45–55 age brackets, each accounting for 27.8% of the sample. Additionally, 22.1% of participants are aged 55 and over, while only 5.6% are under 25. This gender imbalance highlights a structural disparity that persists within entrepreneurial ecosystems, often rooted in sociocultural norms and institutional biases that tend to favor male entrepreneurship. These factors can lead to differentiated access to resources, including financial support, mentoring opportunities, and professional networks. Female entrepreneurs may face additional obstacles related to social expectations, limited visibility in male-dominated sectors, or reduced credibility in the eyes of investors and support institutions. Such disparities emphasize the need to consider gender as a relevant variable in the analysis of entrepreneurial support mechanisms, particularly in the context of efforts to foster inclusive and equitable development.

In terms of level of education, the majority of entrepreneurs in the sample have a university degree, representing 55.6% of respondents, followed by those with a high school education (33.3%) and a small percentage with a primary school education (11.1%). In terms of professional experience, 77.7% of respondents have between 1 and 2 years' experience in the entrepreneurial field, while 16.7% have 2 years' experience or more, and only 5.6% of entrepreneurs have less than one year's experience.

The majority of companies surveyed are young, with 66.7% of respondents less than a year old, followed by 22.2% of companies between 1 and 2 years old, and 11.1% more than 2 years old. In terms of business sector, a large proportion of entrepreneurs (72.2%) operate in the industrial sector, while 27.8% are in the service sector. In terms of forms of support, most entrepreneurs benefit from help in finding financing (27.8%), followed by networking (22.2%) and mentoring (5.6%). Other forms of support, such as training and partnerships, are also present at respective rates of 16.7%, while sponsorship was mentioned by 11% of respondents.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Tunisian entrepreneurs' perception entrepreneurial support

During the exploratory phase of our study, a semantic analysis based on the frequency of words used in the interviews revealed that most of the entrepreneurs interviewed had, at some point in their career, been exposed to the notion of entrepreneurial support. Of the 18 interviews conducted, a large majority of participants

showed themselves to be familiar with the concept, and were able to propose a relatively coherent definition. This finding is partly explained by the respondents' high level of education: over half (55.6%) have a university degree. When we asked them what entrepreneurial support meant to them, several definitions emerged, reflecting a shared understanding of its role in supporting SME development.

The different definitions put forward by the entrepreneurs we interviewed converge around the same idea: entrepreneurial coaching is a strategic lever for boosting SME performance, which enables us to validate our hypothesis concerning the positive impact of integrating Tunisian SMEs into coaching networks on improving their performance. In fact, entrepreneurial support is perceived as :

- ❖ Interviewee 5: "A structured service, offered by specialized organizations or advisors, designed to support young companies in achieving their development objectives, by compensating for their lack of experience"
- ❖ Interviewee 9: "A transfer of knowledge and skills, mobilized to improve the company's efficiency, productivity and competitiveness in the marketplace". (Interviewee 9)
- ❖ Interviewee 12: "A set of concrete actions, framing the implementation of entrepreneurial projects, from planning to execution, in order to maximize the chances of success"
- ❖ Interviewee 3: "A capacity-building process that provides entrepreneurs with the knowledge, tools and resources they need to sustain their business"
- ❖ Interviewee 8: "Comprehensive, tailored support, enabling managers to overcome obstacles they couldn't face on their own, by facilitating decision-making and structuring their business"
- ❖ Interviewee 10: "Crucial start-up assistance, helping to secure the entrepreneurial journey and reduce the risk of failure, particularly in the critical phases of creation and growth"
- ❖ Interviewee 14: "Evolving support, in the form of one-off or ongoing services, aimed at both newly-established companies and those in difficulty, as well as project leaders in the maturation phase"

At the end of this first phase of analysis, it emerges that the notion of entrepreneurial accompaniment is still

marked by a certain diversity of interpretations and a lack of clearly established consensus. Although theoretical efforts are currently underway to structure this notion, notably through the work of Barès and al., (2017), the concept continues to elicit varied representations depending on the experiences, profiles and intervention contexts of the players involved. The definitions proposed by the entrepreneurs interviewed reveal a plurality of approaches, ranging from one-off support to comprehensive coaching, from the transmission of knowledge to broader, performance-oriented strategic support. This heterogeneity reflects both the richness of the concept and the specificities of Tunisian entrepreneurial realities.

B. The role of entrepreneurial support in the performance of Tunisian SMEs

The support of the "Sfax-Innovation 2" business incubator in Tunisia, enabled us to gain a better understanding of their motivations for seeking entrepreneurial support. An analysis of the responses, grouped by major thematic trends, reveals that for almost 70% of the entrepreneurs questioned, entrepreneurial support is perceived above all as a strategic performance lever, particularly through coaching, which enables project leaders to structure, formalize and professionalize their business. It also plays a decisive role in improving entrepreneurial skills and posture, through mentoring, by facilitating access to expert advice, feedback and professional networks.

Finally, it is an essential vector for facilitating access to financial resources, by reinforcing the credibility of entrepreneurs in the eyes of financial backers and facilitating access to financing opportunities or strategic partnerships necessary for the development of their business. More specifically, the support provided by incubators helps entrepreneurs navigate complex and opaque financing ecosystems by offering guidance on available funding mechanisms, assisting in the preparation of robust and convincing business plans, and connecting them with potential investors or institutional funders. The strategic framing provided by incubators enhances the entrepreneurs' perceived legitimacy, increases their negotiation power, and helps overcome structural barriers such as bureaucratic opacity or lack of financial literacy.

In the Tunisian context, where access to funding remains one of the main bottlenecks for SME growth, this dimension of support is often viewed by entrepreneurs as a determining factor for the viability and sustainability of their projects.

C. Entrepreneurial support via coaching as a lever for structuring and boosting SME performance

The entrepreneurial coaching, whether individual or collective, in the development of their project. This coaching mainly involved methodological support in structuring the company, defining the business model, and

reinforcing management, marketing and planning skills. Several entrepreneurs mentioned that these coaching sessions enabled them to better understand the critical stages of the entrepreneurial journey, to clarify their strategic vision, and to avoid certain start-up mistakes.

- ❖ Interviewee 5: "We decided to call on support services to help us structure and formalize our entrepreneurial project, which needed to establish itself on the market."
- ❖ Interviewee 3: "I was mainly looking for support to understand how to structure my business. I had no problem with the technical side, but I was sorely lacking in management and marketing skills."
- ❖ Interviewee 7: "Initially, I had a good idea for a product, but I didn't know how to turn it into a viable project."
- ❖ Interviewee 16: "We had the technical basics, but less entrepreneurial skills, especially on how to better structure the idea and write the business plan."
- ❖ Interviewee 8: "I used the incubator mainly to understand the administrative procedures and learn how to draw up a credible business plan."
- ❖ Interviewee 1: "Thanks to the coaching, I've been able to identify my customer segments and adjust my offering in line with market needs."
- ❖ Interviewee 12: "Coaching enabled me to take a step back from my project, review certain strategic choices and better manage my priorities."
- ❖ Interviewee 10: "Without the support, I think I would have gotten lost in the formalities and wouldn't have known how to structure my idea."
- ❖ Interviewee 4: "The coaching workshops helped me to better define my goals and develop a realistic action plan."

These testimonials confirm that coaching is a genuine professionalization tool, helping entrepreneurs to adopt a strategic posture, strengthen their decision-making autonomy and better anticipate market demands. On the one hand, our results are in line with the research of Bouillon and Paraschiv (2020), who see entrepreneurial coaching as a catalyst for change within organizations.

Indeed, while numerous aids exist to ensure the (re)start-up of SMEs, coaching stands out for its original approach, enabling young managers to improve their managerial skills or develop new ones. In this way, it accompanies changes that are often unforeseen, offering flexibility and adaptability - essential elements for the emergence of dynamic entrepreneurship. In addition, the results of the study also corroborate the work of Jaouen (2022), who stresses the importance of the coach's specific skills, such as listening and empathy, and adaptability to the entrepreneur's particular context, in particular according to his or her learning style.

Leaders of SMEs, whether managerial or family-owned, generally prefer to integrate consultants whose views are in harmony with their beliefs and vision of the business. So, although coaching is widely perceived today as a key factor in entrepreneurial success, it is crucial to consider that the effectiveness of this practice largely depends on the characteristics of the coach and his or her ability to adapt to the specific needs of the manager. What's more, the results of our study concur with the findings of Barès and al. (2017), who insist on the structuring role of coaching devices in improving managerial capabilities and securing the entrepreneurial journey. In short, coaching appears to be an essential strategic lever for both developing managerial skills and adapting to market challenges, thus contributing to the success of entrepreneurial projects.

D. Entrepreneurial mentoring as a lever for strategic orientation and SME performance

The entrepreneurs interviewed unanimously praised the contribution of the mentors made available to them within the framework of the "Sfax Innovation 2" business incubator. These regular exchanges enabled them to benefit from enlightened feedback, anticipate certain common mistakes, validate strategic choices, and expand their professional network. This access to professional networks is not merely peripheral it is a fundamental component of entrepreneurial success. Through these networks, entrepreneurs gain privileged entry into ecosystems of knowledge, opportunities, and partnerships that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Being part of such networks accelerates the diffusion of best practices, fosters collaboration with peers, and creates visibility within the local and national entrepreneurial landscape.

Moreover, the relational capital built through mentoring often leads to trust-based referrals, informal endorsements, and credibility in the eyes of clients, suppliers, and financial institutions. In the Tunisian context, where informal relationships often shape business dynamics, these networks serve as critical bridges between nascent entrepreneurs and established economic actors, facilitating both strategic alliances and resource mobilization. In this way, mentoring appears to be a

decisive support, particularly during the critical phases of project development, as the quotes collected clearly testify:

- ❖ Interviewee 10: "I wanted to secure the launch of my project, avoid classic mistakes and benefit from structured mentoring."
- ❖ Interviewee 12: "I wanted to have access to a professional network and benefit from expert advice to better target my customers."
- ❖ Interviewee 14: "My objective was to receive support to validate the feasibility of my idea and improve my market penetration strategy."
- ❖ Interviewee 7: "The mentor helped me take a step back from my decisions and prioritize the actions essential to getting off to an effective start."
- ❖ Interviewee 3: "Thanks to the exchanges with my mentor, I've been able to identify opportunities for collaboration that I wouldn't have considered on my own."
- ❖ Interviewee 1: "Mentoring has enabled me to avoid some of the mistakes that young entrepreneurs often make, particularly when it comes to time and resource management."
- ❖ Interviewee 15: "I needed someone to challenge my ideas and help me better structure my sales approach."

These testimonials confirm that mentoring is more than just a one-off advisory role: it's part of a human, strategic and evolutionary process. In an entrepreneurial context often marked by loneliness, uncertainty and the complexity of the decisions to be made, the mentor acts as a catalyst for learning. He or she facilitates perspective-taking, encourages critical analysis, and supports the development of strategies aligned with realities on the ground. In this sense, mentoring appears to be a lever for accelerating entrepreneurial development. Our results are in line with the work of St-Jean and Tremblay (2013), who consider mentoring to be an essential learning vector, contributing significantly to the success of entrepreneurial projects and, consequently, to their overall performance.

Moreover, this relational dynamic between mentor and mentee also ties in with Boumedjaoud and Messeghe's (2020) reflections on the notion of entrepreneurial vigilance, understood as the ability to detect and seize relevant opportunities. These authors stress the importance of introducing mentoring at an early

stage of a project, to better assess its potential, anticipate the risks involved in its implementation, and guide the entrepreneur in his or her first structuring choices. In this way, mentoring-type support, anchored in the long term, enables the project owner not only to strengthen his or her strategic posture and resilience, but also to benefit from a transfer of experience and knowledge that fosters sustainable entrepreneurial performance. It thus represents a structuring mechanism, capable of securing entrepreneurial trajectories while fostering the emergence of a genuine learning posture.

E. Facilitating access to financial resources as a lever for the viability and credibility of entrepreneurial projects

The survey results thus confirm our second research hypothesis (H2), highlighting the crucial role played by coaching in facilitating access to financing, a recurring issue for the majority of entrepreneurs surveyed. For them, support, as offered within the "Sfax Innovation 2" incubator, was seen as a strategic channel to diversified financial resources: public subsidies, bank loans, dedicated financing for young promoters, or institutional partnerships. This intermediary role is a decisive support, particularly in a Tunisian context where aid schemes are often complex, fragmented and difficult for project leaders to understand. In this regard, some of those interviewed pointed out that:

- ❖ Interviewee 1: "It was for reasons of setting up the project, formalizing the business, networking and financing the acquisition of new equipment."
- ❖ Interviewee 7: "The coaching helped me to better target the financing schemes available to young promoters."
- ❖ Interviewee 18: "Thanks to the incubator, I was able to present a more structured file to the bank, which made it easier to obtain my loan."
- ❖ Interviewee 4: "Without the support, I didn't even know there were subsidies I was eligible for."
- ❖ Interviewee 11: "I've learned to better formulate my business plan to convince investors and backers."
- ❖ Interviewee 8: "They pointed me in the right direction and helped me put together a solid file, which I would never have been able to do on my own."
- ❖ Interviewee 10: "The support I received

enabled me to negotiate more serenely with financial partners."

These testimonials highlight the fact that the entrepreneurial support provided by incubators is not limited to technical or administrative support. It also plays a strategic financial mediation role, enabling supported entrepreneurs to benefit from easier access to financial resources, whether in the form of public subsidies, bank loans or specific entrepreneurial support schemes. The project leaders supported by the "Sfax Innovation 2" business incubator have repeatedly emphasized that the support provided has enabled them to better identify available sources of financing, to structure their dossiers more effectively, and to increase their credibility with financiers. This personalized support strengthens their ability to dialogue with financial institutions, to understand their expectations, and to formulate coherent and convincing requests. These findings concur with those of Grossetti and Barthe (2010), who emphasize that the support of relational structures such as incubators facilitates access to financing and contributes to the strategic positioning of SMEs. Similarly, Nakara and Fayolle (2012) show that the relationships of trust established with mentors or experts within these structures help to overcome certain obstacles, particularly those linked to the search for financing, by encouraging initiative-taking and the professionalization of approaches.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to understand the impact of entrepreneurial coaching on the performance of Tunisian SMEs, through a qualitative study carried out with entrepreneurs supported by the "Sfax-Innovation 2" incubator. The results confirmed the two initial hypotheses, highlighting the significant contribution of coaching on several key dimensions of SME performance, including economic, organizational and strategic aspects.

Firstly, the integration of entrepreneurs into formal and informal support networks has proved decisive in fostering collective learning, experience sharing, the exchange of best practices and the building of social capital that can be mobilized at different stages of entrepreneurial development. These networks act as catalysts for growth, enabling entrepreneurs to broaden their field of opportunities while consolidating their local and sectoral roots.

Secondly, support has improved access to financial resources, an essential lever for SME development. The mediation provided by structures such as incubators not only facilitates the identification and mobilization of

available financing mechanisms, but also strengthens the ability of project leaders to enter into dialogue with financial backers, structure their dossiers in a professional manner and increase their legitimacy in the eyes of economic partners. In this way, entrepreneurial support helps to remove the structural financial barriers that often hold back the initiatives of young promoters. In a transversal sense, this study highlights the fact that coaching should no longer be conceived as a simple one-off assistance, but as an ongoing process of learning, strategic guidance and networking, capable of producing a structuring effect on the entrepreneurial trajectory. It contributes to the professionalization of practices, the maturing of projects, and the construction of a proactive entrepreneurial posture in the face of market uncertainties.

In a Tunisian context marked by economic instability and often fragmented support systems, entrepreneurial support represents a lever of resilience and sustainability for SMEs. By providing them with the relational, cognitive and financial resources they need to grow, it not only strengthens their competitiveness, but also contributes to the development of a more robust economic fabric, capable of taking part in global dynamics.

A. Research limitations

Although this study sheds relevant light on the impact of entrepreneurial support on the performance of Tunisian SMEs, it does have certain limitations that pave the way for future research. The first limitation lies in the qualitative nature of the research, based on semi-directive interviews with a restricted sample of eighteen entrepreneurs supported by a single incubator, in this case "Sfax-Innovation 2". While this approach provides a detailed, contextual understanding of support mechanisms, it does not allow us to generalize the results to all Tunisian SMEs. The analysis is based on subjective perceptions, which, while enriching on an exploratory level, limits the statistical scope of the results. The second limitation concerns geographical and institutional bias. By focusing solely on a support structure located in the Sfax region, the study does not take into account the diversity of practices and systems present in other regions of the country, particularly in less urbanized areas or areas with less support infrastructure. However, the nature, quality and intensity of support can vary from one incubator to another, having a differentiated influence on entrepreneurial trajectories. A third limitation relates to the temporal dimension of performance evaluation. The

effects of support on SME performance were assessed at a given point in time, based mainly on declarative indicators (increase in sales, access to financing, etc.). However, certain impacts, notably in terms of sustainability, innovation or long-term growth, would require longitudinal follow-up to be fully understood. Finally, this research did not include a comparison group of uncoached SMEs, which would have enabled us to better isolate the effect of coaching on the observed performance. Such a comparison would have enriched the analytical scope of the work by providing more explicit elements of differentiation.

B. Avenues for future research

In order to extend the lessons learned from this study, several lines of research could be explored to refine our understanding of the link between entrepreneurial support and SME performance. A first avenue would be to conduct a comparative analysis between different support structures located in different regions of Tunisia, or in other countries sharing similar economic contexts. Such an approach would shed light on the specific features of local systems, their intervention logics, and the contextual conditions that influence their effectiveness. It would also provide valuable benchmarks for sharing best practices and adapting schemes to local realities.

In addition, it would be advisable to broaden the methodological framework by supplementing the qualitative analysis with a quantitative survey, based on a larger, more representative sample. Incorporating measurable variables such as sales, survival rates over three or five years, job creation or innovation levels would enable a more rigorous assessment of the impact of support on SME performance. Finally, adopting a longitudinal approach would represent a major methodological contribution. By following the development of supported companies over several years, it would be possible to gain a better understanding of the delayed effects of support, particularly in terms of the sustainability of activities, the development of managers' skills and their ability to adapt to economic crises. Such an approach would pave the way for a dynamic evaluation of the schemes, and provide food for thought on how to adjust them to the life cycles of SMEs.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in this research.

Data availability statement

Data used in this study may be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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