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# Managing Business Relationships in Turbulent Environment to Achieve Resilience: A case study on Norwegian firms selling to African Markets

A Network Interaction Perspective

Master's thesis in International Business and Marketing  
Supervisor: Julia V. Bondeli. PhD., Researcher Department of International Business, NTNU

December 2023



Norwegian University of  
Science and Technology



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*Jonas Athanas Mauky*

*Aalesund, 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, 2023*

## **Abstract**

Many global business firms from Western countries are increasingly engaging with emerging markets. These markets, however, are often characterized by turbulent business environments, which can pose challenges to long-term relationship development. This study aims to explore how Norwegian firms that sell to firms based in Africa manage their business relationships to achieve success. Previous research on business relationships within this context is limited. Hence, this study aims to fill this gap.

To achieve this, a qualitative multiple-case study was utilized, which included three Norwegian firms and three African-based firms. Moreover, the study was based on the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) perspectives. Important factors contributing to relationship development were uncovered based on the data gathered through interviews. The study also revealed that firms may achieve resilience through network interaction. This indicates a theoretical gap in business resilience studies; there is inconsistent evidence on whether interdependence or independence leads to resilience. Thus, this study has contributed to filling this gap.

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## **Definitions and concept**

**The IMP perspectives:** views companies as interdependent actors which influence each other and depend on other companies in the specific network to gain access to key resources (Håkansson et al., 2009).

**Resilience:** A firm's ability to prepare for and recover from disruptive events (Bondeli & Havensvid, 2022).

**Interdependency:** IMP perspective on business networks which state that a company's success depends on its relationship with other parties in a network (Håkansson et al., 2009).

**Interaction environment:** A perspective which state that there are elements in the specific business environments that affect a business relationship and its interaction with the other firms in its network (Håkansson, 1982).

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## 1- Introduction

This study aims to explore how Norwegian companies can retain their resilience when selling to markets that are characterized as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. While different perspectives agree on the importance of business relationships for a company's success, there is a conflicting perspective on what should be the focus of "business relationship management". The mainstream perspective suggests that a company should manage its relationship and avoid dependence (Jiang et al., 2023). On the other side, there are those who challenge this view and suggest that firms can achieve success through interdependence within their business network (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). Perspectives that support interdependency, particularly the "Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) perspective", suggest that a company cannot solely manage its relationships without being affected by others in its network through business interaction. Therefore, a company may achieve success through interdependency with other interacting firms (Håkansson et al., 2009).

In the upcoming sections, I will provide an explanation of the background and motivation, followed by a more detailed clarification of the purpose of the study. Additionally, I will discuss the research gap that I aim to address and present a brief overview of the structure of the master's thesis.

### 1.1- Background and Motivation

Globalization and new opportunities accompanied by reduced business barriers are among the factors that motivate firms to engage in business relationships outside their local markets (Abhishek, 2013). Moreover, Norwegian firms have had a long experience with exporting commodities like timber, fish and oil, but mainly to markets in the developed countries. However, there is an increasing trend among Norwegian firms engaging in business activities in emerging markets, especially in Asia, Africa and South America. For example, in 2021, Norwegian companies exported commodities worth NOK 191 million to Kenya, denoting an increase of 27 % in one year (Norway in Kenya, 2023). Moreover, according to Innovasjons Norge (2023), there are about 100 Norwegian companies selling their products in Western African countries, showcasing that Norwegian interest in these emerging markets is increasing. Furthermore, Norges Sjømatråd (2023) states that in 2018, the export of fish from Norway to Africa was about 94000 tons, but in 2022, the export was 174500 tons, denoting an increase of 85 per cent in 4 years.

The trend of selling to emerging markets also unveils new challenges that companies must face. Abhishek (2013) discusses that most challenges companies face when establishing business relationships in emerging markets are related to the environment, which differs from the domestic environment and involves three factors. Thus, domestic, foreign, and international environment factors. The domestic environment consists of uncontrollable forces from the home country that influence the firm life and development (Abhishek, 2013). According to the Interaction Model of IMP, these factors can be related to the social system. They may arise from local regulations, social norms, and culture and influence the business environment (Håkansson, 1982). A good example of this is explained by Bondeli and Havenvid (2022), who discuss how local regulations in Russia destabilize the business environment and business relationships, making it highly uncertain and volatile. According to Abhishek (2013), foreign factors consist of all the uncontrollable forces from outside the home country that influence the firm. These factors are discussed by Håkansson (1982), who argues that the level of international actors in a market may influence the local business environment by increasing competition, which in turn affects the success of a business.

Abhishek (2013) suggests that various factors, including the interaction between domestic and foreign environments, influence the business environment in emerging markets. This interaction may involve international regulations that dictate certain industry standards or currency volatility.

The increasing trend of companies engaging in business with African companies and the importance of understanding the business environment and their influence on business interaction act as a motivation for this study. However, the lack of studies on this topic in African markets has fuelled my interest in conducting this study.

## 1.2- Purpose of the study

This study aims to get a more in-depth understanding of how Norwegian firms interact with firms from emerging markets, particularly in African markets, and how they manage their relationships to tackle challenges in these business environments. A few pieces of research have been conducted on business relationships between African and European countries. However, they have mainly focused on policies, international relationships, and the possible impact on a specific industry. A good example is the work of Ponte et al. (2007), who investigated how the changing nature of the international regime presents a series of challenges to fish industries in Africa. Most of these studies have emphasized the relationships at the country and the regional level, but little has been done about studying the

relationships at the firm level. More specifically, the gap regarding available research on the relationship between Norwegian sellers and African buyers is even larger. It is, therefore, the aim of this master's thesis to investigate and contribute to covering the literature gap which exists and provide some new insight related to the seller-buyer relationship between Norwegian firms and Africa-based firms.

The study uses qualitative methods, and the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing perspectives (IMP) on business networks are utilised to investigate the phenomenon. Moreover, based on the purpose of the master thesis, the research question was formulated as follows:

*“How does a firm operating in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environment manage its business network to achieve and maintain resilience?”*

For my research, I have chosen to conduct a multiple case study on three Norwegian companies that sell products to African-based companies. Two of the firms specialize in exporting food supplements and ingredients, while the third company primarily exports fish. On the African side, one company imports food supplements and ingredients, another imports fish, and the third imports beverages. All these companies have a significant amount of experience in trading, which makes them ideal candidates for my research. I believe that the information they can provide will be valuable in answering my research question.

### 1.3- Structure of the study

The thesis consists of 7 chapters, which I will briefly describe in this section.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background, summarized by the analytical framework of this thesis. Resilience concepts are explained, followed by the IMP perspectives and the Interaction model of the IMP.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the methodological approach of the master thesis, explaining the research design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations.

Chapter 4 presents descriptions of the context of the master thesis explaining the business environment in Africa, the Norwegian sellers and the African buyers.

Chapter 5 Presents the results of the analysis of interviews and discussions of the results based on the data collected. The results are presented based on each participant's firm.

Chapter 6 is devoted to discussing the findings from Chapter 5 in terms of the analytical framework.

Chapter 7 presents the summary of my findings and the conclusions, managerial implications, limitations and recommendations for further research.



## 2- Theoretical foundations on resilience

Resilience is a broad concept used in many academic literature disciplines, including ecology, organisational studies, and managerial studies (Bondeli & Havenvid, 2022). Many works of literature show a variety of approaches various approach that attempt to explore the concept of resilience in business relationships. In recent years, the term has gained popularity among researchers within supply chain management, where different models and strategies for building resilience have been recommended (Grzybowska & Tubis, 2022; Tukamuhabwa et al., 2017).

The academic literature, primarily in business management, argues that firms' ability to combine tangible and intangible resources is essential in order to achieve and maintain resilience. Meanwhile, in defining resilience, the literature identifies criteria such as the capability to anticipate crises and identify risks, the capacity to withstand difficulties and the ability to respond quickly to disruptions and vulnerabilities, as well as the ability to return to normal (Grzybowska & Tubis, 2022). Furthermore, many researchers, especially within supply chain management, have emphasised tangible resource management in achieving resilience by predicting potential risks and encouraging strategies for risk mitigation to remain resilient (Tukamuhabwa et al., 2017). Meanwhile, within the Industrial Management and Purchasing (IMP) research field, the focus has been on other aspects of business that may impact a firm's resilience. Thus, business relationships and interactions (Håkansson & Gadde, 2018). Hence, the IMP researchers argue that business relationships can not be understood as a series of independent activities but rather as complex relationships between a business network in which value is created (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006; Håkansson & Gadde, 2018).

According to this view of IMP literature, resilience can be achieved based on a firm's ability to manage its interaction with other parties within its business network. Mainly concerned by an increasingly volatile world, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous Grzybowska and Tubis (2022) found that volatility and uncertainty are constant phenomena. Thus, future predictions, established routines, and strategies are no longer as effective as intended. Concerning uncertain environments, an excellent contribution to the literature on resilience is the work of Bondeli and Havenvid (2022), who studied firms operating under turbulent environments in Russia. They found that firms' ability to utilise their social capital through networks was essential for the existence of the firm but also crucial in times of disruptions.

Constant, disruptive, and accelerating change in the business environment is a phenomenon we experience all around in different industries. Some studies have questioned the concept of businesses “returning to normal” that is used to define resilience and argue that in a world that is uncertain and constantly changing, businesses might be focusing on the wrong strategies if their focus is put on returning to normal after disruptions. Thus, resilience should not be only about recovery after disruptive events, but the emphasis should be on the ability to adapt and transform (Millar et al., 2018). Also, Buckley (2019) argues that uncertainty in international business is pervasive and it is important to examine the VUCA world to cope with different risks.

There is a variety of definitions that seek to explain resilience in business relationships. However, the definition provided by Bondeli and Havenvid (2022) seems to be in line with the call from researchers of the VUCA world by encouraging understanding of the ability to survive adapt and grow in a business environment that is constantly changing.

*“Resilience is the capacity of the a firm to prepare for and rebound from setbacks, by managing and adjusting its interaction patterns to its specific network and institutional contexts in a way that enables it to survive, adopt and grow in the face of turbulent change”.* (Bondeli & Havenvid, 2022).

Hence, the research interest is influenced by the above definition of resilience. The study seeks to examine how companies adapt grow and achieve resilience in turbulent environments.

In the following section, I will briefly explain what the VUCA world entails. I believe that by incorporating the components of VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity), my study analysis will offer a comprehensive understanding of the specific business environments, and how a firm's success is affected by its business environment, as well as the role of network interaction in the firm's success.

#### *VUCA environments*

International businesses operate in a rapidly changing and uncertain environment. During such uncertain conditions, relying on existing business relationships is considered a valuable approach to overcome challenging situations. This is based on the belief that existing resources can play a crucial role in navigating crises by combining them effectively to achieve the desired outcomes (Runfola et al., 2023).

### *Volatility*

Volatility refers to the occurrence of changes that can impact business strategies, long-term plans, and performance. These changes can arise from various factors such as political, economic, sociological, technological, legal, and environmental aspects. International businesses encounter challenges associated with unpredictable conditions that frequently influence their business relationships and overall performance (Grzybowska & Tubis, 2022).

### *Uncertainty*

Another important concept that characterizes business conditions is uncertainty. It can be related to the exchange of products or services, as well as the overall business environment. However, this study specifically focuses on uncertainty associated with the business environment. It arises when there is limited understanding of events and potential challenges. In uncertain conditions, past experiences are not relied upon when making decisions. In unprecedented situations, there is a high level of uncertainty and tension in the interactions among business parties. Environmental uncertainty occurs due to the unpredictability of the external environment. It is argued that this type of external environment can impact a business relationship because it becomes difficult to foresee and understand the actions of other business parties due to a lack of knowledge about their capabilities and intentions (Runfola et al., 2023).

### *Complexity*

Furthermore, navigating the international business landscape can be challenging due to the influence of various complex factors that make it difficult to identify emerging issues. These external factors are often beyond the control of a company and can impede its operations. Some of these challenges include intellectual property rights, import regulations, restrictions on competition, tariffs, and taxation (Håkansson et al., 2009).

### *Ambiguity*

Ambiguity refers to the challenge of dealing with incomplete or conflicting information and the lack of clarity in interpreting situations. Businesses frequently encounter situations that are unclear, which can result in misinterpreting signals from the environment. This ambiguity can have an impact on the decision-making process and the formulation of strategies, as it becomes challenging to make accurate assessments and judgments (Buckley, 2019).

In the following section, I will briefly overview the perspectives in mainstream management literature. After that, I will explain in detail some key perspectives of the IMP that serve as the foundation of this study.

## 2.1 – Theoretical Background and Framework

In the theory of resource dependence, organizations rely on external entities to acquire the necessary resources for effective operation. This theory recognizes that organizations cannot function independently and must interact with suppliers, customers, partners, and other stakeholders to obtain resources like raw materials, labor, information, capital, technology, and market access (Valeri, 2021). Thus, these external entities have control over the resources and can influence the organization. As it is discussed by Johannesson and Palona (2010), due to scarcity and uncertainty in the environment, organizations engage in strategic interactions and negotiations to secure resources. Thus, managing relationships with external entities effectively is crucial in order to minimize dependency risks and ensure a reliable resource supply. Moreover, it is suggested that organizations may diversify their resource base, establish long-term partnerships, build collaborative networks, or employ other strategies to reduce reliance on a single source. Thus, resource dependence theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of organizations and the need for external interactions to acquire resources necessary for their functioning and survival. Studies within the mainstream management literature, which is mentioned above, focus on control of the relationships and the network as a source to power and success. Conversely, the IMP perspective on business networks which is the focus of this research differ from these perspectives on business relationships.

According to the IMP approach, a firm's success depends on its relationship with other parties in a network (Håkansson et al., 2009). This relationship cannot be solely controlled by the individual firm because all parties can influence and be influenced by each other in the network. Therefore, a value created by a company is derived from its relationship with others in the network. Similarly, it can be argued that a company's ability to survive is dependent on the interacting network. IMP researchers for example, Runfola et al. (2023) have highlighted the importance of understanding how resilience capacities can be developed through interaction between actors and called for more research on the topic. As a result, this research will lend the IMP lenses to investigate how firms operating in turbulent environments can

achieve resilience through network interaction. The IMP view will be presented in the next section.

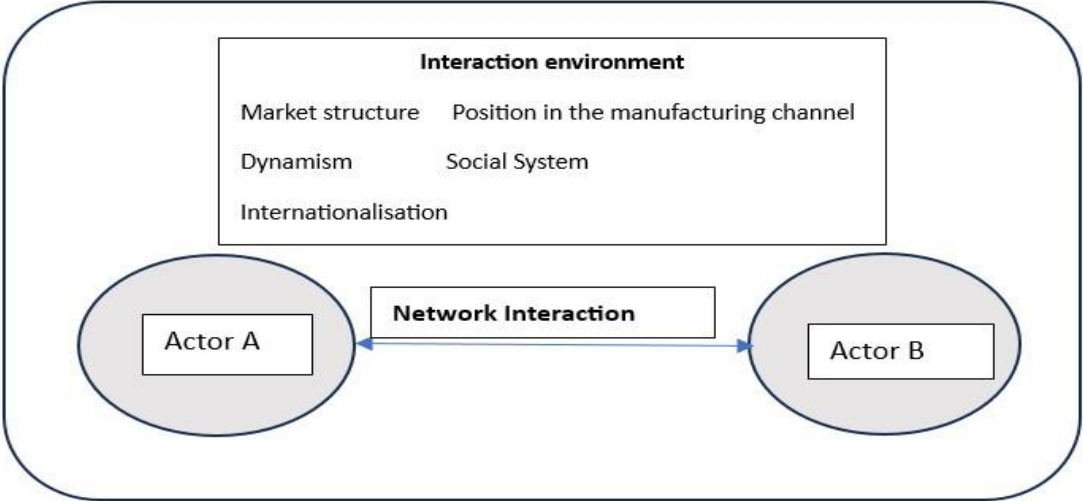


Figure 2. 1: Interaction Model of IMP, adapted from Håkansson (1982)

2.2 – The IMP perspective

This study is mainly built upon the ideas presented by Håkansson (1982), Håkansson et al. (2009) and later the work of Bondeli and Havenvid (2022). The interaction model as presented by Håkansson (1982) identifies four basic elements which in turn are sub-divided. The first element is *the interaction process* which involve episodes that occur in a business relationship, and relationship which involve social aspects that may contribute to build-up inter-organizational contact patterns that can interlock business parties. The second element in the model is *the interacting parties*. It involves the individual characteristics and organization factors such as technology, organization size, organizational experience and the individuals that are involved. The third element is *the interaction environment*. It has several elements that address the business environment. Thus, market structure, dynamism, internationalization, position in the manufacturing channel, and the social system surrounding a particular business relation. The fourth element is the *atmosphere*, which involves the economic and control dimensions. For this thesis, the main component of analysis is the third element, thus interaction environment and the second component the interacting parties as depicted in figure 2.1. The study aims to explore how a firm's business network can be

affected by the interaction environment. To understand IMP research and the context of interactions, I will provide a brief description of the key concepts in the following section. I will start by explaining the components of a business network, followed by the elements of the interaction environment. Hence, these concepts act as the foundation for the theoretical starting point and analytical framework for this study.

According to the IMP (Industrial Marketing and Purchasing) interactive perspective, it is not possible for an individual manager to manage a company or a business relationship in isolation because businesses do not have an independent existence (Håkansson et al., 2009). This means that a success of a company, to a large extent, relies on its interactions and relationships with other businesses and actors in the industry (Ford et al., 2008). Therefore, a manager must consider the various relationships and interactions that their company has with other businesses to effectively manage and achieve success (Zafari et al., 2020). In other words, the success of a company is not just determined by its own actions and strategies, but also by the interactions and relationships it has with other businesses in its industry.

According to Håkansson et al. (2009) each business is embedded in a network of interdependencies and relationships with others, meaning that the success of a business is heavily influenced by its interactions with other businesses in the industry. In this context, the existence of a network means that managerial activities are affected by the interactions that take place with counterparts. Thus, a manager must consider the impact of their actions and decisions on the larger network of relationships in which their business operates (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006).

Moreover, in the business network, each managerial actor has the ability and intent to influence the network, and all administrative actions have effects. Thus, every action taken by a manager can have an impact on the larger network of relationships and interactions in which their business operates (Ford & Mouzas, 2010; Håkansson et al., 2009). However, the outcomes of these actions may not always be the ones that the manager expects. This is because the network is complex and constantly changing, and the actions of one actor can have unintended consequences on the rest of the network (Butler & Purchase, 2021).

Furthermore, Zafari et al. (2020) argue that in order to improve resilience, it is important for managers to consider the potential outcomes of their actions and decisions carefully and to *“be flexible and adaptable in response to changes”* in the network.

The IMP view emphasizes that to understand the process of management in a single company, it is not sufficient to consider what happens in that company alone (Håkansson et al., 2009). Instead, it is vital to consider the larger network of relationships, interactions, and the environments in which the companies operate. This is because the relationships and the business environments influence the success of a company. In other words, this means that the management process is not just about managing a company's internal operations, but also about managing the relationships and interactions with other actors in the network (Håkansson et al., 2009). “*Hence, management in a single company can only be understood by looking at what happens in its unique interactions with others*” (Håkansson et al., 2009, p. 184).

The core idea of the IMP perspective is the business relationship and how the actors involved in it are connected to it and affect it, while also being affected by it. Thus, relationships involve complex interactions, including various forms of cooperation, collaboration, competition, and conflict (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). This interaction between actors in a relationship is seen as central to the success of the relationship and the businesses involved. Therefore, the IMP perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamics of business relationships and the various factors that can impact their success (Håkansson et al., 2009; Runfola et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this perspective emphasizes that relationships are not static but are constantly changing and evolving as actors interact with each other over time (Blome et al., 2023; Runfola et al., 2023). One could argue that a firm faces uncertainty due to changes and evolution. Hence, managing these relationships effectively, a business can improve its competitiveness and achieve its goals (Zafari et al., 2020). As argued by Håkansson et al. (2009), within this interpretation, each actor is a dependent part of a wider structure. Thus, companies are viewed as an outcome of their relationships and their history of interactions, rather than just their own intentions. Contrary to the mainstream management literature, “*the success of a company is not just determined by its internal capabilities and resources but also by its interactions and relationships with other actors in the network* (Håkansson et al., 2009, p. 185)”. Hence, the development of strong relationships with key partners and stakeholders can enhance a company's competitiveness, provide access to new resources and opportunities, and enable the achievement of strategic goals.

Throughout the study, the term network is used to refer broad business relationships. In line with IMP perspectives on business network, in the next section I will briefly explain the

management of network, then I will describe in detail the components that might be involved in the process of interaction considering the environment within which interaction takes place.

### 2.3- Managing network

Based on the Interaction approach it is argued that the outcome of a business relationship is not an individual intent, but it is a result of interaction within a network. It is also important to note that all kind of interactions between firms are affected by the business environments in which the firms operate. This embeddedness of a firm and its business network is explained by the original Interaction model developed by Håkansson (1982). Furthermore, the model of Bondeli and Havenvid (2022), more specifically, takes into account VUCA environments and explain that resilience is a jointly outcome of a business network.

Hence, Managerial actions within this context becomes a process of working with others within existing and emerging relationships (Håkansson et al., 2009, p. 186). Thus, the relationship itself is not a possession of either actor, and cannot be solely managed by either one of them (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Zafari et al., 2020). Thereby, the outcome of a relationship cannot be attributed exclusively to the intentions or actions of one actor, but rather to the collective efforts and interactions of all actors involved (Bygballe et al., 2023).

The next section will clarify how companies interact and combine resources. These elements are crucial to the theoretical framework and in-depth analysis of the master's thesis because they encompass the activities that underpin every business operation.

### 2.4- Interaction of companies

According to IMP perspective, interaction between firms involves a variety of resources such as services, information exchange, logistics, physical and intellectual properties, advice, and finance (Håkansson et al., 2009). As the parties work together, they adapt and develop these resources to achieve their goals. In other words, interaction is a dynamic process that involves constant collaboration and adaptation of various resources to achieve success (Runfola et al., 2023). The process of interaction in business as described by Runfola et al. (2023), has both costs and benefits, but it can be difficult to identify them in detail because of unconscious intentions and unintended consequences. Additionally, interaction is complex because it involves multiple people from the parties, which leads to numerous intentions and interpretations (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). Thus, the outcomes of business interaction can be



hard to predict because of the complexity of the process and the various perspectives and goals of those involved.

Håkansson et al. (2009) suggest that to understand the approaches that business actors take to their interactions, it is essential to start from the assumption that actors from each party have a clear or standard view of where they stand with each other and the intentions of the other party. Thus, each party should have a basic understanding of the goals and motives of the other party, as well as their own position in the relationship. According to Håkansson et al. (2009), from this starting point, it is possible to explore the various approaches that actors take in their interactions and how these approaches impact the success of the business relationship (Håkansson, 1982).

Within the field of management research, capabilities are frequently regarded as a critical factor in determining a success of a company. Consequently, a firm's ability to maintain its internal capabilities is essential for achieving resilience and sustainability. With regard to this, capabilities of a company may also be affected by the environment which may involve formal and informal institutions as explained by the analytical framework developed by Bondeli and Havensvid (2022). In the following section I will explain how capabilities of a firm are looked at as a property of a network.

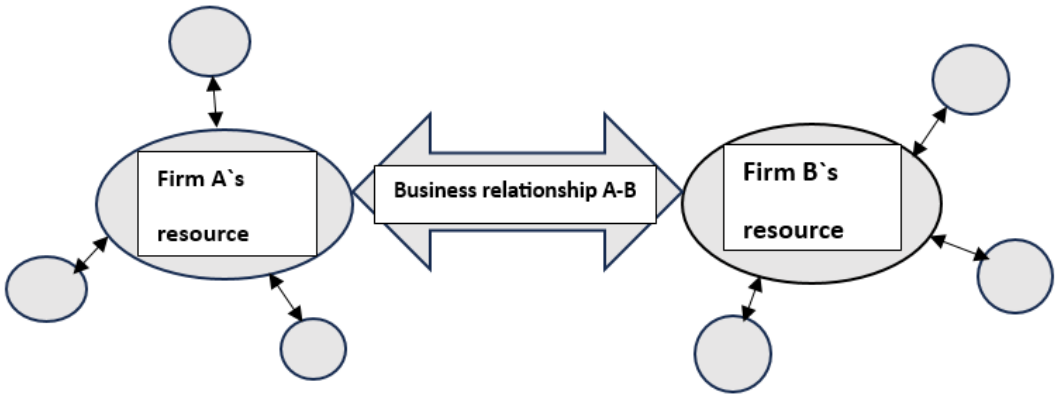


Figure 2. 2: Business relationships as resources, adapted from (Håkansson et al., 2009).

*Figure 2.2 illustrates that a firm's resources can be based on other companies. The firm's capabilities are a combination of their own resources and those of others. These capabilities are developed over time through smaller interaction steps with different counterparts, including suppliers and customers (Ford et al., 2008).*

#### 2.4.1 - Capability as a property of relationship

In the world of business interaction, the focus is on how each actor manages their own resources as well as the resources of their counterparts, and how these resources can be used together to solve both joint and separate problems. From the viewpoint of this perspective, capability of an actor is not just their own property but is also influenced by the capabilities of their business relationships. In other words, the ability to succeed is dependent on the collaboration and coordination within the business relationship, rather than just the individual actors themselves (Håkansson et al., 2009). This is because, when two parties interact within a relationship, their different resources are combined and used. The interaction also create room for independent activities to become more productive when they are coordinated together. Hence, working together and combining resources can make individual activities more efficient and effective. To achieve so, Håkansson et al. (2009) identifies four key concepts that are important for understanding business networks and achieving success within them. Thus, capability, jointness, particularity, and inconsistency (Håkansson et al., 2009, pp. 187-189). By understanding and integrating these four concepts into their business strategies, companies can enhance their resilience and adaptability within complex business networks (Butler & Purchase, 2021; Bygballe et al., 2023; Ford et al., 2008).

The four concepts mentioned before are considered essential in all business relationships. Furthermore, these components are influenced by factors that arise from the business environment. Therefore, it can be argued that they are also affected by factors that often impact the business environment, known as VUCA. Consequently, I believe that by understanding the environmental factors and their relationship to the components that affect the business network, I will gain better insight into a specific business context and explore their impact on the resilience of a firm.

Capability refers to the resources, knowledge, and skills that a company possesses or has access to. In the mainstream business literature, a business capability is typically analysed in

terms of general management capability and competence, logistical competence and strategic capacity (Johannesson & Palona, 2010). These capabilities are what make up the operations of the company, represent important business functions, are different from each other, are independent, and are related to the goals of the individual company (Johannesson & Palona, 2010). In the IMP perspective, capability is not seen as an inherent property of a company, but rather as a product of the relationships of the company with other actors in the network. For example, when a company collaborate with other actors, it can access new resources and knowledge that can enhance its capabilities and competitive position. Furthermore, independent activities in a seller-buyer business relationship can be leveraged to create value, increase productivity, and foster a mutually beneficial partnership (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006). According to IMP, exploiting independent activities in a seller-buyer business relationship requires collaborative efforts, knowledge sharing, strategic planning, and a focus on continuous improvement (Ford et al., 2008). Thus, when sellers and buyers work together, combining their strengths and working towards common goals, they can create a productive and beneficial partnership that generates value and drives business success (Abrahamsen & Håkansson, 2015).

#### 2.4.2 - Jointness

Jointness means that the success of a business network relies on the joint efforts and collaboration of all the parties involved (Håkansson et al., 2009). This means that no single party can achieve success on its own, and instead, everyone must work together to achieve common goals. When businesses collaborate closely and share resources, knowledge, and expertise, it can result in increased efficiency, innovation, and competitiveness (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006; Huemer & Wang, 2021). However, it is argued by Blome et al. (2023) that to achieve a high level of jointness, there needs to be a strong foundation of trust and mutual understanding between all the parties involved in the business network.

Trust is considered as critical factor in any business relationship and refers to the belief that one party will act reliably, dependably, and with integrity towards the other party. Trust is built over time through consistent behaviour, communication, and transparency (Håkansson et al., 2009). Hence, trust is essential in a business network with high jointness as it allows actors to rely on the commitments of each other, depend on shared resources, and collaborate effectively. Furthermore, it can function as an enabler for businesses to work together towards common goals and navigate challenges with confidence. In addition, mutual understanding is also argued to be crucial in a business network with high jointness (Blome et al., 2023). It

involves a shared understanding of the needs of all parties, expectations, and capabilities. According to Blome et al. (2023), mutual understanding allows businesses to align their interests, anticipate the actions of parties, and make informed decisions. Thus, facilitates effective communication, problem-solving, and decision-making, which are critical for reducing uncertainty related to a business environment.

#### 2.4.3- Particularity

The IMP approach emphasizes that each business relationship within a business network is unique and cannot be generalized or standardized (Håkansson et al., 2009). The uniqueness of a relationship comes from the dynamics and characteristics of that relationship. These include mutual interdependence, shared goals, trust, building relationships, flexibility, adaptability, increased opportunities, collaborative decision-making, and shared risks and responsibilities (Håkansson & Ford, 2002).

A successful business relationship within a business network is thus characterized by active engagement, effective communication, and a collaborative mindset among network members. And It involves understanding and addressing the specific needs, preferences, and goals of each actor, and finding ways to work together to achieve collective success (Zafari et al., 2020). This may involve resource sharing, joint projects, mutual support, and coordinated efforts to meet common objectives. Moreover, managing business relationships within a business network requires a context-specific and nuanced approach (Håkansson et al., 2009). Thus, it is essential to prioritize building and maintaining relationships, and adapting strategies and tactics based on the unique dynamics of each relationship. By adopting this approach, companies can capitalize on the opportunities and navigate the challenges presented by business networks, particularly when dealing with complexity and ambiguity in business environments. This may enables them to achieve mutual benefits that benefit all parties involved (Bygballe et al., 2023).

#### 2.4.4 - Inconsistency

In the context of the interaction and network approach, inconsistency refers to the ambiguity and lack of clarity in the communication and interaction between actors involved in a network (Håkansson et al., 2009). It may involve situations where there are discrepancies, variations, changes in the dynamics, behaviours, or expectation within a business relationship. Moreover, various factors like change in priorities or goals, changes in leadership or personnel changes,

and external factors like changes in market environments might contribute to creating discrepancies (Butler & Purchase, 2021; Jalkala et al., 2007).

According to Håkansson et al. (2009), managing and resolving inconsistencies within business relationships is a crucial challenge that businesses face within a networked environment. Thus, addressing inconsistencies requires effective communication, active engagement, and a willingness to adapt and align expectations. It involves establishing clear expectations, maintaining open lines of communication, actively addressing any inconsistencies as they arise, and proactively finding solutions to ensure that the relationship remains healthy and mutually beneficial (Håkansson et al., 2009; Zafari et al., 2020). In other words, proactive relationship management is critical for businesses to foster resilience and sustainability within a company and the network.

In the next section, I will provide a detailed description of the various elements of the interaction environment that I have explained earlier. This will help gain a better understanding of the relationship between the different components of network interaction. Additionally, I will present a table that serves as an analytical framework for my study.

## 2.5 - The interaction environment

When analysing the interaction between firms that buy and sell, Håkansson (1982) suggests taking into account various factors within a broader context. These factors, extracted from the original interaction model, include market structure, dynamism, internationalization, and social system. These elements form the core of the analytical framework in my study, and I will explain each aspect in detail in the following section.

### 2.5.1 - Market structure

The market structure depends on the concentration of buyers and sellers, which affects the market's stability and frequency of changes. Furthermore, according to Håkansson (1982), the structure is affected by the level of its national or international nature and the available options for firms. Consequently, the outcome of the market concentration and the options has a pressure on the importance of interaction with a certain counterpart. Thus, the capability of a firm to coordinate interaction within its network and create jointness will also have some impact on the quality and the level of its success through the business relationships. In this research I will look at the mentioned characteristics of a market structure in relation to firms' capability in order to analyse the jointness and the interaction within the relationship.

### 2.5.2 - Dynamism

How does dynamic environment affect capability, jointness, particularity and inconsistency.

How does the company manage it.

According to Håkansson et al. (2009), companies in a close relationship should have a greater knowledge of the other parties' actions because the ability to foresee the other parties move is based on the information that companies have about each other. Hence, in a dynamic environment reliance on a single or few relationships increase the opportunity cost, especially when it is considered in terms of the development of others in the market. In this study I will put emphasis on the dimensions that characterises dynamic business environments such as technological changes, internationalization, consumer preferences, and entry and exit of firms. In addition, I will also look at economic uncertainty due to geopolitical factors and unexpected disruptions because it may have some impact on the business environment and thus set the premises for the success of a business network.

It is often argued by market environment researchers that in order to succeed in a dynamic environment, companies require strategic flexibility, in addition to innovation and proactive approach to changes (Butler & Purchase, 2021). It is though convincing to think that companies that have established close relationship might have problems in adopting to changes that happens in a dynamic business environment hence miss the possibility of exploiting the opportunities that comes with such environments. On the other hand, IMP researchers claim that changes that aim to stabilize or develop a network are always a matter of several parties (Håkansson et al., 2009) . Thus, no single firm alone is capable of maintaining or changing the structure of the nature of a business. Hence a company which is striving to stabilize a certain situation or trying to change it, the impact of its effort will depend on how the others in the network react and adjust. As Snehota and Hakansson (1995) put it *“there is some kind of collective network logic that makes interaction possible and thereby is also the ground of changes”*.

### 2.5.3 – Internationalization

The level of internationalization of buying or selling market affects the motivation of a firm which intend to develop international relationships (Håkansson, 1982). It is argued that the organization of a company is often affected by the internationalization because when company is engaged in an internationalized market it will have to choose a suitable strategy based on either the experience of the firm in international business or the level of internationalization in the intended market. Firms might choose different strategies like

establishing sales subsidiaries or buying units in overseas based on the nature of the market environments. In some international markets companies might need to acquire special knowledge for example languages, technology or international trade. According to Håkansson (1982), In analysing the interaction environment the aspect of internationalization is also to be taken into consideration.

#### 2.5.4 - Position in the production line

According to Håkansson (1982), position in the manufacturing channel is an important aspect to consider when analysing interaction environment. This is due to the interconnectedness that arise when firms engage in a business relationship. When a firm do business with another firm, it is often that the particular firm inter into extended network because companies exchange products and services at different stages. For example, if a company B produces a component x and sell it to a company C which incorporate it to its product and then sell the product to the company D all these companies inter into a form of network. That means, the business strategies of the company B will be influenced by those of company C and D and all other interconnected relationships in the network. When analysing business environment within a network it is thus argued that position should be considered.

Management researchers argue that a firm's position is crucial to its performance. This is because it affects its capabilities and ability to provide resources. In traditional management studies, position is typically defined in relation to competitors. However, in the IMP and this study, the term position refers to the nature and type of relationship a firm has and how it is situated in a network with others. According to Håkansson and Ford (2002), a firm's network position changes regardless of its own changes in relationships. This means that a firm's position in the network is affected by the changes that happen in the relationships of their counterparts. Furthermore, Håkansson and Ford (2002) argues that a firm's strategy should be to attain and maintain a favourable position over time by influencing the network environment. This involves finding ways to connect other parties' ways of perceiving the network logic with the firm's own, such as by influencing their interpretation of technology or how certain demands can be met.

#### 2.5.5 - The social system

In international business relationships, social systems may impact business environments thus, influence interaction between firms. According to Håkansson (1982) , social attitudes and perceptions vary between societies, hence they are relevant elements of analysis within interaction studies. Moreover, international business environment is known for its complexity,

interdependence, and constant change. Companies must often adapt their strategies and management styles to the regions of the world they operate in. Political, economic, and cultural shifts often accompany technological advancements, posing management challenges for firms. Despite the opportunities presented by international relationships, businesses are also exposed to relatively high risks due to changes in social systems. Political and economic uncertainty are among the challenges that impact international business relationships, forcing firms to stay informed about the countries in which they operate. Furthermore, ethical issues and matters related to social responsibilities have become top priorities for companies operating internationally, and researchers studying interaction environments must consider these aspects of the wider environment surrounding a particular relationship (Abrahamsen & Håkansson, 2015). However, in this study, I will focus on political, economic and regulatory constraints that might impact the interaction environments of a firm.

2.7- The conceptual framework

Building on the contributions of Bondeli and Havenvid (2022), resilience is here defined as “the result of a company's efforts to get ready for, to adapt, and recover from setbacks and thrive in the midst of turbulent challenges in collaboration with other interconnected network participants”. This collaboration occurs within the established economic norms and informal practices of the specific environment and social system.

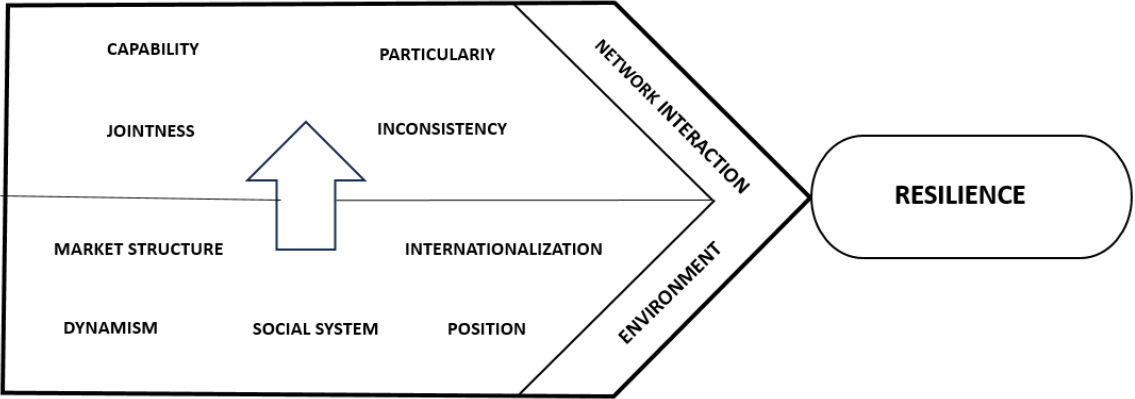


Figure 2. 3: Analytical framework

Figure 2.3 summarizes the perspectives of IMP included in sections 2.3 and 2.4. It combines elements of the interaction environment and components of network interaction, serving as an analytical framework for the master's thesis.



### 3- Research design

In this chapter, I will be discussing the methodology and the choice of research design that I have selected to address the proposed research question. I will begin by elaborating on the choice of my research design and epistemological approach. Later, I will discuss the limitations of the samples used in the research and then describe the data collection methods I employed.

For my study, I aim to explore the business network and the effect of the interaction environment in the context of cross-border relationships. The context of the topic being studied involve a Norwegian company as a seller and firms based in Africa as a buyer. To achieve this, I will be analysing multiple international business relationships. I have chosen to use a qualitative research design as it allows for a greater exploration of a phenomenon that has limited available research. When studying limited-research phenomena, an exploratory qualitative approach is suitable (Saunders et al., 2019).

Based on the current research limitations, my study is most suitable as an exploratory case study rather than an explanatory one. This is because exploratory case studies investigate scenarios where the subject being studied lacks clear or definite outcomes (Lucas et al., 2018). Additionally, qualitative research is intended to provide insight into individuals, situations, and behavioural and social constructs that cannot be comprehended through deductive quantitative approaches (Saunders et al., 2019).

I have conducted a study on interaction as a phenomenon that can be understood only based on individuals' experiences. To achieve my goal, I will use qualitative methods to gather in-depth data in order to gain better understand of the phenomenon. As Lucas et al. (2018) argues, a qualitative case study approach provides a researcher with a unique possibility to gather data about individual cases as well as to interpret and analyze them thoroughly. By engaging in the real life of the studied community, a researcher may gather data and gain crucial insights that help in answering research questions. According to Lucas et al. (2018) , the unique nature of the research object is a part of the setting for research. Hence, the aim should not be to find universal rules but to deeply understand the cases in their own unique environment (Aaltio & Heilmann, 2010).

Moreover, case studies are characterized by their exploration of new topics and their suitability for questions that begin with "why" or "how". Similarly, my research question aims to answer how a Norwegian firm selling to a market that is characterized by turbulent

environments manages its network to achieve and maintain resilience. Therefore, qualitative methods are more appropriate for answering the research question I am exploring.

Furthermore, researchers conducting qualitative studies may adopt either a positivist or interpretivist approach. Lin (1998) explains that a positivist qualitative work aims to document practices that lead to specific outcomes, identify characteristics related to a policy problem, or discover strategic patterns that hold across different settings and actors. On the other hand, interpretivism research aims to understand how general concepts such as "interaction" are manifested in specific settings. *"It is interpretive because researchers need to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the phenomenon being studied (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 163)"* Both approaches seek to uncover details about people's preferences, motivations, and actions that cannot be quantified easily. However, positivist research attempts to identify these details with propositions that can be tested or identified in other cases, while interpretive research combines these details into belief systems unique to a specific case (Lin, 1998). For my study, I will adopt the interpretivism approach to investigate both conscious and unconscious explanations people have about business interactions, particularly within business relationships between a Norwegian and an African-based firm.

This research is an exploratory multiple case study that aims to study a situation or a phenomenon by examining its characteristics through data analysis. The purpose is to identify relevant factors that can help refine the research question. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), exploratory case studies are suitable when the aim is to explore potential factors influencing a specific social issue, and they can be used before conducting a larger study. My research is part of my master's thesis, which has limited time and resources, making it challenging to conduct a large and extensive study on the phenomenon. Therefore, the focus will be on exploring the topic and potentially recommending factors for further research.

When conducting a case study, choosing the unit of analysis is crucial. The unit of analysis determines the scope of the study, such as whether it will focus on individuals, a group, an event, or a process. It also helps researchers define what will be observed, analysed and reported and enables them to draw meaningful conclusions about the studied topic (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 102). By selecting the right unit of analysis, researchers can focus their investigation and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic being studied.

My study focuses on Norwegian companies that sell their products to African companies. To be included in my research, a company must have at least seven years of experience conducting business with its African counterparts. This criterion was established because I believe companies operating for more than seven years have gained adequate experience and knowledge about business interaction and the environment. Throughout my research, the Norwegian companies are referred to as sellers, while the African companies that buy from Norway are called buyers.

### 3.1- Sampling

Sampling is an important aspect of qualitative research design. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), researchers need to determine the sample universe or size of the study based on the study design. The sample universe refers to the group of individuals from whom cases can be appropriately selected for an interview study. To achieve this, specific criteria for inclusion and exclusion need to be established. These criteria help define the limits of the sample universe, the overall population, and the sample selection strategy (Saunders et al., 2012).

During my research, I needed to gather information that could only be obtained from individuals with relevant experience and specific positions. To achieve this, I used purposive sampling, more specifically, judgment sampling. As Sekaran and Bougie (2016) states, judgment sampling involves selecting subjects who are best positioned to provide the required information.

In order to select respondents for my research, I established certain criteria based on my research question and methodology. One of the key criteria was that the firms must be Norwegian and have business relationships with firms based in Africa. The Norwegian firms had to be the sellers, while the African firms were expected to be the buyers. Moreover, the respondents from these firms had to be individuals with relevant information and knowledge about the topic of my study. Specifically, I required respondents with key positions and decision-making authority, such as marketing managers, sales managers, and CEOs. I believe that participants with these criteria possess information that will enable me to gather valuable insights and data for my research.

During my study, I conducted 6 interviews with respondents from three Norwegian firms and three firms based in Africa. Out of the interviewees, 2 Norwegian sellers and 2 buyers had a

business relationship with each other forming two dyads. The African-based firms were invited to participate in my study by the Norwegian seller.s Initially, my plan was to interview respondents who had business relationships with each other, but most of the Norwegian informants didn't agree to share their African counterparts' contacts. However, I managed to recruit one buyer through my own contacts, and the participant has business relationships with Norwegian sellers. In this study, the Norwegian firms are referred to as S1, S2 and S3, and the African-based buyers are referred to as B1, B2 and B3.

### 3.2- Introduction of respondents

To maintain anonymity of the information collected for this study, I will assign codes to each respondent. The code S1 will be used for the respondent from the firm S1, while S2 and S3 will refer to respondents from their respective companies. Similarly, the code B1 will be used for the informant from the buyer firm B1, and B2 and B3 for those from their respective firms. The letter 'S' represents the "seller" group, while 'B' represents the "buyer" group. More details on the companies will be provided later in chapter 4.

#### 3.2.1- Norwegian selling firms

S1 is a company that specializes in the production and export of seafood ingredients as well as ready-to-eat meals in powder format, such as soup. Their products are based on side streams from the seafood industry, which includes ingredients used in the production of snacks, baby food, and noodles. The company's main business strategy is to make their products available in developing countries, as they target consumers with low income. As a result, S1 has established seller-buyer relationships with companies in Namibia, Nigeria, Morocco, South Africa, and some countries in South America. In terms of research recruitment, the company fits the criteria, and the CEO has extensive experience in doing business with companies based in Africa.

S2 is a Norwegian company that specializes in developing, producing, and exporting nutritional supplements made of sea products. It has over 50 years of experience and have established partnerships with various companies worldwide. Their products are supplied to companies in Asia, America, Europe, and Africa, where they have established seller and buyer relationships with firms in, DRC Congo, Nigeria, and South Africa. S2 has been conducting business with African-based companies for over two decades, supplying both semi-finished

and finished consumer products. The company has established sales departments in some countries, while in others, they collaborate with other firms that buy and sell their products. Due to their extensive experience and long-term relationships with African-based firms, S2 is considered relevant to my study. Additionally, the informant from S2 has worked in the company for many years and may provide valuable insights that could be useful for my research.

During my research, I interviewed another company called S3 that maintains a seller and buyer relationship. They specialize in exporting salted dried fish to various countries in Europe, Africa, and South America. S3 was founded in 2009 and has been exporting their products to multiple countries, including Angola, Brazil, Congo, and Portugal. Since S3 has business relations with some companies in Africa, the informant is considered relevant and may provide valuable insights for my study.

### 3.2.2- Africa-based buying firms

B1 is a company based in Namibia that specializes in importing and supplying food products, among other items. According to B1, they import products from various countries, such as Kenya, South Africa, India, Norway, and Thailand. The company has been importing from Norway for over a decade, with their primary imports being Omega3, stock cubes, and their latest product, soup in powder format. The reason why B1 is relevant to my study is due to their long-term business relationship with a Norwegian seller. Additionally, B1 was recommended to me with S1 with whom they have a business partnership.

A second Africa-based firm which I interviewed is B3. The firm has a buyer relationship with a Norwegian company, S3, deals with importing and supplying salted dried fish from Norway. Their business relationship with the Norwegian counterpart started in 2016. B3 purchases Norwegian fish and distributes it to their network of retail traders in certain areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This company is relevant to my study due to its business dealings with a Norwegian firm. Additionally, S3, recommended B3 to participate in my study due to their business relationship.

B2 is another selling firm which participated in my study. The firm is based in Tanzania and specializes in importing beverages from European countries. They supply these imported products to various retailers across Tanzania. B2 has a business relationship with a Norwegian company that produces and exports a luxury beverage. This partnership has been ongoing for

over 15 years, making it relevant to my study due to its long-term nature. Key information about the participants and the interview conducted is summarised in Table 3.1.

*Table 3. 2 - participants overview*

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Business segment</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Interview date</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Language</b>
S1 (dyadic relation with B1)	Norway	Food products (supplements) (dyadic relation with B1)	CEO	1.11.2023	50min	Norwegian
S2	Norway	Food ingredients	Sales manager	1.11.2023	40	Norwegian
S3 (In dyadic relation with B3)	Norway	Fish	CEO	06.11.2023	30	Norwegian
B1 (dyadic relation with S1)	Namibia	Food supplement	Sales & purchasing manager	08.11.2023	25	English
B2	Tanzania	Beverages	Product-manager	05.11.2023	27	Swahili
B3 (in dyadic relation with S3)	DRC Congo	Fish	CEO	13.11.2023	23	Swahili

### 3.3- Data collection

Once a researcher has chosen a research design, the next step is to determine the qualitative techniques for collecting data. According to (Yin, 2009), when conducting research using a case study, the methods for data collection are not strict, and the phenomenon to be studied and the type of research question should guide the researcher in the decision-making process. Hence, the researcher might choose to use primary data, secondary data, or a combination of

both. In this case study, I will use primary data that I will collect through in-depth interviews and observations that I made while visiting some firms. I chose this method of data collection due to the nature of the phenomenon I wish to study. I intend to study a phenomenon that is difficult to gain knowledge about through documents because it involves people interacting. Therefore, the most appropriate way of gaining an understanding is by talking to the main subjects and making observations.

Before collecting any data for my research, I conducted preliminary research on the firms that had agreed to participate. To gather relevant contextual information that could be useful for my research problem, I visited the locations of two firms - S1 and S2 - and had informal meetings with their CEO and sales manager, respectively. These meetings helped me to arrive at a precise problem that I wanted to research. The firm S3 is in a different region of Norway, making it impossible for the researcher to visit the firm physically. However, to establish a good research environment, an informal phone meeting was held with the sales manager before the interview. Similarly, for firms B1, B2 and B3 based in Africa, the researcher had a telephone conversation with them. I obtained information about the history, size, business purposes, resources, interdependent relationships, and external business environments of these firms during the meetings. After conducting preliminary informal meetings, I was able to gather crucial information and gain experience that helped me determine the most suitable method for collecting data. As a result, I decided to conduct a semi-structured interview, which I will explain in detail in the upcoming section.

### 3.3.1- Semi structured interview

Saunders et al. (2012) suggests that semi-structured interviews are useful in qualitative research methods as they provide researchers with valuable data and new ideas on the subject being studied. Moreover, semi-structured interviews are less rigid than structured interviews but more structured than unstructured interviews. During semi-structured interviews, the researcher has a set of pre-determined questions or topics to guide the conversation. In contrast, unstructured, in-depth interviews have no predetermined questions, and the interviewee is given the freedom to talk about events, behaviors, and beliefs related to the topic. Structured interviews, on the other hand, lack flexibility and freedom as they rely on predetermined questionnaires. Typically, structured interviews are used to collect quantifiable data and are referred to as quantitative interviews (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 374).

For the study of the phenomenon, I am interested in, I will be using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This type of interview allows for flexibility during the conversation, where a researcher can explore interesting topics or dive deeper into responses. According to Saunders et al. (2012), this interview method permits participants to express their thoughts freely, which helps capture detailed and rich data.

Moreover, qualitative method researchers argue that the semi-structured interview format allows for more conversational and less rigid interaction, resulting in participants feeling more engaged and willing to share their perspectives. Therefore, this method is particularly effective for collecting qualitative data, as it provides a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes. Hence, I believe that semi-structured interviews would be an effective approach to my study. It would provide a balance between structure and flexibility, making it a suitable tool for obtaining in-depth qualitative data. Additionally, it would allow me to gain valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of the participants. This method would also allow for adaptation in the research process, as each participant has unique experiences in their respective business environments. In the following section, I will describe the structure and content of the interview guide I utilized to gather data.

### 3.3.2- Interview guide

The purpose of the interview guide is to establish a connection between the research question, theory, and the participant responses, thus providing evidence. The guide is structured according to the topics that I intend to explore, which are divided into three categories. The first category consists of questions that aim to explore the market environment as presented by the IMP model of Håkansson (1982). These questions cover the elements of the market environment, including market structure, market dynamism, internationalization, position in the network, and social system.

In the interview guide, the questions that investigate this category are formulated as follows: To what extent can you explain the competition level in the market as a seller? This question seeks to examine market structures, exploring their characteristics that can impact business interaction and resilience.

Regarding dynamism, the main questions are formulated as follows: *“How easy is it to establish relationships with new buyers?”* and *“how often do you change business partners?”*



These questions tend to investigate dynamism in the market because it is an important factor in understanding its environment and how it affects companies.

Understanding market *internationalization* is an essential aspect of the interaction model. To achieve this, I will explore some questions that will help me understand the significance of this factor in the business environment. The questions in my interview guide that seeks to investigate this element are, *what is your motivation for doing business internationally?* “, And *“how have international relationships affected you company?* By asking these questions, I believe I will be able to identify some key characteristics of the international business environment.

Another important question in the interview guide aims to investigate a firm's position in the manufacturing channel. Question which intends to investigate this element is, *“do you have contact with your customers suppliers or partners?”* And *“how do you get knowledge about the final consumer?”* The objective is to explore the position of the seller in the business network and the impact of their position on themselves and others.

The social system is the last important element in the interaction environment. In my interview guide the questions that aim to explore this element involves, *“how often do you experience problems related to the political situation in your partners country?”* Another question is, *“what impact have regulations and constraints on your business relationships?”* I believe these questions will help in providing crucial information that can be used to analyse the business environment and its impact on the network.

The second category in my interview guide delves into the components of network interactions, including capability, jointness, particularity, and inconsistency (Håkansson et al., 2009).

To explore capability I have included questions, *“how do you access resources like knowledge, skills and infrastructures that are managed by your partner?”* And *“how do you share resources that are managed by you with your partner?”* By asking these questions I believe that I will be able to collect information on resource sharing and resource management within interacting companies.

Another component of network interaction is jointness. The main questions in my interview guide that seeks to explore this component are, *“how much of your activities are based on trust?”* And *“how dependent are you on your partners?”* I believe these questions will help to

get some valuable information from the participants which I can use to explore the jointness in a business interaction.

A third component in this category is particularity. In order to explore this component, the main questions in my interview guide are formulated as follow: *“To what extent do you experience having common goals and understanding?”* and, *“How do you ensure effective communication between your companies?”*

The third category tends to collect information about volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity in the market and business network. This category is considered a sub-category and will be explored through questions intended to study the two main categories or possibly by follow-up questions. This is because the VUCA elements can be observed through the market environment elements and the network interaction components.

In addition, another sub-category, which intends to investigate resilience, is included. Resilience will be studied through network interaction components because the research question aims to study how resilience is achieved through networks. The main questions that aim to investigate resilience are formulated as follows: *“How can you explain critical events or situations that have affected your business operations?”* This question was followed by *“How did you solve the situation?”*. Another question intended to investigate resilience was, *“How can you explain the role of your counterpart when dealing with disruptive situations?”* The questions explained above are relatively the same questions as those for the buyer group. However, they have been adjusted to fit buyers.

Furthermore, due to the nature of the research topic and the chosen method, all main questions in my interview guide are open-ended. These formats of questions are preferred in studies that intend to comprehend the "what," "how," and "why" of a certain phenomenon. They allow the respondents to answer the questions in their own words, which provides more detailed information than closed questions. Open-ended questions are highly recommended in qualitative studies as they help researchers better understand the subject being studied. These types of questions are best explored in qualitative studies (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 179).

### 3.3.3- Execution of the interviews

The interviews were conducted either in person or through virtual platforms such as Teams, WhatsApp, and telephone. For respondents from S1 and S2, the interviews took place at their

office, while for S3, the interview was conducted through Teams. As for B1, B2, and B3, WhatsApp was utilized since they were in different countries.

The researcher faced some limitations while using WhatsApp as a means of communication. It was not possible to observe non-verbal cues such as body language or the business environment, which could have helped in understanding if the respondents were uncomfortable with certain questions. Additionally, WhatsApp does not allow recording audio, which was a drawback. The researcher resorted to using an external device to record the conversations, but the audio quality was reduced, making it impossible to transcribe using automated transcription tools. As a result, the researcher had to transcribe the conversations manually, which was a time-consuming task.

Moreover, during my research, I conducted in-person interviews with participants from S1 and S2. Additionally, I had the opportunity to observe the production facilities and other business-related processes of both companies. The duration of all interviews varied between 23 to 50 minutes. I noticed that online interviews were generally shorter compared to in-person meetings. This might be because the online participants were less comfortable elaborating on some of their responses, as they had not met the interviewer in person.

At the beginning of each meeting, I introduced myself and expressed my gratitude to the interviewees for their willingness to participate in my research project. Following the introduction, I presented the consent form and requested permission to record the audio of the interview. For in-person meetings, the consent form was presented to the participants for signature, whereas their consent was recorded at the start of the interview for online meetings.

Recording in-depth interviews is a useful technique that can greatly benefit the research process and provide valuable data for analysis. By recording interviews, researchers are able to accurately capture the exact words and expressions used by the participants, minimizing the risk of misinterpretation or distortion of information. Additionally, researchers may need to listen to the recording multiple times in order to fully understand the content, especially during the data analysis process.

Furthermore, Saunders et al. (2012) advise that researchers can use recordings to validate and cross-reference participant quotes in publications, which can enhance the credibility and reliability of the research findings. In situations where transcription is uncertain or ambiguous, the original audio can be referred to in order to clarify and resolve discrepancies. Active listening is also a significant advantage of recording interviews, as it allows

researchers to focus less on note-taking and more on fully understanding what the interviewee is expressing.

To analyze the in-depth data that I collected, I transcribed the audio recordings manually, leaving out the irrelevant information to my study. This method proved to be time consuming and significantly increased the workload associated with transcription. I tried to use transcription tools, but the software could not transcribe correctly due to the different dialects that the respondents speak. However, to ensure the quality of the transcriptions, I listened to the audio several times while reading the text to verify that the content from the audio was understood and nothing important for the study was left out. Wherever I noticed any discrepancies in the text, I rectified them. The languages that were used in the interviews were Norwegian, English, and Swahili.

Before the interviews, I informed the respondents that the collected data would be anonymised, stored securely and deleted after completing the research project. After the interview, I asked the respondents for permission to contact them if I needed clarifications.

### 3.4- Data analysis

In this section, I will explain the method and philosophical approach used during the data analysis process. I will begin by elaborating on the type of reasoning utilized, followed by an explanation of the data reduction process.

When I began my study, I formulated my research question and then created an analytical framework based on the existing theories. This deductive approach allows researchers to connect their work with the established knowledge in their field of interest, providing a solid foundation for analysis (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 549). Some researchers have suggested that those who solely use deductive methods in their analysis could benefit from incorporating alternative approaches, such as abductive reasoning. According to Dubois and Gadde (2002), abductive reasoning promotes creativity in exploring potential explanations for observed phenomena. Hence, it allows analysts to consider a broader range of concepts that may not be immediately apparent. Moreover, it is also suggested that the abductive approach is suitable for inferring new theory or developing existing theory, which is appropriate for qualitative studies. This approach involves ongoing reflection on data and its position in relation to different theories. By doing so, the data can contribute to and further develop the selected research questions (Conaty, 2021). Hence, I will use an abductive approach in content analysis to identify emerging patterns, themes, and concepts.

I want to emphasize that there is limited existing research on the topic I am studying. As a result of this, I have decided to use the systematic combining method for my study. This method is a structured and organized way of combining and synthesizing data during the analysis phase of research. It will enable me to understand better the context I'm studying by continuously referring back and forth between the framework, data sources, and analysis (Saunders et al., 2012).

To analyze the data I have collected, I will follow the five stages recommended by (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 557). The initial stage involves identifying categories or codes that allow me to comprehend the data. According to Saunders et al. (2012), once the data has been categorized, the second stage is to integrate the from various sources by attaching them to the appropriate categories or codes. In my study, I used only data collected through interviews, thus, making this stage irrelevant. Next, in the third stage, I will establish key themes or patterns that can help me identify relationships and patterns within the data. Based on these patterns or relationships, in the fourth stage, I may develop hypotheses that can be studied further. Lastly, in the fifth stage, I will draw and verify conclusions based on the results of my analysis.

#### 3.4.1- Data reduction

After collecting, transcribing and cleaning the data, the next step was to reduce it. To achieve this, I categorized the data into different analytical categories, assigning each one a suitable name, also known as code or label. This categorization provided a relevant structure that helped me organize and further analyze the data. To identify these categories, I relied on my analytical framework, which is based on existing theory and literature, and some emergent terms used by the participants that I found useful for my study.

For example, in the first stage, I assigned all phrases, statements, and sentences that talked about visiting the code “visit” (for relationship development).

In the same way, the statements that talked about invitations, greetings, together, I assigned the code “invitation” (for personal relationship).

The statements that included contact, calling, I assigned them “contact” (for active engagement).

The statements which talked about language I assigned code “com” (for effective communications).

The phrases that included “we want”, “understand” was assigned code “Both” (for common goals).

After completing the initial categorisation stage, I analysed the data by searching for patterns and relationships among the categories. In certain cases, it was necessary to merge and rearrange the categories to refine the analysis and make it more comprehensible. During this stage, some patterns became clearer by using a matrix to display the reduced data in a more condensed and organized way. This allowed me to establish key themes that I have used to identify relationships and patterns within the data. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016, p. 347), a matrix display is recommended for displaying qualitative data due to its descriptive nature. A matrix below shows an example of data display on the interview analysis with participant S1 involving the unit “particularity” as a component of network interaction. The first row involves 1<sup>st</sup> order quotes reduced from the interview. 2<sup>nd</sup> row includes more abstract themes narrated by combining framework and theories. 3<sup>rd</sup> row is the analytical concept stemming from network interaction perspectives.

*Table 3. 3 - Data display, S1), an example*

<b>1<sup>st</sup> order</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> order</b>	<b>Analytical concept</b>
I visit them once or twice a year.	Maintenance of relationship	Particularity
My family were on vacation in the country, so I asked them to visit the firm. The CEO invited them for a dinner.	Personal relationship	
Recently we have introduced a new product in the market. It is a ready-to-eat meal. I contact them often to follow up on how it is doing in the market. Luckily, it's very good.	Active engagement	
We talk often. We both speak English, so it is very easy to call.	Communicating frequently and managing challenges. Effective communication	
We both want the end user to be satisfied with our products.	A clear common goal	

In the next section, I will outline the steps and approaches taken to improve the validity and reliability of my research.

### 3.5- Trustworthiness

Ensuring the quality of research work is crucial for researchers who want their work to be credible and accepted by others. When researchers discuss the trustworthiness of their research, they are usually referring to the issue of determining its quality (Saunders et al., 2012). Hence, the criteria used to evaluate the quality of research may vary depending on the type of research and the philosophical perspective. According to Saunders et al. (2012) the term '*reliability*' and '*validity*' are often used when discussing the issue of trustworthiness, particularly in association with positivist quantitative research. However, some researchers argue that these criteria cannot be applied to qualitative research. Some qualitative researchers have thus modified these concepts to suit qualitative research designs. Others have developed new versions that consider the nature of qualitative research, such as using '*dependability*' instead of '*reliability*', '*credibility*' instead of '*internal validity*', and '*transferability*' instead of '*external validity*' (Schwandt et al., 2007). Additionally, '*authenticity criteria*' have been developed to replace '*validity*' when evaluating the quality of qualitative research.

According to Guba (1981), qualitative research is a diverse set of interpretive methods that aim to explore, understand, and explain people's experiences within social constructs using non-numerical data. Typically, qualitative research involves interviewing or observing those who are central to the research topic. The resulting data is usually in the form of text, capturing what interviewees have said or done. The data is then analysed, often by the interviewer or observer, which can lead to subjectivity and potential bias. As a result, qualitative studies have often been criticized for lacking transparency, rigour, and justification of data collection and analysis methods, thereby casting doubt on the integrity of findings. According to Schwandt et al. (2007) over the years, the question of "judging the quality" in qualitative research has been debated by methodologists, and in recent years, there seems to be little agreement on what constitutes a good and trustworthy qualitative study.

Saunders et al. (2012) identifies three different opinions in the literature regarding the best way to assess the quality of qualitative research. The first approach is dominated by methodologists who propose the use of positivist terms like "validity" and "reliability" to describe rigour in qualitative studies. The second group with naturalistic paradigm view, advocates for alternative terms like dependability, credibility, conformability, and transferability (Guba, 1981). The third view is held by methodologists who challenge the idea

of having pre-determined criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research. They argue that qualitative research involves multiple research paradigms and theories, making it impossible to develop and apply a single evaluative criterion. The methodologists, who follow a naturalistic approach, have developed techniques that qualitative researchers can use to achieve trustworthiness. Due to the nature of my study, the naturalistic paradigm approach and technique suggested by Guba (1981) is relevant. In the next section, I will explain the elements of this approach and how I applied it in my study.

### 3.5.1- Credibility

When researchers adopt the naturalistic paradigm approach, credibility becomes a key aspect that ensures the trustworthiness and authenticity of research findings. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding phenomena in their natural settings. To produce plausible results that reflect the complexities and nuances of the real-world context, establishing credibility in this context is crucial.

There are several strategies that can be employed to establish credibility in research. Saunders et al. (2012) recommend that researchers should aim to gain the “*cooperation*” of participants and build a rapport with them. This can be achieved by explaining the purpose of the research project to the participants and how their participation can help the researcher (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 225). I held informal meetings with the participant before the interviews where I explained the purpose of the study and ensured them that their participation was of great value to my study. Furthermore, the researcher should provide guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. By following these steps, Saunders et al. (2012) suggest that researchers can establish credibility and obtain quality information.

During my research, I conducted interviews with individuals in key positions. Specifically, I interviewed three selling firms and three buying firms. In doing so, I employed multiple perspectives on the topic of interest, hence increasing understanding. The participant from S1 has 43 years of experience in the position of CEO, and the participant from S2 has been working in the same position for 11 years. Interviewing respondents with long experience in the topic of interest is one way of ensuring credibility. Additionally, I visited some firms, S1 and S2, beforehand and held virtual meetings with those I could not meet physically. These interactions helped me to identify both common and unique qualities. As suggested by Guba (1981), extended interaction with a situation or environment allows researchers to understand its essential or characteristic features. All the participants that I was able to interview possess plenty of knowledge on the phenomenon of interest, increasing credible results.



### 3.5.2- Transferability

Transferability is a crucial aspect that should be considered when discussing the findings of qualitative research. According to Guba (1981), transferability refers to the degree to which the results of a study can be tested in another context or situation. Unlike quantitative research that seeks generalization, qualitative research focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of a particular context. It emphasizes understanding phenomena within their natural context. However, transferability recognizes that the insights gained from a qualitative study might have relevance or applicability to similar contexts. Still, it emphasizes the importance of context specificity. Therefore, researchers need to take into account the unique characteristics of the original context, including cultural, social, and historical elements, to apply the findings elsewhere. Guba (1981) suggests that, to ensure transferability, researchers can apply theoretical/purposeful sampling to maximize the range of information covered.

In my study, I extended the range of information by including only informants with long experience on the topic being studied. Additionally, I asked respondents with seller's perspectives to nominate respondents with buyers' perspectives, allowing me to include different viewpoints in the same relationship. One of the respondents from S1 recommended the respondent from B1, and S3 recommended participant from B3. Furthermore, I included one more Norwegian seller, (S2), and one Africa-based buyer, (B2), who are not in a business relationship with each other in my sample. As a result, I believe I was able to collect thick descriptive data that will allow a comparison of this context to other possible contexts to which transferability might be contemplated.

### 3.5.3- Dependability

Dependability in the naturalistic paradigm refers to the quality and consistency of qualitative research findings. Establishing dependability is essential for ensuring the trustworthiness and quality of the study within this paradigm. According to Guba (1981), some of the considerations regarding dependability involve consistency in data collection and analysis. To ensure dependability in my study, I used the same interview guide for all respondents, with minor adjustments made to suit each group being interviewed, i.e., sellers and buyers. This approach helped me maintain consistency in the data collection process, thus improving dependability. You can find both interview guides attached in appendices (1 and 2).

### 3.5.4- Confirmability

Confirmability is an essential component of the naturalistic paradigm in qualitative research. It refers to the degree to which the findings of a study are based on the collected data and the

participants' experiences rather than the researcher's biases, perspectives, or preconceptions (Guba, 1981). Moreover, Treharne and Riggs (2015) state that researchers must demonstrate that the findings are grounded in the data and not influenced by personal biases or theoretical inclinations. To ensure confirmability, Treharne and Riggs (2015, p. 60) suggest that data should be checked and rechecked throughout the data collection and analysis process; hence, regular journaling is one way to achieve this. During the data collection and analysis process, I recorded my reflections after each interview to evaluate my role as an interviewer.

Journaling helped me keep records of the interview process and improve after each interview. To document my analysis, I used a coding schema to identify codes and patterns. In the analysis section, I have provided detailed information about the data collection and analysis process. Therefore, I argue that my research findings' confirmability is strengthened.

In the following section, I will briefly discuss ethical considerations and potential limitations related to carrying out my research.

### 3.6- Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations in research refer to the behavioural standards that guide the researcher's conduct in relation to the rights of those who are affected by the study. Ethical concerns arise as researchers seek access to organizations and individuals to collect, analyze, manage, and report data (Saunders et al., 2012). Research institutions and authorities have developed codes of ethics that aim to avoid poor practice, malpractice, and harm, as well as promote ethical practice and private or public beneficence. According to Saunders et al. (2012), some of the important principles that researchers should consider are related to the integrity and objectivity of the researcher, respect for others, avoidance of harm, and privacy of those taking part. Moreover, researchers should ensure that participation is voluntary, participants have the right to withdraw, informed consent is obtained, and confidentiality of data is ensured, including the maintenance of anonymity of participants.

To meet ethical requirements, I have followed the ethical guidance for research work provided by The NTNU university, and Sikt (formerly Norwegian Centre of Research Data, NSD). I have informed the participants about the purpose of the study and how the information collected will be treated and stored. I have also assured the participants that their personal information and identity will not be revealed to a third party and will be deleted upon completion of the study. Moreover, I have obtained each participant's consent and informed them that they have the right to withdraw it whenever they decide to do so. Additionally, I filled the notification form and submitted it to Sikt prior to data collection process.

### 3.7- Limitations

Although qualitative studies offer valuable insights into complex phenomena, they have certain limitations that researchers need to recognize. It is crucial to acknowledge these limitations to ensure appropriate interpretation and transferability of findings (Schwandt et al., 2007). My study is about exploring the international environment; thus, it was crucial to involve relevant participants in the topic.

The participants from the buyer firms were situated in different African countries, making it impossible to arrange physical meetings with them. Consequently, interviews were conducted online through WhatsApp. Hence, it was impossible to observe their business environment and body language, which could have been helpful in improving the analysis. Moreover, some respondents from African companies were reluctant to provide detailed information, providing only brief answers to some of the questions.

Overall, the African respondents spent much less time in the interview compared to their Norwegian counterparts. Similarly, during the study, it was found that some Norwegian companies hesitated to provide recommendations or share contacts of their Africa-based business partners. They stated that their internal policy prohibits disclosure of information about customers or suppliers to third parties. Out of three participants, one stated that they were not comfortable revealing the identities of their customers or suppliers. As a result, this further restricted the possibility of studying firms in the same business relationship.

During the interview, some participants used language that may have limited the quality of information shared. For example, the interviews with respondents B2 and B3 were conducted in Swahili and later translated into English for analysis. This switching between languages might have affected the quality of information shared because the respondents may not have understood some key terms. I consider this as one of the challenges that firms in cross-border and cross-cultural business relationships must deal with in their business communications. However, whenever the respondents did not understand the terms being used, the interviewer had to interpret the content. This may have introduced some bias into the interview process.

## 4- Context

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the study's context, starting with a briefing on the business environments in African countries and then an introduction to the participants involved in my research.

As the participating firms are expected to remain anonymous, I will use the codes I mentioned earlier instead of their names and the companies they represent.

I will first start with explaining the business environment in Africa, then I will describe the characteristics of the seller group, followed by the buyer group.

### 4.1- Business environment in Africa

As I mentioned earlier, several African countries face difficulties such as political instability, poor social and economic conditions, and a high level of corruption. These challenges can hinder the establishment of a favourable business environment, which may discourage foreign investors, especially in countries experiencing war or political violence, due to the possibility of incurring losses.

Considering the business environment, The World Bank has published a yearly report called Ease of Doing Business, which analyses the regulations that either facilitate or prevent business growth. This report evaluates various indicators related to business regulations, property rights, and their protection across 190 economies (The World Bank, 2020). It covers several areas, such as *“starting a business, obtaining construction permits, accessing electricity, registering property, obtaining credit, protecting minority investors, paying taxes, trading across borders, enforcing contracts, and resolving insolvency”* (The World Bank, 2020).

Figure 4.1 displays the scores of African countries according to the Doing Business Report of 2020. It includes the scores of all African countries considered in my study and can be compared to Norway's score of 82.6. Namibia scored 61.4, Tanzania scored 54.5, DRC Congo scored 36.2 and Morocco scored 73.4. Although Morocco wasn't analysed in-depth in this study, it was included due to the valuable business relationship information provided by participant S1. Moreover, according to The World Bank's indicators for scoring, the countries that receive low scores are deemed to have volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous business environments. This means that the presence of VUCA elements is higher in countries

with lower scores. Furthermore, African currencies are often unstable, and most international purchasing is conducted in US dollars, making them highly susceptible to any changes that affect the US dollar. For example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has released an analytical note on the Regional Economic Outlook. The note suggests that between January 2022 and May 2023, most African currencies have weakened by an average of 8% against the US dollar (Kemoe et al., 2023). This, in turn, has led to inflation pressures across the continent, affecting the business environment.

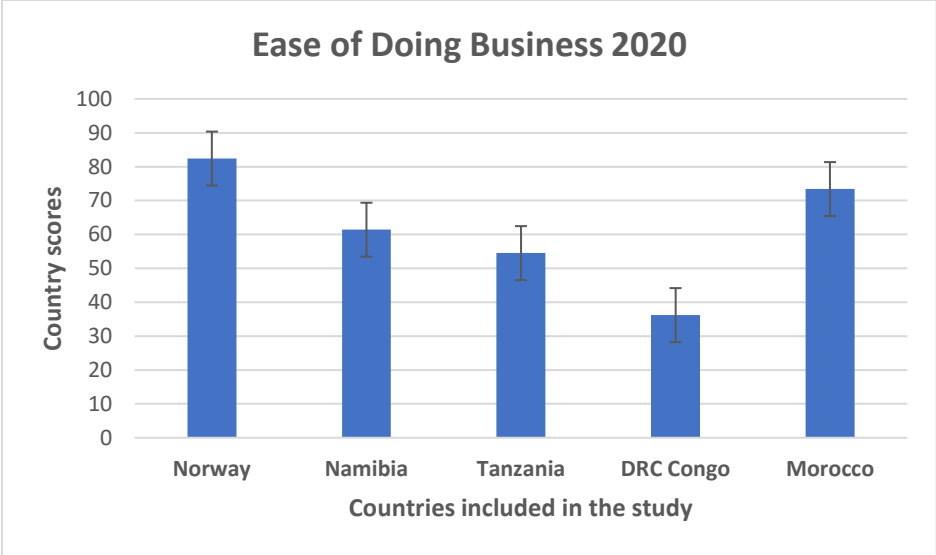


Figure 4. 2: Ease of Doing Business Scores 2020, adapted from The World Bank (2020).

4.2- Norwegian sellers

As part of my study, I examined three Norwegian companies that manufacture and export their products globally. One such company, S1, produces food supplements using fish by-products from Norway, China, India, Japan, and some African countries. With over 50 years of experience, the company specializes in selling its products to low-income countries in Africa and South America. Their products include, among others, broth, stock, and powder soup. They also supply semi-finished products to other Norwegian manufacturers. Their product range includes finished goods for consumers and semi-finished products for use as inputs in other firms' products. They have both standardized and non-standardized products, with the latter being produced according to customer requests.

Their primary customers are wholesalers who supply the products to consumers in various countries. Once the products are manufactured as per demand, they are shipped directly to the buyers without involving any third-party auctions. This means that the firm has direct interaction with its buyers. However, the company does not directly interact with consumers, which is not the focus of my study.

Another firm I included in my study is S2. It is a multi-international company that produces and exports various fish-based food products globally. It has several production departments in some Eastern and Western European countries as well as some Asian and African countries. In Africa, S2 operates in Nigeria, DRC Congo, Ghana, and Kenya. While S2 has subsidiaries and sales centres in some countries, like Nigeria, it cooperates with wholesalers in others. The department I interviewed focuses on the DRC Congo market, primarily selling and exporting salted and dried fish from Norway. The products are shipped directly from the Norwegian selling department to the Congolese buyer without intermediaries. S2 has been active in the Congolese market for nine years.

During my interviews, I also interviewed a third company from Norway, known as S3. S3 operates as a seller and has established relationships with buyers in DRC Congo, Angola, Brazil, and Portugal. The company sells directly to its buyers, who are then responsible for supplying the fish to their respective retailers.

In addition to the previously mentioned companies, there is a fourth company in the seller group that I studied hereby mentioned as S4. It is involved in the production and sale of timber products to a buyer in Tanzania. The company offers a variety of products such as doors, roofing panels, and furniture items tailored to meet the needs of its customers. S4 has been in business relations with this markets for 7 years and views it as a growing market. Moreover, S4 has been in the same industry for over 35 years, but it has only started exploring new markets outside Norway in the last 10 years. According to the informants from S4, it collaborates with one firm which is based in the mentioned market. The products are mainly semi-finished when shipped to customers, and buyers handle the finishing before selling it to the end-user. The company ships its products directly to its customers, meaning there is a direct interaction between the company and its buyers thus making it relevant to my study.

#### 4.3- African-based buyers

As part of my study, I have included a company from Namibia, which I have labelled as B1. This company is one of the ones representing the buyer's group. B1 has been doing business with S1 for about 12 years. They import food products from various countries in Asia, Europe, and other African countries. From Norway, they mainly import broth, stock, and ready-to-eat soup. Soup (in a powder state) is the latest product introduced to the market. Moreover, B1 supplies these products to small firms and shops that sell them to the end-user. According to B1, their business relationship with S1 is stable and reliable. They have not worked with any other Norwegian company because B1's products are cheaper, and their quality has been consistent for many years. For B1, consistency is important to their customers, so they do not need to change suppliers.

In my study, the second buyer that is included is named B3, who is a firm based in DRC Congo. They specialize in importing salted, dried fish from Norway. B3 has been doing business with S3 for six years, and their relationship has been growing strong. According to B3, the demand for Norwegian fish in Congo is increasing rapidly. However, many newcomers are trying to enter the market and supply the dried fish. This includes several Norwegian companies and many new businesses based in Congo. Despite the competition, B3 has decided to stick with S3 as their supplier because they have a great understanding of each other's requirements. This ensures that the quality of fish is reliable. Moreover, B3 is a wholesaler of dried fish, and they distribute it to other retailers within the local market. According to the informant from B3, it is not easy for Western companies to enter the local market due to the complexity related to social and political systems in Congo. *“if you are a western foreigner and want to do business here you will meet a lot of obstacles... you have to know who to contact to acquire a permit or license”* (B3). Moreover, B3 explains that knowing the local environment and market dynamics is essential to succeed in Congo. During elections, predictions of potential political unrest are made based on signals in society. These predictions are then shared with counterparts in Norway to make essential decisions together *“if we see signs of unrest... we talk together and we cancel deliveries”* (B3).

The third company in the buyer group is known as B2. It is an import and export company based in Tanzania. B2 specializes in importing beverages from Europe and other parts of the world. With over 40 years of experience, B2 has established itself as a reliable player in the market.

As for their business relationship with the Norwegian company, B2 sources its product from a specific Norwegian producer and mainly supplies it to other companies in Tanzania. The product is considered a luxury beverage and is only supplied to a selected few clients due to its high cost. B2 has been working with their Norwegian partner for over 14 years and has established a strong partnership.

In this section, I have provided a brief explanation of the sample used and the context in which the analysis is built. Although the companies differ in terms of business nature, product offerings, size, and experience, these factors are not the focus of my study. Rather, the common factor among them is their involvement in an international business relationship with a buyer and seller relation with a Norwegian or Africa-based firm. In the next section, I will review my research results and attempt to provide a response to the research question stated in the introduction.



## 5- Analysis

In this chapter, I will present the analysis result of the data I gathered through interviews. The data is analysed for each individual firm, both in the seller and buyer groups. I divided the analysis into two main categories. The first category explores the "business environment," focusing mainly on elements of the interaction environment described in the IMP approach. The second category explores the components of network interaction. I identified individual factors that influence the success of each business based on the two main groups. Moreover, I used the identified individual factors to observe common company characteristics, which will form the basis of the discussion in the next chapter and to answer my research questions.

In my research, I inquired about various aspects such as market structure, dynamism, internationalization, and position in the manufacturing channel, as well as the social system. To understand the network interaction, I asked questions about the capability, jointness, particularity, and inconsistency. As part of assessing resilience, I asked about past business disruptions and their solutions as well as future preparedness for potential adverse events, both individually and in collaboration with partners

As these companies have been operational for a considerable time, it is expected that they have faced and overcome various challenges. I believe that every company possesses a certain capability that helps them navigate the unpredictable business environment. The table displaying abstract components according to the analytical framework and the characteristic factors observed in the data is provided for each individual participant, followed by detailed explanations of the results.

Table 5. 7 - Respondent S1

Elements of Business Environment & Network Interaction	Characteristics factors
Market structure	-few competitors (sellers) -high level of dependence
Dynamism	-buyers to access the market -uncertainty due to personnel change (potential risk)
Internationalization	-few international sellers
Position	-buyers to access the market -Flexible production
Social system	-often, problems with currency volatility
Capability	-flexible in terms of tangible resource sharing (open mindset) -knowledge sharing -no contact with partners of partners
Jointness	-joint decision - high level of trust -Active engagement- visiting -communication in managing crisis
Particularity	-maintenance of relationship (visiting) -personal relationship -effective communication (language)
Inconsistency	- mutual goals (quality product) -effective communication (language) -clear expectations

### Interaction environment

According to the participant from S1, when asked about elements that characterize the interaction environment, the informant explained that the environment differs according to the product offered to the market and the specific country where the product will be consumed. They entered African markets, specifically the Namibian market, because of business opportunities, and they have experience doing business globally. Considering the products they sell to the Namibian market, they are one of only five producers globally. That means they have a strong position, and the level of competition in the market is low. However, the strong position as sellers does not give them control power in relation to their buyers because they depend on the buyers to get their products to the end-users. Moreover, S1 explained that sometimes they are affected by personnel changes in their counterparts' firms. They have experienced product preferences changing when new personnel are responsible for the product development or purchasing department. *“Some new personnel have contact with other partners before entering their new positions. Often, they might try to bring the previous relations to these new positions”* (S1). Moreover, S1 explains that to mitigate this kind of risk,

they try to communicate effectively with their counterparts, which includes visiting the buyers often. Furthermore, S1 describes that the firm has been affected by its business relationships because it sells to international buyers. According to S1, they have gained international communication skills and other knowledge related to international business; for example, English has been one of their main work languages, and some of their personnel have learned French in order to improve the quality of communication with some of their buyers who are based in French-speaking countries.

#### *Network interaction*

Regarding capabilities, S1 does not focus on the wider network as much as it emphasizes the relationship with its buyers. For example, the firm does not share information about its partners on the upstream side of the supply chain with its partners on the downstream side. Hence, all relationships are handled separately and individually.

Regarding resource sharing, S1 informed that one of their counterparts has installed some machines at their production facility. The machine was installed as a part of an agreement with a buyer who wanted to shift from buying inputs for production to buying the fully developed product. S1 did not want to lose the counterpart, so they agreed to share the resources. In addition, S1 also informed that they own a packaging machine at the facility of one of their buyers in Morocco. According to S1, this was done to attain cost reduction because it was cheaper to do packaging in Morocco than in Norway. Moreover, they share knowledge of productions with some of their partners, particularly in the packaging and flavouring process. This is done to meet the product specifications and demands of their buyers. Furthermore, S1 explains that, over the years, they have changed from being sellers of ingredients used as inputs by other companies to producing fully developed products. This is due to the demand from some customers who want to buy finished products instead of inputs. To do so, S1 had to acquire some of the knowledge needed from their counterparts, thus buyers. This is considered a high degree of flexibility, collaboration ability, and willingness to change.

When it comes to jointness, a firm can be influenced by its relationships in two ways. First, the buyers can influence the products by specifying the type of product and the flavours they want. S1, the seller, produces the product and sometimes hires other experts to help them with the production process. Second, after the products are finished, S1 relies on their buyers to get the products to the market and consumers. Once the product is delivered to the buyers, S1 is

no longer involved with any market activities. Therefore, the relationship between the seller and the buyer is emphasized, not the network relation. It means that the seller (S1) manages suppliers in upstream without involving the buyers, and the buyers manage suppliers on the downstream side of the supply chain without the involvement of the seller. However, according to the participant, good communication plays a vital role in their business activities, and they have also developed a high level of trust between them. As the participant puts it, “Trust is Alfa and Omega” (S1).

In the components considering particularity and inconsistency, the question about common goals was asked. S1 replied, “*We have a common goal, which is to get the best possible product to the market...we contribute to this process by some percentage, our products add value to the end product*” (S1). Moreover, S1 emphasizes effective communication, for example, by learning a new language to ensure that these goals are met. Hence, English has been a crucial skill in the company; in addition, people with key positions in the company have been learning French.

Furthermore, the S1 seems to engage actively with their customers by visiting the buyer often as a way of building relationships. For example, S1 visits the buyer in Namibia often, and they also develop the relationships toward more personal relationships. For example, S1 explained that his family members had visited Namibia on their summer vacation. The participant asked his family to visit the company they were selling to, and the firm's CEO in Namibia invited the family members for dinner. This can be interpreted as active engagement in communication and one way of strengthening or developing the business relationship into a personal relationship.

*Table 5. 8 - Respondent S2*

Elements of Business Environment & Network Interaction	Characteristics, factors
Market structure	-risky market -low competition
Dynamism	-possibilities
Internationalization	-low competition
Position	-reliance on partners
Social system	-no challenges related to regulations -currency volatility issues
Capability	-no tangible resource sharing -reliance on partners -flexibility -sharing knowledge and experience
Jointness	-informed decisions -individual agreements -clear commitments -Consistent behaviours -mutual trust
Particularity	-long-term relationship -common goals -relationship maintenance -active engagement
Inconsistency	-clear expectations -clear communications -understand mutual goals

### *Interaction environment*

As shown in table S2, it can be inferred that S2, the company under consideration, perceived the market as risky but full of opportunities due to the low competition from Norwegian suppliers. The respondent explained that many companies do not want to enter that market because they fear the complications that may be found in African markets. However, the informant explained that they do not have problems with their involvement in the African markets, and the potential risks are the same regardless of the market's geographical location. Moreover, S2 stated that the company's aim to engage with African partners is to expand its markets.

According to S2, the market they operate in has very few international companies. The lack of participation from foreign players results in less competition for the Norwegian seller, which can be interpreted as S2 having a strong market position.

Social system-related factors do not influence S2, as they employ different strategies depending on the country they sell to. In some countries, they have a sales department, whereas in other countries, they sell to local companies. On the other hand, the participant from S2 is responsible for a specific country where the firm does not have a sales department. Therefore, they rely on collaboration with a local import firm.

Moreover, the participant stated that they have not encountered any issues related to the system since they do not interact with their customers' authorities. The customers themselves deal with the challenges arising from the social systems of their respective countries. *“When we only sell to some local buyers, we don't have to deal with the local authorities”* (S2). However, S2 often faces the impact of unstable currency in their partner countries; although it affects their business activities, S2 explained that they always find ways to manage it in collaboration with their partner.

#### *Network interaction*

According to the participant, regarding capability, the company relies on the buyer to access African consumers since it doesn't have its sales department in a particular African country. S2 sells its products to a partner who owns and manages the customer base. This reliance on the buyer to access the market can be considered resource sharing, where the buyer solely manages it.

Regarding jointness, S2 appears to handle its business relationships independently. Although effective communication is considered crucial by S2 in all business relationships, the company does not disclose information about its suppliers to its customers. S2 maintains long-term partnerships by communicating regularly and visiting its partners. *“there might be some problems in Congo sometimes...I cooperate with the buyer there, and we normally find solutions”* (S2). However, it seems that S2 is the one who usually initiates the communication and visits with their African partners.

Regarding inconsistency, S2 explained that they aim to meet the expectations of their customers. They have been working with the same partners for many years and have learned over time what is expected of them. *“As businesspeople, our common goal is to sell as much as possible and retain customers. To achieve this, I must strive to meet their demands”* (S2).

*Table 5. 9 - Respondent S3*

Elements of Business Environment & Network Interaction	Characteristics factors
Market structure	-medium competition
Dynamism	-stable environment
Internationalization	-growing market
Position	-reliance on partners
Social system	-political instability
Capability	-no tangible resource involved -sharing of knowledge -long experience in fish industry
Jointness	-good communication -Addressing challenges jointly -trust developed over time
Particularity	-Mutual goals -dependence on buyer
Inconsistency	-informed decisions -stable relations -clear expectations

*Interaction environment*

S3, the respondent, views the market as somehow competitive, primarily due to the presence of multiple Norwegian companies. Despite the competition, S3 defines the market as stable and growing. The participant has been trading with their Congolese partner for over seven years, and the company has over thirteen years of experience within the fish industry. Moreover, the CEO of S3 has extensive experience in the fish industry, having worked in it for over 25 years.

S3 has stated that they do not need to disclose information about their suppliers to the buyers, as their product does not require it. They rely on the buyers to distribute their products to the consumers. Moreover, they gather feedback from the consumers through their counterparts in Congo. The informant has mentioned that they have to rely on the information received from the buyers, as they are not directly involved in selling their products to the end consumer. However, they believe the buyer shares the same goal of selling good products and increasing market share.

In relation to the social system, S3 has faced certain challenges due to occasional political uncertainty in Congo. However, they have managed to overcome these obstacles by working

closely with their partner to find solutions. For instance, they had to reduce their deliveries to Congo during the election period, which was decided upon after consulting their Congolese partner to avoid potential risks that could arise due to political unrest. Additionally, they also encounter challenges due to currency depreciation because they trade in American dollars.

#### *Network interaction*

S3 claims that their product is uncomplicated and does not require the sharing of physical resources. Nevertheless, S3 has extensive experience in the fish industry, which he gladly shares with his partners. S3 emphasizes the importance of collaboration with his business partners, particularly in addressing joint concerns. For instance, when they encounter high prices from suppliers or in the European market, he engages with his partner in Congo to determine the quantity and price of deliveries. In situations of political uncertainty in Congo, sharing information and making joint decisions are essential to mitigate potential risks.

Considering particularity, it appears that S3 has a collaborative approach, focusing on meeting specific needs and working closely with its partners. Additionally, S3 consistently communicates with its partners and shares common goals, which aim to enhance its position in the market.

As per the information provided by the participant, they utilize the available technology to ensure efficient communication. They share information promptly whenever they detect any changes in the market conditions. The company has a clear understanding of what are the expectations of its counterparts in Congo. Moreover, S3 also communicate its expectations to its buyers. “...we exchange information regularly... and we tell them what we want and how we think, they also tell us about their demand” (S3).



Table 5. 10 - Participant B1

Elements of Business Environment & network interaction	Characteristics factors
Market structure	-high competition (local)
Dynamism	-many companies (similar products)
Internationalization	-few international companies
Position	-established local network
Social system	-Stable political environments
capability	-no tangible resource sharing involved -using network to access end-user -knowledge sharing
Jointness	-reliable -consistent behaviour -committed to partnership
Particularity	-trust developed over time -Seller visit -dependence on one supplier
Consistency	-professionalism -mutual goals-grow together -regularly communications

#### *Interaction environment*

B1, the buyer, has a business relationship with S1, the Norwegian seller. According to the informant, the local market is quite competitive due to many similar products. However, Norwegian products are considered unique and not easily substitutable. *“Our customers know the products...they do not change to other products”* (B1). Moreover, B1 explains that they have an established network of retailers who sell their products. The company sources products not only from Norway but also from other countries like Thailand, Kenya, South Africa and India. Furthermore, the company does not consider the Namibian social systems problematic for the business environment due to the political stability in the country.

#### *Network interaction*

Regarding capabilities, B1 clarifies that the products they purchase from their Norwegian counterparts do not involve resource sharing.

*“They supply us with the products we demand, and we sell to our customers. We do not have other resources we share”* (B1).

B1 emphasizes building strong relationships with customers (retailers) and suppliers. They visit their customers weekly in order to follow up on developments in the local market.

Moreover, they have had a positive experience with their Norwegian partner, who provides crucial information on new products and necessary details. The Norwegian partner visits B1 at least once yearly, but B1 has never visited them.

When it comes to working together, B1 considers its Norwegian counterpart to be a skilled and experienced player with clear expectations. B1 also mentioned that they have increased communication with the Norwegian seller since they introduced a new product to the market. As a result, close communication is necessary to make joint decisions on marketing and branding strategies. When asked if any events have affected their business relationship, B1 couldn't recall any such situations with the Norwegian seller. Additionally, B1 mentioned that both parties share a common goal, which is to ensure their product satisfies the end-user.

*Table 5. 11 - Participant B2*

Elements of Business Environment & Network Interaction	Characteristics factors
Market structure	-low competition due to product segmentation
Dynamism	-many local companies
Internationalization	-no foreign firms with same product
Position	-unique brand
Social system	-stable business environment
Capability	-maintaining quality
Jointness	-clear expectations -regular communication
particularity	-mutual goals
Inconsistency	-clear expectations (maintain quality service)

### *Interaction environment*

B2 describe that the market environment is currently stable, without any significant competition or threats to the specific product. The Norwegian product is classified as a high-quality luxury item with limited competition. However, the product's high price compared to other options in the market makes it challenging to establish relationships with new suppliers in the local market. According to B2, the social system in Tanzania is stable, with few disruptions that affect the business environment.

### *Interaction network*

Regarding capability, B2 explains that the product is exclusively manufactured in Norway and is supplied globally by only one company, as per B2. Hence, no tangible resource sharing is required between B2 and the Norwegian seller. This is due to the nature of the product. Furthermore, it is only supplied to a few shops in Tanzania, where the potential consumers reside. B2 is reliant on the Norwegian supplier since there are no other alternative suppliers of the product. However, B1 informed that the Norwegian seller have provided them with the knowledge they need in order to maintain the brand. This is because the Norwegian seller want to maintain the same service quality globally.

Regarding jointness, B2 states that they have a mutual understanding to maintain the quality of the brand and service. To achieve this, they only supply the product to a few retailers that meet the required criteria. B2 explains that their communication with the Norwegian supplier is a buyer-seller relationship. However, to maintain the relationship they have frequent communication with the Norwegian seller. Moreover, the product manager from Norway visits their counterpart in Tanzania once or twice a year.

*Table 5. 12 - Participant B3*

Elements of Business Environment & Network Interaction	Characteristics factors
Market structure	-increasing demand
Dynamism	-dynamic market (several firms)
Internationalization	-few international suppliers
Position	-established retailer network
Sosial system	-occasionally political unrest
Capability	-retailer base -knowledge and information sharing -frequent communication
Jointness	-making decisions jointly
Particularity	-active engagement -frequently visiting customers Common goal
Inconsistency	-inform about product availability -communicating in advance to foresee potential problems

#### *Interaction environment*

B3 provides information about the market environment for Norwegian salted dried fish in DRC Congo, describing it as a growing market with the domination of a few Norwegian suppliers. However, many local retailers sell the products to the end-user. Typically, Norwegian sellers collaborate with local companies, i.e. buyers, to reach consumers. Moreover, the company does not encounter major challenges related to the social system in Congo because they know how business works due to extensive experience.

#### *Network interaction*

According to B3, the business relationship does not involve sharing any tangible resources, but it does involve knowledge sharing. Moreover, B3 explained that he experienced establishing business relationships with Norwegian fish suppliers as long and challenging. According to B3, many companies he contacted did not want to sell their products to Congo. Furthermore, he explained that when he began importing fish from Norway, he lacked the necessary knowledge about salted fish. Fortunately, his Norwegian partners provided him with the required knowledge.

Regarding jointness, B3 emphasizes they have frequent communication with their partner in Norway to address different challenges and make joint decisions. They rely on product information from their Norwegian counterpart to plan their business activities with customers in Congo. For example, the supply of fish is subject to seasonal and market fluctuations, particularly in European markets, which affects B3's business. They are impacted by the demand in Europe and the supply of fish to their Norwegian partner. In such cases, effective communication has been critical.

Regarding particularity and inconsistency, B3 is actively engaged in communication with the S3, and they also visit each other regularly. When asked about common goals and expectations, the participant said that their goal is to increase their market share, and they believe that their Norwegian counterpart will continue to trust them and consider them their reliable partner. Moreover, B3 informed that frequent communication with the seller enables the company to foresee potential problems and thus plan its supply activities to the retailers in Congo. *“when the Norwegian detect the signs of undersupply... they inform us immediately so that we can plan our deliveries”* (B3).

To summarize the analysis, below, I will provide some important characteristics that were explored during the data analysis. These characteristics will also be discussed in chapter 6.

In the analysis, five out of six participants expressed that there are few Norwegian sellers in the markets studied, which could result in low competition among sellers and suppliers. Despite this, seller and buyer participants describe the markets as "stable and growing". It was discovered that the low competition may stem from sellers' perception of certain markets, particularly African-based ones, as risky, which affects market dynamics. This perception was confirmed by the seller (S2), who stated that many sellers from Western countries avoid entering the African market due to the risk involved. Additionally, there is a high level of dependency among the participants, with all sellers confirming that they rely on a single buyer in each country to access the market and gain knowledge about consumers and the market. The buyers also confirmed the dependency, stating they rely on their Norwegian counterparts.

For instance, two selling firms confirmed that due to potential political turbulence in Congo, they have been making delivery decisions in collaboration with their buyer. To do so, the buyer in Congo reads the signals in the environment and discusses them with the seller. On some occasions, they stopped or reduced deliveries to Congo to avoid potential losses caused by political unrest. This is particularly in relation to elections in the country. Similarly, the

Norwegian seller discusses and jointly makes decisions with the buyer when they detect an unusual trend in the fishing industry, particularly when there is an over-supply or undersupply.

Moreover, dependency, commitment, and jointness were also discovered in another business relationship involving (S1), which the participant described as critical for its survival. As per the participant, one of their major buyers faced price competition, threatening their market position. The participant (S1) and the buyer had been in a seller-buyer relationship in which (S1) had sold raw materials to the buyer for over 30 years. To protect its market position, the buyer decided to outsource the production of the involved product. The outsourcing strategy would mean that S1 loses the customer relationship with the buyer. In collaboration with the buyer, they decided that the seller (S1) should produce the products for the buyer. To do so, the seller (S1) took over the production using machines owned by the seller. This means that their business relationship took a deeper level, which involves intangible and tangible resource sharing. According to the seller, this was a critical move for their existence (S1) because the resources opened opportunities for them to expand their product portfolio.

The next chapter will present the discussions based on the findings from the analysis.

## 6- Discussion

In this chapter, I will discuss the common characteristics of the participants' results presented in chapter 5 and use them to answer my research question. The discussion will be the basis for the conclusion in chapter 7.

The main research question that I will be addressing is “How does a firm operating in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environment manage its business network to achieve and maintain resilience?”

### 6.1- Interaction environment

One of the common characteristics that are observed in the studied business environment is the absence of high competition among sellers. Two of the sellers suggested that there are few Norwegian sellers in the market they are involved in. These suggestions from the S1 and S3 are also confirmed by their counterpart B1 and B3 from the buyer participants. As for the seller S2, he said the competition is low, but his counterpart does not confirm his experience because the researcher could not access the buyers from S2. However, similar characteristics can be confirmed by respondent B2. B2 suggest that the product imported from Norway does not have competition in the local market due to product segmentation.

Low competition in a market environment may significantly impact the dynamics of network interactions between businesses and their buyers in several ways. For example, sellers may become less motivated to offer competitive prices or quality products because buyers have fewer alternatives. However, this is less likely to happen with the Norwegian sellers because it shows that the consumers of their products are people with low incomes; hence, they cannot afford to pay high prices. This argument was supported by S1, who explained that their strategy is built on selling to people with very low income; thus, they do everything to ensure the products are affordable for the end-user.

Moreover, Håkansson (1982) describes that, in a low-competition environment, sellers may have more power and control. With fewer alternatives available to buyers, sellers can dictate terms and conditions, potentially leading to a less balanced relationship. As a result of the power imbalance, buyers may have limited choices, thus reducing their ability to negotiate favourable terms.

Moreover, Håkansson et al. (2009) suggest that in a low-competition market, buyers may depend more on specific sellers to access goods, hence fostering stable and predictable relationships. This dependency may influence the bargaining power of buyers, thus their

ability to demand better prices or the quality of the product. It can also be argued that in environments characterized by low competition, sellers may emphasize developing long-term relationships with buyers to improve trust and loyalty (Zafari et al., 2020). Based on the information provided by the participants, it is observed that the Norwegian sellers emphasize building long-term relations with the sellers. All sellers informed that they visit the African buyers regularly, which indicates their commitment to developing long-term relations. For the African buyers, there is only one, B3, who informed regular visits to his counterparts in Norway. Moreover, all sellers informed that they depend on only one buyer in each country, indicating a high dependence on buyers to access end-users. Similarly, all three buyers informed that they depend on only one seller from Norway for the product, suggesting a high level of dependence to access the goods. It can, therefore, be argued that companies that operate in such an environment interlock some interdependence, forcing them to help each other when one of the parties encounters non-preferable situations. Thus, developing long-term relationships and achieving relationship resiliency. This interdependence may be argued that is created on conditions such as Trust, loyalty and sharing of relevant information.

## 6.2 – Interaction network

### *Capability as tangible resource*

In my study, I observed the absence of tangible resource sharing among the involved parties. According to Johannesson and Palona (2010) tangible resources refer to the physical assets that a business owns or controls, such as production capacity, infrastructure, equipment, and distribution centres. These resources can influence the dynamics and outcomes of a business interaction in several ways.

For instance, production capacity can determine the seller's ability to meet buyers' demands. If a seller has the necessary infrastructure and equipment, they can fulfil orders consistently, thus building trust and reliability. Moreover, businesses with flexible production capabilities may meet the specific needs of buyers, thus fostering more robust relationships.

It can also be argued that efficient management of shared tangible resources such as distribution centres and transportation can have an influence on business relationships. It can improve the supply chain efficiency and ensure timely delivery, which in turn can enhance product availability.



In the seller's group, two out of three participants (S2 and S3) stated that they do not share tangible resources in their business relationships. This is because these business relationships are based on straightforward exchanges. However, S1 explained that they share tangible resources with some of their counterparts. Specifically, they have a flavouring machine owned by a buyer installed at their production centre. This was done as part of a process in which the buyer changed some of their business activities. The buyer shifted from buying inputs to wanting to buy fully developed products. S1 and the buyer agreed that S1, supplying inputs to the buyer, should produce the product for the buyer and thus acquire the machine from the counterpart. Additionally, S1 also mentioned that they own a packaging machine installed in one of their buyers' facilities in Morocco. This capability has helped them tackle some challenges related to market uncertainty. According to S1, the flexibility has helped them maintain low prices and good business relationships with both buyers.

#### *Capability as Intangible resources*

Intangible resource sharing is a common characteristic observed among business relationships. In a seller and buyer relationship, intangible resources refer to non-physical assets that contribute to a business's value but are not directly measurable (Håkansson et al., 2009). These resources can play a significant role in influencing the outcome of a business relationship. One such resource is brand reputation, which can help improve trust and credibility, leading to stronger buyer-seller relationships (Abhishek, 2013). Buyers are more likely to trust and engage with sellers who have a positive image. For example, participant B1 revealed that their customers are familiar with the product supplied by S1, making it challenging for B1 to find a substitute product.

Customer relationships and service are often considered intangible resources. Effective customer service can help build quality customer relationships. Businesses prioritising good customer service contribute to positive buyer experiences and long-lasting relationships (Zafari et al., 2020). All the sellers in the group expressed their commitment to providing good products and services to their customers. For example, Norwegian sellers visit their buyers regularly as part of their service. Buyers also confirmed that Norwegian sellers often visit them, strengthening the customer relationship.

Knowledge is a valuable intangible resource that plays a crucial role in empowering sellers to understand, connect with, and add value to buyers. It can contribute to developing trust, facilitating effective communication, and positioning sellers as valuable partners in seller-

buyer interaction (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). Hence, businesses prioritising knowledge sharing are better equipped to tackle changes and challenges and build enduring relationships. All participants in the seller group share knowledge with their counterparts, which is considered critical to their business activities. This was confirmed by buyers B1 and B3, who expressed that knowledge sharing with the Norwegian counterparts is vital to carrying out business operations. For instance, participant B3 explained that when he started importing fish, he had no knowledge about the fish industry. Over time, he gained knowledge about the industry through S3. Participant S1 also expressed how the firm has changed through the knowledge exchange with the buyers.

To summarize, when evaluating the capability of network interaction, it appears that tangible resources do not impact the studied business relationships or networks. This is because all firms involved in this research control and manage their tangible resources without involving their counterparts. However, it is clear that firms may change this approach if they encounter situations that force them to do so. One seller firm provides a good example. The company, S1, faced two major challenges threatening its commercial survival. The first challenge was the risk of losing its market position due to rising prices. To avoid losing the market, the company had to transfer the packaging service to the main buyer in Morocco. The second challenge involved the risk of losing another major customer because the customer wanted to stop production services. The company agreed with the customer and took on the responsibility of production using the customer's machines. As a result of dealing with these two challenges, the company has been able to increase efficiency as well as the variety of products they can offer. It can thus be argued that businesses that adopt flexible resource-sharing approaches are better equipped to navigate challenges and attain resilience.

### *Joint decision*

In the context of seller-buyer relationships, it is believed that working together can have a positive impact on the success of a business (Håkansson et al., 2009). Jointness refers to the collaborative efforts between the parties involved, involving various business activities that create value.

When sellers and buyers work together, they can generate value that may not be achievable in a more traditional transactional relationship. Additionally, jointness can enable sellers and

buyers to respond quickly to changes in the business environment that may arise from market shifts, regulatory changes, or other external factors (Butler & Purchase, 2021).

During my analysis, I discovered that the companies involved work together to make important decisions related to their business activities. For instance, respondents S3 and B3, who are in a business relationship, stated that they communicate regularly to make joint decisions regarding product availability due to the volatility of the fish industry and market situations in Europe. S1 also mentioned that joint decision-making has helped them solve some production-related problems and overcome challenges that could have threatened their existence. Additionally, S3 and B3 stated that they make joint decisions to prepare for potential risks related to the political environment in Congo. Similarly, S2 explained that joint decisions have been crucial for them to maintain business relationships with Congolese buyers because of certain factors related to the business environment in Congo. However, although the joint decision seems to strengthen relationships between sellers and buyers, I would like to emphasize that in this study, decisions seem to involve only sellers and buyers; thus, they do not involve the wider business network.

It is also observed that the sellers do not establish several business relationships with several buyers within the same country. This is interpreted as focusing on developing a stable relationship. As the B3 explained regarding his counterpart S3 “... *We grow together*”. This can be looked at as a commitment between the two companies.

### *Particularity*

In a business network, active engagement, effective communication, and a collaborative mindset can define particularity. The particularity has a significant impact on the success of the business and involves understanding and addressing the specific needs, preferences, and goals of each actor in a business relationship (Håkansson et al., 2009).

In my analysis, I found that sellers are actively engaged in communication with buyers, and all participants seem to know their partners' expectations. Particularly, participants S1 & B1 and S3 & B3 have clearly communicated common goals. S1 and B1 expressed that a quality product and end-user satisfaction are important to them. For participants S3 and B3, they are committed to working together to increase their market position in Congo.

Moreover, effective communication is a crucial aspect of successful seller-buyer relationships, according to Ballantyne and Varey (2006). How information is exchanged between sellers and buyers can significantly impact the business relationship. Having high-quality information can strengthen relationships and increase commitment among counterparts, whereas poor information can weaken relationships or even lead to business decline or closure.

In my research, I found that all respondents frequently communicate through emails and virtual meetings. All seller participants explained that they use virtual services to conduct business activities with their counterparts. Similarly, all buyer participants confirmed that virtual services make communication with sellers more effective.

Furthermore, the type of information shared also affects the relationship between sellers and buyers. Information may include product details, pricing, market conditions, and terms. In my analysis, I found that sellers share information about product availability and activities associated with the delivery of the products. Buyers use this information to plan and carry out activities related to sales. However, I found that sellers do not disclose their suppliers to buyers, which does not affect the relationship with buyers because it is considered irrelevant information. On the other hand, buyers share information about the market environment and end-user feedback with the sellers.

In addition, I discovered that sellers are making efforts to improve the clarity of information sharing to avoid misunderstandings. All sellers stated that they have adopted English as their communication language because their counterparts speak English. Those who sell to French-speaking buyers, especially S1 and S3, have learned French to avoid ambiguities and miscommunication. Therefore, it can be argued that this adaptable behaviour of sellers has contributed to building and nurturing relationships through effective communication. This aligns with the suggestions of Håkansson et al. (2009), who argues that businesses prioritising clear and meaningful communication are better positioned to establish trust, meet buyer expectations, and cultivate long-term relationships.

### *Inconsistency*

Inconsistency is the lack of reliability, uniformity, or predictability in business interactions. It can arise from various factors, such as unstable quality of products services, or insufficient information. Inconsistent communication can lead to confusion and misunderstandings

(Håkansson et al., 2009). Counterparts may receive mixed messages or conflicting information, potentially causing relationship breakdowns. Therefore, it is recommended that businesses recognize the importance of consistent and reliable experiences to build trust, enhance customer satisfaction, and maintain a positive brand image in the eyes of their buyers. Based on my analysis, it is suggested that Norwegian sellers emphasize good communication with their counterparts, which enables them to understand their expectations. Additionally, they provide sufficient information to buyers about their products, including potential risks. Overall, they prioritize effective communication and transparency, though limited, in their dealings with buyers.

Moreover, It has been observed that most activities in the relationship between Norwegian sellers and African buyers are not connected to a larger network. The seller group participants have stated that all interactions and communications are handled individually based on the information available. For instance, the buyers do not have access to information about the suppliers of the sellers. One of the sellers stated, "*My suppliers are confidential... I won't disclose them to the buyers*". Therefore, the seller decides which information to pass on to the buyers, and information is not shared across the entire network. On the other hand, the buyers seem to have more control over the information from their customers and retailers. They decide which information to pass on to the Norwegian sellers. However, the African buyers are open to disclosing their customers to the Norwegian sellers. Several participants, including sellers S1 and S3, and buyers B1 and B3, confirmed that Norwegian counterparts often get to visit some of their local counterparts when they visit.

## 7- Conclusion

In this chapter, I will present the findings from the analysis conducted in chapter 5, followed by a discussion in chapter 6. Subsequently, I will conclude by answering the main research question stated in the introduction.

This study aimed to explore and investigate the characteristics that can explain how firms selling to companies based in turbulent business environments achieve and maintain resilience. For this purpose, the research question was developed and stated as follows:

How does a firm operating in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environment manage its business network to achieve and maintain resilience?

### *Interaction environment*

In order to understand a company's success, the IMP interaction approach suggests examining its relationship with other participants in the business network, also known as network interaction. According to researchers such as Håkansson et al. (2009), interaction within a network is influenced by the interaction environment. In the case of a seller-buyer relationship, the interaction environment consists of five crucial elements, namely market structure, dynamics, and internationalization, as well as position in the manufacturing channel and social system. Through analysis presented in Chapter 6, it was found that some common characteristics in the market environment may influence network interactions. For instance, the research revealed that there are few sellers, low competition, and a high level of dependency. Few sellers in the market could result in low competition. Despite the market being stable and growing, the low interest of newcomers may have been resulted by the perception about certain markets, particularly African, as risky.

Moreover, the market is characterized by a high level of dependency with each seller depending on a single buyer to access end-users and related information and each buyer depending on a single seller to access products. The characteristics of these findings suggest that firms operating in such environments enter a mutual dependence due to a lack of alternatives, hence focusing on relationship development. This may help them prepare to handle unfavourable situations together, which I will explain later.

### *Interaction network*

In my analysis of network interaction, I examined four components of the network interaction model: capability, jointness, particularity, and inconsistency. Capability refers to the resources a company manages or has access to, including tangible and intangible resources such as equipment, production facilities, knowledge, and skills.

Based on my research, I found that in the initial stages of interaction between sellers and buyers, they do not share tangible resources. Instead, sellers offer their products to buyers, who then pay for the products. However, the sharing of intangible resources, such as knowledge and skills, was highly involved. Thus, sellers sharing their knowledge of products and services as well as their skills in maintaining their brand and buyers sharing their knowledge of the market environment and consumer preferences.

Knowledge sharing forms the foundation of the development of relationships because it helps the interacting firms form a common goal. To achieve this goal, the interacting firms utilize jointness, another component of business interaction.

According to IMP, jointness refers to joint efforts and collaboration of interacting businesses to achieve success (Håkansson et al., 2009). In evaluating jointness, the level of dependency, joint decision and commitment are crucial aspects. In my analysis, I found that there is a high level of dependency among the partners. Thus, sellers depend on buyers to access consumers and related information, and buyers depend on sellers to access products and related skills. The high level of dependence creates interdependence, and the partners enter commitments in which the parties collaborate and make joint decisions on matters that may impact everyone. In my findings, I found that some of these joint decisions are about critical events that determine the survival of a company or a business relationship. Based on my study, firms in a survival fight can establish a stronger relationship by sharing intangible and tangible resources. To achieve so, interdependence, jointness, and commitment are crucial aspects that may influence this development.

Moreover, particularity is an essential aspect of a successful business relationship within a business network (Håkansson et al., 2009). The characteristics of particularity that I found in my analysis involve active engagement, effective communication, and a collaborative mindset among the counterparts. According to the IMP approach, active engagement helps counterparts understand and address each party's specific needs, preferences, and goals (Håkansson et al., 2009). It can thus be argued that particularity in terms of active engagement

and effective communication have contributed greatly to helping the counterparts address their specific needs. Hence, it is through effective communication that they manage to find solutions to survive in the turbulent business environment.

Furthermore, it is also important to consider inconsistency when studying a network interaction. According to the IMP approach, inconsistency is about the ability to avoid ambiguity and enhance clarity in the communication between interacting parties (Håkansson et al., 2009). In a seller-buyer relationship, inconsistency may arise when there are non-preferable situations in the business environment. For example, changes in the dynamics, priorities or expectations, market conditions and personnel change. Thus, it is suggested by the IMP researchers that to foster resilience of a firm and the network, active engagement, clear expectations, willingness to adapt, and effective communication are vital (Håkansson et al., 2009).

In my analysis, I found that effective communication between the partners is an important aspect of the relationships studied. In order to ensure effective communication common language like English is utilized to communicate as well as learning new languages like French when there is need to do so. This adaptability mindset characterises the focus on avoiding ambiguity, thus enhancing clarity in communication with partners. Moreover, participants explained that they communicate frequently to discuss and find solutions to different situations that arise in the market environment.

To conclude, based on the results of my analysis, as I have demonstrated, a firm operating in a VUCA environment can attain and maintain resilience through several stages of business interaction. First, the firm develops a simple exchange seller-buyer relationship where only intangible resources are shared. Second, over time, the parties develop interdependence based on trust and commitment, and they make joint decisions on matters that may have influence on the individual company or the network. Third, through particularity, active engagement, and effective communication, the companies learn how to avoid ambiguity through clear communication; hence, the relationship between the parties becomes stronger. When one of the parties or several in the relationship encounter a disruptive event or situation in the business environment, the counterparts that have developed a strong relationship jointly make decisions and find a new way of sharing not only intangible resources but also tangible resources to achieve what Bondeli and Havenvid (2022) describe as “*bouncing back*” in a turbulent environment. This contrasts the mainstream perspective I explained in the introduction, which suggests that a company should manage its relationships and avoid



dependency in order to succeed. Moreover, I argue that based on my research, there is theoretical gap in the existing research on resilience, hence inconsistent evidence on whether it is interdependence or independence that leads to resilience. This study has contributed into filling this gap.

### 7.2- Managerial Implications

Managing business relationships between firms operating in a turbulent environment requires attention and extensive knowledge of business relationship management. It necessitates skills and the ability to foster cooperation to leverage available resources within the business network. This is because when firms venture into unfamiliar territory, they enter a different environment than their origin. They often encounter cultures and systems they have little knowledge about. Unfortunately, due to the unknown environment, many companies hesitate to engage in these markets, missing out on potential opportunities in these countries. However, some firms take on the challenge of entering these turbulent markets.

This research aims to examine the experiences of Norwegian firms that have engaged in business in turbulent environments and discovered that firms can not only succeed but also develop strong relationships that can help them attain and remain resilient. This study suggests that companies should build their relationships through the following stages: First, firms in seller-buyer relationships should focus on exchanging knowledge and skills with their counterparts. In this process, the emphasis should be on good communication to build trust and strengthen relationships. Second, companies should develop the ability to make joint decisions by utilizing effective communication. This will help them solve problems while also disclosing new opportunities within the partnership. Finally, companies should develop the ability to change and adapt, which will enable them to utilize available resources within the network during disruptions or non-preferable events, thus improving their capability and maintaining resilience.

### 7.3- Limitations and recommendations for further research

My master's thesis has some limitations that are worth noting. In this section, I will describe these limitations and suggest some recommendations for future research to improve the understanding of the topic studied.

One of the limitations is the lack of access to informants, particularly in African countries. This limitation is due to some participants' unwillingness to share contacts of their

counterparts. As a result, only four firms were studied, forming two dyads. The analysis of the other two firms could not be fully explored using the "lenses of interaction network."

However, I included them in my analysis because the information they provided was valuable and reflected their experience in doing business in the environment studied. To get a better understanding of the topic and increase the applicability of the findings, it would be beneficial to study more firms that form business dyads.

Another limitation is the data collection method used. Only two of the six interviews were conducted face-to-face. The other four interviews were conducted via telephone or other online solutions due to resource and time constraints, as the participants were in different geographical regions. The quality of data collected may have been affected by this limitation, as in-person meetings may increase participants' comfort level and allow researchers to explore factors that cannot be observed through telephone or online solutions. For future research, it is recommended to conduct in-person meetings to improve data quality and range of information.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1 – Interview guide used for Norwegian Firms (sellers)

#### **Interview Guide – Norwegian firm (seller)**

The numeric questions are the main questions. The questions with letters are possible follow-up questions.

Firm/organisation ID:

Date of the interview:

Duration of the interview:

#### **Background information**

1. When was the firm founded?
2. What is your position?
3. What are your main products?
4. Which countries do you sell to?
5. How do your products reach the market?

#### **Market structure**

1. How long have you been trading with your main partners?
  - a. To what extent can you explain the competition level in the market as a seller?
  - b. Are there many buyers?
2. What are the challenges related to establishing new relationships in the market?
3. How many other countries sell the same product to the same market apart from Norwegian companies?
4. How do you access resources like knowledge, skills and infrastructures that are managed by your partner?
5. How do you share resources that are managed by you with your partners?
6. Can you explain if there are other resources that you share with your partners?

#### **Dynamism**

1. How easy is it to establish relationships with new buyers?
2. How do you get new partners?
3. How often do you change business partners?
4. How dependent are you on your partners?
5. How does your partner see you?
6. To what extent do you experience having common goals and understanding?
7. How do you ensure effective communication between your companies?
8. How do you describe the cooperation within your business network?

#### **Internationalisation**

1. What is your motivation for doing business internationally?

- a. How have international relationships affected your company? Which language do you use?
- b. Knowledge of international trade?
  - a. What kinds of resources do you access through the relationship?
2. How do you invest in your partner's business?
  - a. how does your partner invest in your business?
3. What kind of relevant knowledge do you gain from the relationship?
4. What have you done to adapt your resources to your partner's firm?

#### **Position in the manufacturing channel**

1. Do you have contact with your customer's suppliers or partners?
  - a. How often?
  - b. How important?
    - a. How do you get knowledge about the final consumer?
    - b. How does the final consumer affect or influence your product?
2. What are your expectations for your business partners?
3. What are you prepared to do for your partner?
4. How much do you have in common?
5. How much of your activities are based on trust?
  - a. How important?

#### **Social system**

1. How often do you experience problems related to the political situation in your partner's country?
2. How is the business environment in your country compared to your partner's country?
3. How does the culture in your partner's country affect your business?
  - a. Are there challenges related to the culture?
4. How do the differences related to communication affect the relationship?
5. How do you experience your partner's attitude toward you as a Norwegian counterpart?
6. How do you explain your partner's perceptions of international business?
7. How do you describe your partner's reliability?
8. What impact have regulations and constraints on your business relationship?
  - a. example interest rate, trade regulations, language?

#### **Resilience**

1. How can you explain critical events or situations that have affected your business operations?
  - a. How did you solve the situation?
2. How can you explain the role of your counterpart when dealing with disruptive situations?

Is there any other relevant information that you would like to share with me?

Would it be ok to contact you in case I will need further clarification?

## Appendix 2 – Interview guide used for Firms in Africa

### Interview Guide – Buyer

The numbered questions are the main questions. The questions with letters are possible follow-up questions.

Firm/organisation ID:

Date of the interview:

Duration of the interview:

### Background information

6. When was the firm founded?
7. What is your position?
8. What are your main products?
9. Which countries do you import from?
10. How do your products reach the market?

### Market structure

7. How long have you been trading with your main partners?
8. To what extent can you explain the competition level in the market as a buyer?
  - c. Are there many sellers in the same market? Sellers?
  - d. Are there many buyers?
9. What are the challenges related to establishing new relationships in the market?
10. How many other countries sell the same product besides Norwegian companies?
11. How do you access resources like knowledge, skills and infrastructures that are managed by your Norwegian partner?
12. How do you share resources that are managed by you with your Norwegian partners?
13. Can you explain if there are other resources that you share with your partners?

### Dynamism

9. How easy is it to establish relationships with new sellers?
10. How do you get new partners?
11. How often do you change business partners?
12. How dependent are you on your partners?
13. How does your partner see you?
14. To what extent do you experience having common goals and understanding?
15. How do you ensure effective communication between your companies?
16. How do you describe the cooperation within your business network?

### Internationalisation

5. What is your motivation for doing business internationally?
  - c. How have international relationships affected your company?
  - d. Knowledge of international trade?
6. What kinds of resources do you access through the relationship?



- b. Are this tangible or intangible?
- 7. How do you invest in your partner's business?
  - b. how does your partner invest in your business?
- 8. What kind of relevant knowledge do you gain from the relationship?
- 9. What have you done to adapt your resources to your partner's firm?

#### **Position in the manufacturing channel**

- 6. Do you have contact with your partner's suppliers?
  - c. How often?
  - d. How important?
- 7. How do you get knowledge about the final consumer?
  - c. How does the final consumer affect or influence your product?
- 8. What are your expectations for your business partners?
- 9. What are you prepared to do for your partner?
- 10. How much do you have in common?
- 11. How much of your activities are based on trust?
  - a. How important?

#### **Social system**

- 9. How often do you experience problems related to the political situation in your partner's country?
- 10. How is the business environment in your country compared to your partner's country?
- 11. How does the culture in your partner's country affect your business?
  - a. Are there challenges related to the culture?
- 12. How do the differences related to communication affect the relationship?
- 13. How do you experience your Norwegian partner's attitude toward you?
- 14. How do you explain your partner's perceptions of international business?
- 15. How do you describe your partner's reliability?
- 16. What impact have regulations and constraints on your business relationship?
  - a. example interest rate, trade regulations, language?

#### **Resilience**

- 3. How can you explain critical events or situations that have affected your business operations?
  - b. How did you solve the situation?
- 4. How can you explain the role of your counterpart when dealing with disruptive situations?

Is there any other relevant information that you would like to share with me?

Would it be ok to contact you in case I will need further clarification?

