

Between National Institutionalization and Local Appropriation: Territory in the Diffusion of Competitive Intelligence among Algerian SMEs

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Abstract

This article examines the role of territory in the diffusion of competitive intelligence (CI) among SMEs, drawing on a field survey conducted in the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou (Algeria). Building on proximity economics and the concept of territorial intelligence, it analyses how SMEs' territorial embeddedness both formal and informal shapes their access to strategic information. Findings from a sample of 104 SMEs show that SME participation in the territory's institutional structures (chambers of commerce, professional associations) remains largely administrative and weakly appropriated strategically, whereas informal networks supplier-customer relationships and interpersonal trust ties constitute the main channel through which territorial information circulates. These findings call for a reconsideration of SME-oriented CI support policies, one that better accounts for the informal dynamics that, in practice, structure Algerian SMEs' access to strategic information.

Keywords: SMEs; competitive intelligence; territory; territorial embeddedness; informal networks; Algeria

Résumé

Cet article interroge le rôle du territoire dans la diffusion de l'intelligence économique (IE) auprès des PME, à partir d'une enquête menée dans la wilaya de Tizi-Ouzou (Algérie). Il mobilise les apports de l'économie de proximité et de l'intelligence territoriale pour analyser comment l'ancrage territorial des PME formel et informel influence leur accès à l'information stratégique. Les résultats, obtenus auprès d'un échantillon de 104 PME, montrent que l'insertion des PME dans les dispositifs institutionnels du territoire (chambres de commerce, associations professionnelles) demeure largement administrative et faiblement appropriée sur le plan stratégique, tandis que les réseaux informels relations fournisseurs-clients, liens interpersonnels et de confiance constituent le principal vecteur de circulation de l'information territoriale. Ces résultats invitent à reconsidérer les politiques de soutien à l'IE des PME en tenant davantage compte des dynamiques informelles qui structurent, en pratique, l'accès des PME algériennes à l'information stratégique.

Mots-clés : PME ; intelligence économique ; territoire ; ancrage territorial ; réseaux informels ; Algérie

Introduction

The rise of the information society and the knowledge economy has fundamentally reshaped the foundations of organizational competitiveness. In this new paradigm, economic performance no longer rests primarily on the possession of material resources, but on an organization's ability to master informational processes to turn scattered, heterogeneous flows of information into strategic knowledge, and to fold that knowledge into its decision-making (Foray .D,2009).

For Algerian SMEs, which typically operate under tight resource constraints, gaining timely access to relevant information and knowing what to do with it is not a peripheral concern but a genuine lever of competitiveness and survival (Bendiabellah.A et Djennas.M,2018). Seen this way, an organization's information culture becomes a precondition for putting competitive intelligence (CI) into practice: it equips actors with the capacity to identify, evaluate, and process information in the first place. This link between information culture and CI takes on a distinctive shape once territory enters the picture territory understood not as a backdrop, but as a space where knowledge is produced, circulated, and shared, and where collective CI practices can take root to the benefit of local SMEs.

For the SMEs of the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou, territory can thus be seen as a catalyst for competitive intelligence, operating through local actor networks, support institutions, proximity mechanisms, and the formal or informal cooperation they generate (Rallet.A et Torre.A ,2004). On this reading, territory becomes a strategic space for informational diffusion, one capable of strengthening SMEs' command of information and of spreading CI practices suited to their particular constraints.

The question driving this article is the following: do territorial embeddedness and local proximity actually shape SMEs' command of information? Put differently, to what extent does the territorial dimension act as a structuring variable in how SME competitive intelligence takes shape in the first place?

The article unfolds in three stages. The first briefly revisits the general foundations of competitive intelligence before turning to its territorial extension: we show how territory, long treated as a mere backdrop for economic activity, has gradually become an active space for producing, valuing, and diffusing information one that local SMEs can draw upon. The second stage sets out the methodology of the survey conducted among SMEs in the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou. The third presents and discusses the empirical findings on how these SMEs are territorially embedded, before concluding with the study's lessons and limitations.

1. From Competitive Intelligence to Territorial Intelligence: Building a Territory-Centred Approach

Competitive intelligence is this article's conceptual starting point, but it is not, in the end, what the article is really about. What the article is really about is territory how it produces, circulates, and makes available to SMEs a strategic informational resource. This section begins with a

brief reminder of CI's foundations (1.1), before turning at greater length to its territorial extension (1.2), which forms the article's main theoretical backbone, and finally situates this framework within the specific context of Algeria's national CI apparatus (1.3).

1.1. A Brief Reminder of the Foundations of Competitive Intelligence

Competitive intelligence is hardly a new idea. Its roots run deep into history, back to a time when informational superiority was already understood as key to strategic decision-making a principle later taken up by modern CI theorists (Harbulot.C,2004). It was not until the 1960s, however, that CI began to take shape as a distinct field within management science. Against a backdrop of expanding international trade, information itself became a strategic resource, and writers such as Wilensky (Wilensky Harold L,1967), Porter (Porter Michael E,1980), and Ansoff (Ansoff Igor,1984), laid its theoretical groundwork, each pointing to the decisive role that informational analysis plays in building competitive advantage.

It was really from the 1990s onward, though, that CI underwent a major institutional turn in France. The Martre report (1994) laid its official foundations, defining CI as the coordinated set of actions research, processing, and dissemination aimed at putting useful information in the hands of economic actors, and bringing together for the first time what are still its four pillars: monitoring, analysis, protection, and influence. The Carayon report (2003) carried this further, tying CI to national competitiveness and social cohesion through the idea of an active economic security, backed by a deliberate strategy of influence. Since the 2010s, the digital revolution has turned CI into something closer to a global strategic framework, centred on mastering, securing, and extracting value from information amid pervasive uncertainty and hyper-competition.

What ultimately forced CI to adapt to the local scale, however, were shifts in modes of governance decentralization, and the growing weight of sub-national territories which gave rise to its territorial variant. It is this territorial variant, rather than CI in its classical corporate sense, that provides the real analytical framework for this article, and which the following section develops in detail.

1.2. Territory as a Space for Producing and Circulating Strategic Information: the Article's Core Theoretical Framework

1.2.1. From Territory-as-Backdrop to Territory-as-Resource

Globalization may have seemed, at first glance, to diminish the role of the nation-state; paradoxically, it has done the opposite for sub-national territories, strengthening their standing as levers of competitiveness and development. In an increasingly competitive environment, economic actors have come to place growing weight on the specific, differentiated resources embedded in territory (Demazière.C ,1997). This renewed interest in the smaller territorial scale owes much to the limits of the Fordist model concentration, standardization, organizational rigidity which proved increasingly ill-suited to an uncertain, fast-changing environment. SMEs, for their part, have gained ground precisely because the qualities once counted against them flexibility, local rootedness turned out to be assets. Territory, in this light, is no longer a fixed spatial boundary but a living space where information of strategic value is created, circulated, and appropriated.

This reframing of territory finds decisive support in a distinction introduced by Colletis et Pecqueur (Colletis,Get Pecqueur.Be,1993), between generic and territory-specific resources. Generic resources standard equipment, bank financing, ordinary raw materials are available on the open market to any solvent firm, and confer no lasting advantage precisely because of that availability. Specific resources are a different matter altogether: they are the product of local history, of know-how and trust relationships built up over time, and they cannot be bought, imported, or relocated. Strategic information about local competitive dynamics, regional market opportunities, or the practices of other actors in the same value chain belongs squarely to this second category it circulates through relational and institutional channels that only that particular territory, through its own history, has built. It is this specificity that elevates territory from a mere backdrop to a genuine strategic resource for the SMEs situated within it.

1.2.2. Foundational Theories: Industrial Districts, Innovative Milieus, Localized Production Systems

The rediscovery of Alfred Marshall's work marks an important milestone here: writing about industrial districts, Marshall had already identified the cognitive externalities at work in them, captured in his well-known observation that the trade secrets of an industry seem to hang "in the air" of the place where it is practised (Marshall.A,1920 [1890]). Later scholarship carried this intuition forward. Becattini (Becattini .G,1979) recast the territory as a social and cognitive construct conducive to collective learning; the innovative-milieu approach (Aydalot .P,1984) and the localized-production-systems framework (Courlet.C,1994) both reinforced the idea that territory is an active variable in economic organization, with proximity easing the flow of knowledge and enabling durable collective practices to emerge.

1.2.3. The Decisive Contribution of Proximity Economics: Geographical versus Organized Proximity

Proximity economists (Bellet.M, et al1993) pushed this idea further by distinguishing two forms of proximity whose conflation, in their view, has muddled a good deal of the earlier literature on districts and clusters. Geographical proximity refers simply to the physical distance separating two actors; its effect on information flows, while real, is neither automatic nor sufficient on its own. Organized proximity is a different matter: it refers to two actors' capacity to interact and cooperate regardless of physical distance, by virtue of belonging to the same trust-based network or sharing the same body of knowledge (Rallet.A et Torre.A ,2004). This distinction matters a great deal for the present research, since it allows us to formulate, already at the theoretical stage, a working hypothesis: geographical proximity alone is unlikely to guarantee the surveyed SMEs' access to strategic information that access depends just as much, if not more, on their ability to build organized proximity with other actors across the territory. Following this line of thought, territory comes into view as a dynamic space, one that carries historical memory, sedimented local networks, and social and cognitive capital essential to SME competitiveness and resilience (Colletis.G et Gilly.J-P,1999).

1.2.4. Territorial Social Capital as the Glue of Informational Circulation

A territory's informational richness depends not only on its material or institutional resources, but also on the norms of reciprocity, trust, and shared belonging that ease cooperation among

its actors what the literature calls social capital (Putnam Robert D,1995). The distinction between bonding social capital, which circulates within tightly-knit, homogeneous groups, and bridging social capital, which flows between different groups through looser but more diverse ties (Putnam Robert D,2000), is directly relevant here. A territory rich in bonding capital family ties, neighbourly relations, professional camaraderie but poor in bridging capital, that is, lacking the mechanisms that connect otherwise separate groups of actors (entrepreneurs from different sectors, SMEs and public institutions, local firms and outside partners), risks generating information that is plentiful but not very diverse, circulating in a closed loop among the same relational circles. This is precisely the risk documented by Granovetter's (1973) theory of weak ties, and one that the empirical survey conducted in Tizi-Ouzou allows us to examine directly: the most original information tends to travel through occasional ties connecting different circles, rather than through the close, repeated relationships that link actors who already share the same sources.

1.2.5. Territorial Intelligence: From Resource to Collective Construction

The concept of territorial intelligence, first introduced by Bertacchini (Bertacchini.Y,2000), and developed at length in his later work (2007), draws all of these threads together. It designates an informational and cognitive process, carried forward by local actors durably engaged in a shared project, aimed at reducing uncertainty in collective decision-making about the territory's development. Three features of this definition are worth underlining. Territorial intelligence is, first, a collective process, driven by the territory's actors as a whole firms, institutions, local authorities rather than by any single organization. It is, second, oriented toward reducing decisional uncertainty, which sets it apart from the mere passive gathering of information. And it depends, third, on the sustained engagement of actors in an ongoing dynamic of cooperation, which rules out its spontaneous emergence in a territory lacking effective governance. Bertacchini's ITER model, which brings together four processes identifying informational needs, collecting and processing information, disseminating it, and evaluating the results offers a practical framework for gauging how mature a given territory's intelligence actually is, and it supplies the analytical lens used in the empirical section that follows.

1.2.6. An Integrative Conceptual Framework: From Territory to Bottom-Up Territorial Intelligence

The conceptual scheme adopted here brings together all of these theoretical strands into four successive links, arranged in a bottom-up logic. The first link is territory itself, understood as a reservoir of proximity (both geographical and organized), specific resources, social capital, and potentially mobilizable strategic information. The second consists of territorial networks, which bring SMEs into concrete interaction with chambers of commerce, professional associations, and local public institutions. The third link groups together the informational practices that result from these interactions collecting, monitoring, processing, sharing, and using information. The fourth and final link is bottom-up collective intelligence, or territorial intelligence proper, the cumulative outcome of the first three links once they operate with

sufficient density and durability (a scheme inspired by Torre et Rallet, 2005, and Ferguène et Coissard, 2021).

This body of work, rooted largely in observations of industrialized economies, cannot simply be transplanted wholesale onto developing countries, whose institutional, economic, and territorial realities local governance that is often less structured, a productive fabric dominated by micro-enterprise and informality, public support schemes that are recent and sometimes discontinuous call for a critical, context-sensitive reading rather than the mechanical application of theoretical frameworks built for very different settings Ferdj Y,et Djeflat.A,2024),. It is precisely this contextualized reading that the third part of this article puts to the test on the ground, through the case of the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou.

1.3. Competitive Intelligence in Algeria: A National Apparatus Still Largely Un-Territorialized

1.3.1. A Discontinuous Institutional Trajectory, Inspired by the French Model

Algeria's public CI apparatus is a relatively recent development, and one that draws heavily on the French model discussed in section 1.1 a lineage documented in detail by Belkacemi (Belkacemi.M.A,2018) in his doctoral thesis on the genesis of the Algerian scheme, and confirmed by Belkacemi, Moinet et Salaouatchi (2019). Officially launched in 2006 under what was then the Ministry of Industry, SME and Investment Promotion, the initiative took concrete shape in 2010 with the publication of the national Competitive Intelligence Training Manual (Ministère de l'Industrie,2010), before entering a period of revival from 2017 onward, marked by strengthened partnerships with the ISGP and the INPED and the creation of monitoring units within several state-owned industrial groups. That revival gathered real momentum with the Second International Conference on Competitive Intelligence, held in Algiers in February 2023 under the banner "New International Challenges and Economic Sovereignty: Competitive Intelligence as a Lever for Industrial Recovery." The conference saw the release of three key documents: a white paper on CI in service of industry, an implementation guide for businesses, and a training guide covering the field's three classic pillars of monitoring, protection, and influence.

1.3.2. A Fragmented Apparatus: What Actor-Network Theory Reveals

Beyond this official institutional trajectory, arguably the sharpest and most recent analysis of Algeria's CI apparatus comes from Belkacemi et Moinet (Belkacemi ,M.A et Moinet.N,2023), who read it through the lens of actor-network theory. What their analysis brings to light is an apparatus riddled with controversy, carried forward by a multiplicity of actors whose logics do not always align central government bodies, state-owned industrial groups, academics, consultants without any single translation centre managing to stabilize the resulting network over time. This finding echoes, in a more implicit way, an older question raised by Baaziz et Quoniam (Baaziz.A et Quoniam.L,2014): what model of competitive intelligence actually fits the Algerian context, given that the imported French model built for an economic fabric dominated by large firms and by a long-established, dense territorial administration cannot simply be transplanted onto an economy in which SMEs and the informal micro-enterprise sector occupy centre stage? This institutional fragmentation, well documented at the national

level, offers a useful starting point for understanding why its translation down to the local territorial scale as in the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou remains, as the next section shows, particularly thin.

1.3.3. SME Support Schemes at the Wilaya Level: Informational Relays Without an Explicit CI Mandate

The institutional fabric meant to support Algerian SMEs at the local level did not, historically, grow out of a competitive-intelligence logic at all, but out of a logic of administrative and financial support for business creation and development. Three categories of actors structure this landscape. The National Agency for Investment Development (ANDI) handles the administrative facilitation of investment projects, with decentralized branches at the wilaya level. The National Agency for Entrepreneurship Support and Development (ANADE, formerly ANSEJ) runs wilaya-level offices tasked with reviewing, scoring, and supporting project applications, which makes it, on paper at least, the institutional actor closest to the local entrepreneurial ground. The National Agency for SME Development (ANDPME) is of particular interest for this article's argument: it runs an internal monitoring and information system on SMEs, conceived as a national-level SME observatory.

This last point deserves emphasis, because it illustrates precisely the argument this article is making. A monitoring apparatus for SMEs does exist institutionally in Algeria but it is conceived, first and foremost, as vertical and top-down: a national observatory that gathers and disseminates information about SMEs, rather than a horizontal, territorialized process in Bertacchini's sense (section 1.2.5), which by contrast presupposes the collective, bottom-up production of information at the level of the territory itself. None of these three bodies ANDI, ANADE, ANDPME is, at present, specifically mandated to animate, at the scale of the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou, a collective process of monitoring, sharing, and valuing strategic information among co-located SMEs. Their local branches serve, for the most part, an administrative function processing funding applications and supporting individual project holders rather than an animating function for a territorial information ecosystem.

1.3.4. A Gap Between National Structuring and Territorial Appropriation: This Article's Empirical Stake

This institutional apparatus thus displays a feature that matters a great deal for this article's argument: conceived and rolled out along an essentially national, sectoral, and administrative logic large state-owned industrial groups, decentralized agencies with a financial mandate it has not, to date, developed a genuine territorial dimension in the sense of the territorial intelligence theorized in section 1.2. No regional scheme for territorial intelligence, of the kind observed in some French regions (Lebrument.N et Rochette.C,2024), has been set up at the scale of the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou: the local structures nominally responsible for relaying such orientations the chamber of commerce, professional associations, ANADE's wilaya offices operate, as the third part of this article will show, largely disconnected both from this national framework and from one another. It is precisely this gap between a national CI apparatus that looks reasonably well structured on paper and its near-total absence of effective territorial translation that the survey of SMEs in the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou sets out to document

empirically and, as we will see, it is this gap that explains why it is ultimately informal networks, rather than institutional schemes, that carry out most of the work of diffusing strategic information across the territory.

2. A Field Survey to Examine SMEs' Territorial Embeddedness

2.1. Approaching the Question Through Managers' Own Perceptions

To put the theoretical framework developed above to an empirical test, this article takes as its entry point the perceptions of SME managers themselves: how do they see the role of territory in their firm's survival and competitiveness, and to what extent do they actually engage in behaviours that amount to competitive intelligence practices? This focus on managers' representations and self-reported practices fits within what Hurdebourcq (Hurdebourcq.Ph,2016), calls the SME-territory dialectic a relationship of mutual dependence in which the SME shapes, and is in turn shaped by, its local environment.

2.2. Fieldwork and Sample Construction

The sample analysed here comprises 104 SMEs based in the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou, drawn from a larger field survey that initially reached out to more than 170 SMEs. The choice of a purposive, non-probability sampling strategy answers two requirements specific to the research question at hand. The first has to do with the nature of the question itself: understanding in depth the mechanisms through which SMEs appropriate — or fail to appropriate — the informational resources of their territory calls for targeting firms with sufficiently contrasting profiles (size, degree of formalization, length of establishment) rather than chasing a broad but shallow statistical representativeness. The second has to do with the study's explanatory, rather than merely descriptive, ambition: the priority here is the quality and richness of the data collected, not sheer numerical scale. Of the 170 questionnaires initially collected, 104 were retained for analysis, corresponding to fully completed and usable responses.

The questionnaire administered to managers set out to document the nature of the relationship SMEs maintain with their home territory, along three complementary lines: the concrete channels through which these firms access local economic information, the nature of their relationships with the territory's various actors, and their actual degree of integration into territorial networks, whether formal or informal.

In designing the questionnaire, territory was treated as a multidimensional ecosystem made up of four distinct but complementary components: a spatial component, tied to geographical proximity and business concentration; a relational and social component, tied to personal networks, word of mouth, and interpersonal trust; an institutional component, tied to formal support structures (chamber of commerce, associations, university); and an event-based component, tied to participation in locally organized economic events such as trade fairs, conferences, and seminars.

3. Territory Put to the Test: What the Survey of Tizi-Ouzou SMEs Reveals

3.1. A Real Informational Resource, but One Unevenly Distributed Between Formal and Informal Channels

The findings confirm that territory does, on the whole, play a favourable role in giving the surveyed SMEs access to strategic information. Even at this first level of analysis, though, they reveal a marked imbalance between informal channels and institutional schemes an imbalance that runs through all of the results presented in this third part.

Table N° 1: Channels of Access to Territorial Information (Share of SMEs)

Channel of access to territorial information	Share of SMEs (%)
Spatial concentration of firms	51%
Geographical proximity	49%
Informal networks (personal relationships)	72%
Social relationships / trust ties	68%
Economic events (trade fairs, conferences)	48%
Local institutions (official schemes)	38%

Personnelle conception Managers surveyed reported that the spatial concentration of firms (51%) and geographical proximity (49%) ease access to market-related information prices charged by competitors, competitor behaviour, shifts in demand which bears out the findings of Krugman.P (1991) and Zimmermann Jean-Benoît (1998), on the effects of spatial concentration. Yet the analysis shows that it is the informal dimension of territory that really matters here: informal networks (72%) and trust-based social relationships (68%) are, by a wide margin, the leading channels through which often-tacit information circulates the reliability of business partners, business opportunities, lessons learned from dealing with local administration a finding consistent with the view of territory as a social construct advanced by Courlet et Pecqueur (1992). Local institutions, by contrast, are the least mobilized channel (38%), despite their potential role in diffusing official information support schemes, regulatory changes, funding opportunities which speaks directly to Pecqueur's (2000) argument about the institutional under-structuring of many developing territories. Economic events occupy something of a middle ground (48%), giving access to more formalized information such as sector-wide trends and partnership opportunities.

3.2. Institutional Integration as an Optical Illusion: Membership Without Appropriation

The questionnaire also set out to map SMEs' integration into formal territorial networks chambers of commerce, professional associations, the university, training centres treated here as the natural institutional relays of a territorial competitive-intelligence ecosystem, in order to assess how far they actually manage to feed, structure, and consolidate the CI practices of the surveyed SMEs.

Table N° 2: Forms of SME Integration into Formal Territorial Networks

Form of integration into formal territorial networks	Share of SMEs
Membership in the chamber of commerce and/or a professional association	77% (67 SMEs)

Part of a spatial cluster of SMEs (agri-food sector, Boghni municipality)	16%
Cooperation with the university / training centres (hosting interns)	6%
No membership in any formal territorial network	30% (26 SMEs)

Personnelle conception

The first figure looks encouraging enough at first glance: 77% of SMEs report membership in one of the two main formal territorial structures (chamber of commerce, professional associations). A closer look at the responses, however, calls for considerable caution. In the vast majority of cases, this membership turns out to be purely administrative: several managers volunteered, unprompted, that registration is useful for certain regulatory procedures but does not translate into any real involvement in these organizations' activities. In other words, membership does not lead to any strategic appropriation of the informational resources these networks could, in principle, make available. This same statistical mirage shows up in the other indicators of formal integration: only 16% of the surveyed SMEs are part of an organized spatial cluster agri-food SMEs located in the Boghni municipality, whose actual collaboration is limited to a handful of one-off joint investments, such as jointly manufacturing packaging for certain food products. Cooperation with the university and training centres remains marginal (6%), usually limited to hosting end-of-programme interns. And close to a third of the surveyed firms (30%, or 26 SMEs) report no membership whatsoever in any formal territorial network. If nothing else, this confirms that territory can only fulfil its function of diffusing competitive intelligence when its actors get actively not passively involved in organized, durable coordination schemes.

The same illusion resurfaces in the levels of participation in events organized by territorial actors awareness-raising meetings, conferences, professional seminars: participation here remains low and largely occasional (24% for meetings, 26% for conferences and seminars), reflecting a shortfall in collective engagement that managers most often attribute to a lack of available time and to a perceived return that does not justify the investment required.

Table N° 3: SME Participation in Locally Organized Events

Response	Count	%
Yes, regularly	12	14
Yes, occasionally	32	37
No	43	49

Personnelle Conception

This table points to a logic of opportunistic, selective participation rather than any deliberately built collective engagement: 51% of respondents take part, regularly or occasionally, in locally organized events, but they reserve their interest for training sessions they judge directly useful to their own business and their own stock of information. The surveyed SMEs thus capture targeted resources for their own benefit, without necessarily contributing back to their collective production. While this strategy gives firms real flexibility, it comes at the cost of limiting the durable positive externalities that a territory could otherwise generate a result that departs

noticeably from Becattini's model of the industrial district, in which it is precisely the active, reciprocal participation of every actor that sustains the circulation of knowledge and collective territorial innovation.

3.3. The Real Territorial Engine: The Centrality of Informal Networks

Taken together, the findings of sections 3.1 and 3.2 point, almost by elimination, to the decisive importance of indirect and informal integration for the SMEs of the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou. It is mainly through supplier-customer networks and personal and friendship ties that these firms actually gain access, in practice, to territorial information.

Table N° 4: Informal Channels of Territorial Integration

Informal channel of integration (multiple responses)	Share of SMEs
Supplier / customer networks	64%
Personal and friendship networks	61%

Personnelle Conception

The surveyed managers offer concrete illustrations of this mechanism: several mention, for instance, relying on their accountant to learn about available support schemes, or on their suppliers for early, first-hand information about market developments. These findings vividly illustrate the social embeddedness of economic action theorized by Granovetter (Granovetter Mark, 1985), as well as the relational proximity highlighted by Torre.A (2018): grounded in interpersonal trust rather than institutional procedure, these mechanisms make information travel quickly and cheaply, and constitute a genuine asset for the SMEs of the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou one that, in practice, ends up compensating for the already well-documented shortcomings of institutional networks when it comes to diffusing strategic information across the territory.

4. Discussion

The findings sketch a pattern of territorial embeddedness that looks, at first sight, paradoxical: the surveyed SMEs describe themselves as heavily dependent on their territory for access to strategic information (72% for informal networks), yet remain largely outside the institutional schemes that are supposed to structure and sustain that diffusion (only 38% for local institutions, and 30% with no formal membership at all). On closer inspection, though, this is not really a paradox, once it is placed against the distinction, discussed in the first part of this article, between classical approaches to territory grounded in geographical proximity and more recent ones grounded in organized, relational proximity ¹. The SMEs of the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou are not really mobilizing territory as an organized institutional apparatus; they are mobilizing it as a network of trust-based relationships, inherited from patterns of economic sociability that predate any public CI policy.

This finding invites us to qualify a reading of territorial intelligence that is, at times, too institutional — one that tends to measure its maturity by the density of the formal schemes put

¹Rallet Alain et Torre André (2004), « Proximité et localisation », *Économie Rurale*, n°280, pp. 25-41.

in place by public authorities (chambers of commerce, development agencies, competitiveness clusters). In the case studied here, it is informality supplier-customer relationships, word of mouth, interpersonal trust that does the main work of diffusing strategic information. This finding chimes with work that, following Granovetter.M (1985), stresses the socially embedded character of economic action, but it also raises a genuine question about how sustainable, over the medium term, such a lightly institutionalized model of informational diffusion can really be: informal networks, however effectively they compensate for the shortcomings of public schemes, guarantee neither the completeness, nor the reliability, nor the systematic updating of the information they carry.

On the managerial front, these findings suggest that public schemes aimed at supporting Algerian SME competitive intelligence would gain little from simply creating more formal bodies the survey shows these already struggle to attract more than administrative-level membership. A more effective policy would instead build on the informal networks SMEs already use supplier-customer networks, local sector-based professional associations and graft onto them, incrementally, more structured practices of monitoring and information-sharing, rather than trying to replace them outright.

Conclusion

The investigation carried out among the sample of SMEs in the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou points to several lessons about the role of territory in the diffusion and appropriation of competitive intelligence. The analysis shows a pattern of territorial embeddedness dominated by informal, relational ties: while SMEs are indeed well embedded in their local environment, that embeddedness remains loosely structured and weakly institutionalized. This shortfall pushes SMEs to look elsewhere in their quest for strategic information, and informal networks end up as the main vehicle of territorial integration. These findings bear out Torre's (2018) theoretical work on relational proximity: exchange networks built on trust make information travel fast and cheap.

SMEs' integration into the territory's formal networks, for its part, shows firms selecting, in a fairly opportunistic fashion, whatever resources they happen to need, while steering clear of costly commitments to schemes that do not always match their day-to-day realities. Limited as it is in depth, this approach still reflects a reactive entrepreneurial spirit and a genuine ability to draw on a local ecosystem without depending exclusively on institutional support. More tellingly still, SMEs' occasional participation in organized events shows them picking up targeted resources without contributing to their collective production which limits the positive externalities that would otherwise be needed to formalize monitoring and CI practices more broadly.

Beyond these structural limitations, the sheer predominance of informal channels of integration reveals a genuine vitality in the territory's dynamics and a valuable stock of social capital one capable of turning the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou into a real lever for competitive intelligence, provided public policy learns to build on this informality rather than trying to replace it. This research has limitations worth flagging. The non-probabilistic nature of the sample limits how far the findings can be statistically generalized, and the single-territory scope of the study

invites replication in other wilayas with different socio-economic configurations, in order to establish how much of what has been found here reflects features specific to Tizi-Ouzou, and how much reflects more general mechanisms at work among Algerian SMEs.

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