ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

Vulnerable Entrepreneurship and Artisan Resilience in Lubumbashi: A Grounded Theory of Copper and Malachite Trajectories Between Precarity, Dignity and Adaptation

Pascal Sem Mbimbi[1];
Cheko Misakabu Blanchard[2]; Mupeta Mutwila Trésor[3]; Mukuzo Muheme Victoire[4]; Mudimbi Wa Mudimbi Dony[5]; Kabanishi Mputu Emmanuel[6]; Mujinga Kalenga Mamie[7]; Sipila Kaozi Emmanuel[8]; Eliezer Eden Mwenz Wazeng[9]

[1-9] University of Lubumbashi

Publication Date: 2025/09/12

Abstract: This study explores entrepreneurial dynamics in the informal sector of copper and malachite art crafts in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It seeks to understand how artisans manage to construct sustainable professional trajectories despite precarity, lack of institutional recognition, and economic instability. Adopting an inductive perspective, the study employs Grounded Theory to generate conceptual categories from the field, capable of explaining artisans' logics of action and resilience. The methodological approach is qualitative and ethnographic, combining semi-structured interviews with storytelling. This posture prioritizes the meanings that actors themselves attribute to their experiences, progressively building an interpretative framework rooted in empirical data.

Findings reveal eleven structuring dimensions, including initial motivations, structural constraints, flexible organizational forms, intergenerational transmission, symbolic recognition, and the mobilization of economic, social, cultural, and identity resources. Craftwork thus emerges as a space of resistance, dignity, and cultural valorisation, beyond its economic function. In response to artisans' persistent vulnerability, the study proposes an integrated model for strengthening entrepreneurial resilience in the craft sector, structured around five key axes: flexible formalization, economic securitization, social reinforcement, cultural recognition, and openness to frugal innovation.

Keywords: *Vulnerable Entrepreneurship, Informal Craft Sector, Precarity, Symbolic Capital, Space of Resistance, Artisanal Know-How, Entrepreneurial Resilience, Cultural Capital.*

How to Cite: Pascal Sem Mbimbi; Cheko Misakabu Blanchard; Mupeta Mutwila Trésor; Mukuzo Muheme Victoire; Mudimbi Wa Mudimbi Dony; Kabanishi Mputu Emmanuel; Mujinga Kalenga Mamie; Sipila Kaozi Emmanuel; Eliezer Eden Mwenz Wazeng (2025) Vulnerable Entrepreneurship and Artisan Resilience in Lubumbashi: A Grounded Theory of Copper and Malachite Trajectories Between Precarity, Dignity and Adaptation. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(9), 279-288. https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

I. INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of Congo is among the world's poorest countries, with approximately 73.5% of its population living below the international poverty line of $2.15 per day (World Bank, 2024). This precarity is accompanied by high structural unemployment, estimated at 40% (ILO, 2022), and disproportionately affects youth, 78% of whom had no paid employment in 2021 (UNDP, 2023). Haut-Katanga, despite intensive mining activity (copper, cobalt), exemplifies a paradox characterized by limited redistribution of extractive wealth, sustaining deep inequalities (World Bank, 2023). This is compounded by informal artisanal mining and related crafts, perceived as a survival strategy for many households yet often associated with hazardous working conditions (UNICEF, 2021).

Lubumbashi, the capital of Haut-Katanga, stands out as a major artisanal hub, particularly in the production of art objects in copper and malachite, drawing on an ancient know-how from Basanga communities, known as the "copper eaters" (UNESCO, 2015). However, the sector remains

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

largely informal: over 80% of actors operate outside the legal framework, 67% rely on it exclusively, and 40% report more than thirty years of experience (INS, 2022). Despite this longevity, precarity persists. This study seeks to understand why experienced artisans, bearers of recognized know-how, remain economically marginalized by examining the social, economic, and identity mechanisms structuring their artisanal activity.

Recent studies highlight the importance of artisanal entrepreneurship as a driver of local development (Kiptoo et al., 2024; Hasanah et al., 2023; Ratten et al., 2019). However, this literature tends to privilege an economic and utilitarian reading of the phenomenon, overlooking identity, heritage, and symbolic dimensions that are nonetheless fundamental. Manual know-how, the aesthetic value of produced objects, and rooting in local cultural traditions are often relegated to the background. Moreover, the Base of the Pyramid (BoP) approach (Prahalad & Hart, 2002) has valorised the entrepreneurial potential of low-income populations by emphasizing inclusion in market dynamics; yet it often remains blind to non-market logics, forms of cultural capital, and social imaginaries that orient economic practices in informal contexts. This study adopts a complementary perspective by exploring artisanal trajectories in Lubumbashi, where entrepreneurial dynamics are tightly intertwined with identity-based, symbolic, and sociocultural resources that exceed purely market logics.

The research is organized around the following main question: How are entrepreneurial dynamics structured and sustained within the informal sector of copper and malachite art crafts in Lubumbashi? Several sub-questions follow: Why do artisans, despite seniority and technical experience, remain vulnerable? How do they construct sustainable professional trajectories in a precarious and weakly regulated economic environment? Which economic, social, cultural, and symbolic resources do they mobilize to confront structural constraints and affirm professional identity under persistent informality? The objective is to explore and examine artisans' initial motivations, professional paths, encountered constraints, organizational forms, and strategies for the economic and symbolic valorisation of their productions. The study also investigates processes of knowledge transmission and artisanal innovation in a context of socioeconomic marginalization.

Methodologically, the study relies on a qualitative ethnographic approach, integrating the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kamdem, 2017). Semi-structured interviews and storytelling were conducted with artisans in the city center and in Ruashi at the Kalukuluku market. The analysis, based on inductive thematic coding, seeks to surface logics of action, identity anchors, and the meanings actors attribute to their practices within an informal and precarious context.

The paper proceeds as follows. After the introduction, the literature review examines research on informal crafts and vulnerable entrepreneurship, including concepts of the informal economy, resilience, and cultural capital. The methodology details the data collection and analysis protocol. Field results are then presented and discussed considering theoretical contributions. The conclusion formulates recommendations for better recognizing, structuring, and supporting the artisanal art sector in Lubumbashi.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Informal crafts constitute a key component of urban economies in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in contexts marked by structural unemployment, lack of social protection, and the scarcity of formal jobs. They are generally defined as small-scale productive activities, often carried out at home or in public spaces, and outside official legal or fiscal frameworks (ILO, 2021; Chen, 2012). In Lubumbashi, a mining city, such activities have developed at the margins of the formal extractive sector, both as a survival strategy and as heritage valorisation through sculpture and the working of copper, malachite, or bronze (UNESCO, 2020).

Far from being marginal, these artisanal practices possess significant economic, symbolic, and identity potential. Contemporary entrepreneurship literature, through the concept of artisan, cultural, and tourism entrepreneurship (Ratten, Costa, and Bogers, 2019), highlights how crafts, when articulated with local cultural dynamics and tourism, can drive urban revitalization. In a complementary perspective, Hasanah et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of cultural and identity capital as a resilience factor for artisanal communities, enabling them to face social and economic transformations while preserving traditional knowledge. However, much of this work focuses on Asian contexts or settings that are highly integrated into international tourism, and it tends to neglect the specific situations of informal artisans in Central Africa, who face persistent structural precarity and limited institutional recognition.

The concept of vulnerable entrepreneurship illuminates this situation. It designates forms of entrepreneurial engagement grounded in necessity rather than opportunity, in environments characterized by institutional uncertainty, lack of protection, and income instability (Williams and Youssef, 2014). In the informal craft sector, this vulnerability is particularly evident among experienced yet marginalized actors who continue to practice despite exclusion from mechanisms of recognition, credit, and training.

The study by Kiptoo, Sambajee, and Baum (2024), conducted in Kenya, illustrates this phenomenon by showing that the survival of artisans largely rests on implicit cultural norms, collective adaptation strategies, and intergenerational transmission of know-how. Several authors also underscore the lack of institutional tools that are adapted to the realities of informal crafts. Chen (2012) observes that economic inclusion policies struggle to account for community logics, transmission practices, and the identity dimensions of these occupations. Similarly, Alobo and Obaji (2021) note that in Central African countries, legal recognition of informal artisans remains insufficient, which limits their access to finance, social coverage, and collective structuring.

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

Consequently, these actors remain invisible in public policies despite their economic weight and cultural embeddedness. Within this perspective, the theory of vulnerable entrepreneurship (Williams and Youssef, 2014) proposes a contextualized reading of entrepreneurial engagement as a response to constraint rather than opportunity. It posits that in environments dominated by social exclusion, income instability, and generalized informality, individuals engage in enterprise not by strategic choice but by necessity. This lens applies particularly to Lubumbashi's artisans, whose activity reflects a precarious insertion into a lightly regulated economic ecosystem marked by absent legal recognition, lack of social coverage, and limited access to finance (Alobo and Obaji, 2021).

In addition, the notion of entrepreneurial resilience helps explain how these artisans, despite adverse conditions, manage to sustain or adapt their activity. According to Bullough and Renko (2013), resilience results from a combination of internal resources such as flexibility, technical skills, and motivation, and contextual resources such as community solidarity, intergenerational transmission, and informal networks. Recent studies, including Kiptoo, Sambajee, and Baum (2024), show that the persistence of African artisans often rests on mutual aid, frugal innovation, and early socialization into the trade. These elements resonate in Lubumbashi, where artisans develop strategies of product diversification, resource pooling, and mobilization of identity narratives in order to ensure subsistence in the face of institutional shortcomings.

Moreover, the literature on the informal economy has long underestimated the cultural and symbolic dimensions of artisanal activity. In contexts such as Lubumbashi, crafts cannot be reduced to their economic function alone. They are also vehicles of memory, social recognition, and identity affirmation. In this respect, cultural capital, developed by Bourdieu (1979) and extended to urban creative economies (Throsby, 2010; Comunian, 2020), offers a pertinent analytical key. It highlights how know-how, produced objects, aesthetic practices, and artisanal traditions contribute to building local symbolic capital that is socially recognized but rarely integrated into public policies.

Finally, knowledge transmission, the aesthetic dimension of productions, and their identity-laden symbolism remain underexplored in research on the informal economy. From a historical perspective, Vansina (1984) notes that among Lubaic societies, from which the Basanga of Haut-Katanga originate, artisanal metallurgy served as a medium of social differentiation and collective memory. This link between craft, culture, and identity remains visible today among Lubumbashi's artisans, for whom copper and malachite are more than economic materials. They carry history, aesthetics, and cultural recognition. A renewed reading of vulnerable entrepreneurship in this context therefore implies considering not only the scarcity of means but also the richness of meanings and knowledge that underpin these activities.

In sum, combining approaches centered on vulnerable entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial resilience, and cultural capital moves beyond a strictly economic or institutional view of informal crafts. It enables a richer reading of field dynamics by integrating the precarity of working conditions, adaptive capacities, and symbolic resources that artisans mobilize in order to give meaning and continuity to their activity. This integrated framework illuminates the complexity of artisanal entrepreneurship in Lubumbashi, situated between economic survival, identity attachment, and creative resistance to institutional invisibility.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative ethnographic approach in order to explore the entrepreneurial dynamics of the informal art-crafts sector in Lubumbashi in depth. The approach is well suited to apprehend the complexity of trajectories, practices, and the meanings that artisans attribute to their activity in an unstable socioeconomic environment. The study is more specifically grounded in Grounded Theory, as formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and adapted to the African context by Kamdem (2017). This strategy constructs theoretical categories directly from the field without prior hypotheses while valorising actors' perceptions (Sem and Cornet, 2017).

The field comprises two major sites in Lubumbashi, the Parc du Lion market downtown and the Kalukuluku market in Ruashi, both known for concentrations of makers and sellers of art objects in copper, malachite, bronze, and iron. These sites afford direct observation of economic interactions, work organization, and the visibility of crafts in urban space.

The study population consists of artisans active in these two markets, selected using purposive sampling that accounted for diversity of life paths, seniority in the trade, artisanal specialization in copper, malachite, bronze, or iron, and organizational forms that are individual, family based, or cooperative. Such sampling, recommended for exploratory qualitative research (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014), maximizes profile variation and helps surface empirical regularities. A total of 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted, this number determined by the theoretical saturation threshold, meaning the point at which data cease to yield new information (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). In addition, four life-story narratives were collected from artisans selected for the depth of their trajectory, seniority exceeding 25 years, and involvement in transmitting know-how (Sem and Cornet, 2017). Storytelling, as a narrative method, reconstructs subjective logics, identity anchors, and the meanings attached to activity over time (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). These narratives enriched the analysis of artisanal dynamics in an informal urban context marked by economic uncertainty and institutional exclusion.

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

The analysis, based on inductive thematic coding, aims to surface logics of action, identity anchors, and meanings that actors attribute to their practices in a precarious informal context. Data processing followed a three-phase iterative process: open coding that freely identified meaning units, axial coding that grouped themes into categories, and selective coding that determined central dimensions. The work was conducted manually and supported by NVivo, which helped structure, visualize, and refine analytic matrices. Interpretive validity was strengthened by triangulating interview data with life-story materials.

The objective of this methodology is to highlight how artisans conceive, structure, and justify their practices in an environment marked by economic exclusion, lack of institutional support, and uncertain valorization of their production. It also clarifies how artisans mobilize social, cultural, and symbolic resources to maintain a durable activity that extends beyond market logics.

IV. RESULTS

Analysis of interviews and storytelling yielded a set of inductive theoretical categories that reveal the complexity of artisanal trajectories and the symbolic richness of entrepreneurial practices within an informal and economically unstable environment.

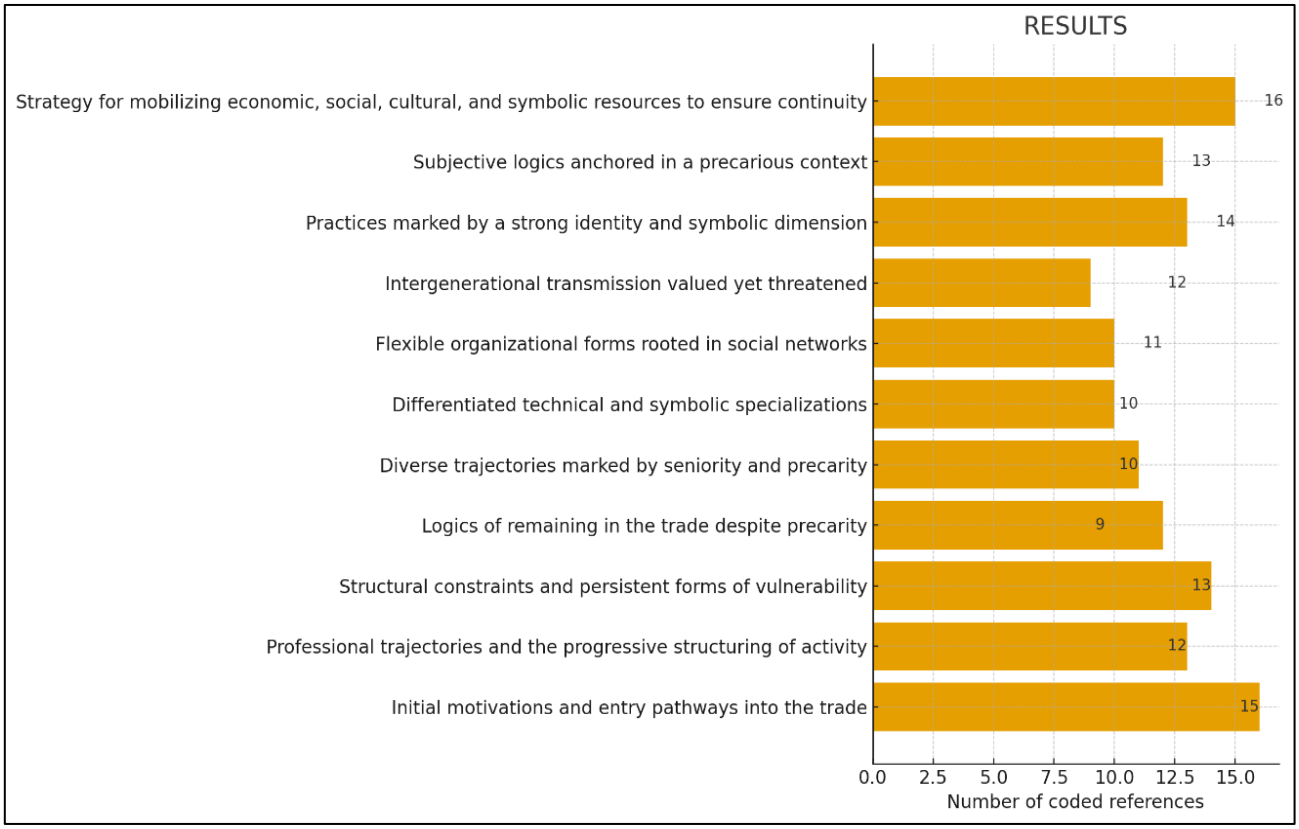

Fig 1. Frequencies of Occurrence of the Different Dimensions

This chart highlights the frequencies of occurrence of the eleven dimensions in artisans' discourse. The most cited themes concern initial motivations for entering the trade, the mobilization of resources for continuity, and structural constraints. These findings underscore the importance of engagement, resilience, and vulnerability in artisanal trajectories. Other dimensions, such as the progressive structuring of activity, identity, or subjective logics, also appear central. Intergenerational transmission is least cited, with a count of nine occurrences, which possibly reflects a decline in succession or a weakening of this vector of continuity. This thematic profile confirms both the richness of experience and the challenges that artisans face, situated between precarity, adaptation, and the quest for recognition.

These dimensions are products of a Grounded Theory approach in the sense that they emerge directly from inductive analysis of interviews and life stories, without imposing a prior theoretical framework. They were constructed by cross-reading artisans' narratives and regularities observed in their discourse. This inductive posture faithfully restores the complexity and depth of local artisanal trajectories, revealing logics of action, forms of resilience, and identity meanings that are rooted in lived experience. The use of verbatim quotations as anchoring material strengthens interpretive validity by tying each category to the words of the actors themselves.

➢ *Initial Motivations and Entry Pathways*

The study reveals a wide variety of motivations underlying engagement in the art-crafts sector in Lubumbashi. Some entered through family heritage and intergenerational transmission of know-how. Others reconverted after professional ruptures, school dropout, or

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

failures in other sectors. For many, entry into crafts is less an opportunity choice than a response to precarity and lack of formal jobs. As a 62 year old artisan explained:

"I started this trade alongside my father, who taught me to make copper bracelets. It was our only activity and the family's sole source of income. We worked together every day, hoping to sell enough to cover our needs. This know-how passed down from generation to generation has allowed me to remain in this trade to this day, despite difficulties. That is how I built my artisanal path, in family continuity."

This testimony illustrates a trajectory that is deeply rooted in family transmission. Early socialization into the trade, the absence of economic alternatives, and strong dependence on crafts as a means of subsistence underscore the importance of generational continuity in local informal entrepreneurship.

➢ *Professional Trajectories and Progressive Structuring*

Respondents report lengthy careers that range from seven to more than forty years. Trajectories are often marked by technical specialization in copper, malachite, bronze, or iron that is learned on the job, by imitation, or within family and community networks. Activity generally revolves around individual or informal workshops, at times small cooperatives or temporary collaborations, with flexible and adaptive organization. Diversification of products, including masks, sculptures, paintings, rugs, necklaces, and jewellery, broadens clientele and stabilizes income despite market fluctuations. Structuring remains empirical and often takes place without formal support.

"I started more than twenty years ago by watching an uncle who worked copper. Little by little I learned, then I opened my own workshop. I mostly work copper, but over time I added necklaces, rugs, paintings. You have to adapt. I am not in a cooperative, but sometimes we group together for big orders or exhibitions."

This verbatim typifies informal artisanal careers in Lubumbashi. It features empirical, progressive, non formal learning, gradual autonomy through a personal workshop, durable technical specialization, diversification as an adaptation strategy, and ad hoc cooperation that reflects flexible organization and limited formal structuring.

➢ *Structural Constraints and Persistent Vulnerability*

Despite seniority, technical experience, and adaptive capacity, most artisans face high vulnerability due to structural factors. These include lack of legal and social recognition, limited access to credit and adequate infrastructure, unstable supplies of raw materials, and exposure to volatile informal markets. Many lack social protection or insurance, which makes them highly sensitive to economic shocks. Informality also deprives them of institutional outlets and visibility in official cultural or commercial circuits. Vulnerability persists, even among the most experienced.

"Even after all these years, I still feel fragile. I do not have a trader's card, no official recognition. When copper is scarce or too expensive, I must stop. I have never had access to a loan to improve my workshop. And when I am ill, there is nothing. We work a lot, but we remain invisible, without security or support, even with all our experience."

➢ *Logics of Remaining in the Trade Despite Precarity*

Despite the constraints, artisans continue, motivated by identity, cultural, and symbolic logics. Craft is perceived as family heritage, a source of social recognition, and a way of giving meaning to everyday life. They express pride in manual work, in transmitting knowledge to younger generations, and in their role as carriers of local culture.

"Even if my income is not always high, I feel valued in my neighborhood. People know that I work with my hands, that I create objects in copper or malachite, and they respect me for that. This respect matters a lot to me. Even without much money, I have a place here, an identity. My work gives me a certain dignity that I do not want to lose." (Artisan from Ruashi)

This highlights social recognition as symbolic capital that can partially compensate for limited economic capital.

➢ *Diverse Trajectories Marked by Seniority and Precarity*

Artisans' paths are remarkably diverse in duration, from seven to forty-one years, and in entry modes. Some inherited the practice. Others reconverted after rupture. A 62 year old artisan active since 1981 recalls:

"I started here with my father, we made copper bracelets for tourists who frequented the downtown markets. It was our only source of income. I never left the trade, even when the market collapsed after the war and the periods of looting."

Longevity does not guarantee stability. Chronic uncertainty persists due to weak regulation, variable demand, and constrained access to materials. Even experienced artisans remain structurally vulnerable, without access to credit or social protection.

➢ *Differentiated Technical and Symbolic Specializations*

The study identifies several specializations, in particular the working of copper, malachite, bronze, and iron. These specializations are linked to locally transmitted know-how and to collective identities. Malachite workers, for example, cite connections to Katangese heritage and to the stone's spiritual value. A craftswoman from Ruashi stated:

"Malachite is a stone from here, from our land. When I work it, when I polish it, I am not just making an object to sell. I feel that I am doing something noble that represents our culture and our identity, and not simply commerce."

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

Transformation techniques are highly manual. They involve a long learning process and firm gestural mastery. These practices refer to an artisanal conception of value that is founded on precision, patience, and aesthetics, which goes well beyond productivism logics.

➢ *Flexible Organizational Forms Rooted in Social Networks*

Three main forms of organization appear. These are individual work, often street based or in informal workshops, family organization, notably between father and son, and cooperative or associative structures, which are rarer yet emerging. These forms are frequently flexible and evolving.

"I work alone, that is true, but in reality, I am never really alone. There are several of us here at the Kalukuluku market, and we help each other all the time. When one person lacks stone or a tool, another helps out. And if a client requests a large object that one person cannot make, two or three of us join to complete it together." (Artisan from Kalukuluku market)

Although limited, cooperative organization is perceived as a potential lever for collective legitimation and for negotiation with authorities or foreign clients, yet it is hindered by institutional mistrust and by lack of public support.

➢ *Valued Yet Threatened Intergenerational Transmission*

The interviews reveal diverse life courses that include ruptures, reconversions, and inheritance. Some left school early in order to learn on the job. Others were trained by relatives or by artisan groups. Regularities nonetheless emerge. These include long tenure, sometimes more than forty years, a close link between artisanal activity and identity construction, and the central role of practical apprenticeship. Narratives portray craft as vocation, long term practice, and a way of life rather than a simple economic activity.

"I did not go to school, I never learned to read or write, but I learned to polish stone with my hands. Today I want my sons to do as I do. That is our heritage, our real family wealth."

"You do not choose this trade as you choose an office job. It is not a matter of a CV or a diploma. You are born into it, you grow up with the smell of copper, the sound of the hammer, the gestures of the elders. It is a passion that runs in the blood, a tradition carried almost without noticing, day after day."

Transmission is, however, threatened by precarious economic conditions and by the growing disinterest of younger generations, who aspire to occupations perceived as more lucrative or more modern.

➢ *Strong Identity and Symbolic Dimensions*

Beyond its economic function, artisanal activity is invested with identity meaning that is linked to local culture, social recognition, and personal fulfilment. The production of objects in copper or malachite is described as a way to perpetuate collective memory and to resist cultural erasure.

"What I do is more than a job to earn money. It is our history, it is who we have been for generations. Every object that I shape tells something about us, about our people. Even when sales do not follow, even when tourists no longer come, we continue, because abandoning would mean forgetting who we really are."

Symbolic resilience, nourished by collective narratives, memory practices, and aesthetic values, gives artisanal activity a depth that goes far beyond market logics. Artisans mobilize cultural, social, and symbolic resources such as local reputation, mutual aid networks, and belonging to an artisanal lineage in order to maintain their activity and to secure a form of professional dignity.

➢ *Subjective Logics Anchored in a Precarious Context*

The analysis brings to light several subjective logics that orient practice in an informal and uncertain environment. Most respondents associate their activity with resistance to marginalization and also with an affirmation of professional dignity. Despite precarity, lack of social coverage, and the absence of legal recognition, these artisans continue to invest their work with meaning. For them, producing an object is not only a matter of selling. It is also transmitting culture, keeping know-how alive, and asserting belonging to a collective memory.

"Even if I do not earn much with my work, I am respected here in Ruashi. People know that I do something special, something they recognize and appreciate. I transform bronze with my hands; I create objects that have meaning and that tell our culture. I did not have this respect in other jobs. Here, people greet me, they call me the artist, and that is worth a lot to me." (Storytelling, bronze specialist, Ruashi)

These subjective logics are anchored in powerful identity attachments. Craft becomes a way of inhabiting the city, of perpetuating traditions in the face of oblivion, and of building a place within a fragmented social fabric. The meanings attributed to activity therefore extend beyond the economic sphere. They refer to forms of pride, transmission, and cultural valorisation that give informal craft social legitimacy within the Katangese urban space.

➢ *Mobilizing Economic, Social, Cultural, and Symbolic Resources to Ensure Continuity*

The mobilization of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic resources is a central dimension of resilience and continuity in artisanal activity within an informal environment. It refers to the capacity of artisans to rely on resources that are both material and immaterial. These resources come from their social environment, their cultural anchoring, and their symbolic recognition. They help artisans overcome structural constraints related to economic instability, lack of social protection, and institutional invisibility.

From the economic standpoint, a key mechanism identified in the trajectories of copper and malachite artisans in Lubumbashi is the diversification of products and the flexibility of the offer. These are strategies for adapting to

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

market instability. In a context where demand is irregular, marked by the seasonality of tourism, the variation of local purchasing power, and uncertainty around access to raw materials, artisans develop flexible approaches that are oriented toward artisanal innovation and commercial responsiveness. Diversification concerns not only types of objects but also style, size, level of finish, and in some cases use, including jewellery, decorative items, utilitarian pieces, and religious objects. In response to instability, many artisans broaden their offer by integrating varied products such as traditional masks, wood or stone sculptures, hand painted canvases, artisanal rugs, necklaces and jewellery sets, and contemporary paintings. This strategy enables them to address a wider clientele, including tourists looking for cultural souvenirs, art collectors, and local households that seek to decorate interiors. It also spreads commercial risks. By multiplying expressive media, artisans adapt their production to fluctuating expectations while valorising their cultural heritage.

This approach is grounded in a pragmatic understanding of market expectations that is acquired through experience, direct observation, and client feedback.

"I make bracelets, statuettes, sometimes earrings or even pendants. You have to vary and propose new things all the time. If you stay with a single model, you do not sell, people get tired of it. Each client comes with a different idea. Some want something simple, others prefer something more sophisticated. You have to know how to adapt, to innovate, and above all to observe what catches the eye on the table." (Jeweler, 36)

"Tourists tend to look for light pieces that are easy to slip into a suitcase, such as pendants, small bracelets, or simple figurines. Local clients prefer heavier and more symbolic objects, such as masks, animals, or village scenes. They want something that tells a story. I make both in order to respond to all tastes and to lose no client." (Decorative objects specialist)

In this logic, frugal innovation becomes a tool for securing income. It prevents market saturation with overly standardized products and maintains a competitive edge in a highly competitive and lightly regulated environment.

"Sometimes I go back to an old model that I know well and add a small detail, modify a shape, or change a motif. That is enough to give a sense of novelty. Clients like to see something different, even if the base remains the same." (Copper sculptor)

Flexibility also extends beyond production to pricing, negotiation, and payment methods. Some artisans accept instalment payments, barter, or adapt prices to the client profile in order to avoid losing a sale. This capacity for rapid and pragmatic adjustment demonstrates entrepreneurial know-how that is often underestimated and that actively contributes to the economic resilience of informal actors.

From the social standpoint, artisans rely on mutual aid networks, family based or community based, to confront financial or logistical difficulties. Ties of solidarity enable the pooling of tools, the sharing of production spaces, and the circulation of market opportunities.

"When I lost my workshop because I could not pay the rent, a former colleague reached out to me. He hosted me, and now we share the same space. Without him I would have given up." (Sculptor, 38)

"Here in the Ruashi market, we do not consider ourselves competitors but a family. We help each other all the time. If I have no order for several days, I am not left with nothing. My brothers, my artisan colleagues, talk about me to their clients and recommend me. Thanks to this solidarity, I can continue to work and to support my family even in difficult times." (Copper jeweler, 45)

From the cultural standpoint, practice is embedded in intergenerational continuity that is carried by the transmission of gestures and traditions from family lineages. This cultural anchoring gives meaning to activity, even in the absence of official recognition.

"My father taught me to cut malachite when I was still young. It is not just work for me, it is something deeper. With each stone that I shape, I think of him and of my ancestors. It is our history, our identity, transmitted from generation to generation." (Stonecutter, 54)

"The style that I use in my creations comes from home, from our way of seeing the world. Even if I sell to tourists, I remain faithful to this inspiration. I do not copy others, I do not do what everyone else does. Each piece that I make carries our identity and our culture. That is what makes my work unique and authentic." (Wood sculptor, 29)

From the symbolic standpoint, local recognition and identity valorisation play a fundamental role. Being an artisan in certain neighbourhoods of Lubumbashi is synonymous with respect, autonomy, and know-how. This recognition, although often informal, constitutes a powerful source of motivation.

"People know me here, in the neighbourhood as well as at the market. I do not even need to look for clients anymore, others send them to me. When someone wants a good bracelet, well made, solid, and beautiful, they tell that person to come to me. That is my strength, reputation, word of mouth, and the trust that I have built over time and thanks to the quality of my work." (Jeweler, 62)

"Even if I do not always earn much, I wake up every morning with the pride of doing this work. Shaping material with my hands and creating something beautiful is a noble trade, dignified and meaningful." (Blacksmith, 47)

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

In the absence of a formal structuring framework, these immaterial resources anchor activity in a social and symbolic fabric that sustains long-term engagement. They compensate for institutional and financial gaps and contribute to reinforcing the legitimacy and viability of entrepreneurial trajectories.

In summary, the interviews and life stories collected from Lubumbashi's artisans bring to light a wide diversity of professional trajectories that are marked by seniority, economic precarity, and identity attachment to artisanal activity. These paths, ranging from seven to more than forty years of experience, testify to long-term engagement, sometimes inherited across several generations, in trades grounded in specific manual know-how in copper, malachite, bronze, and iron. Despite their expertise, artisans operate in an unstable environment that is characterized by informality, lack of social protection, and limited access to resources. Informal craft in the copper and malachite value chain in Lubumbashi goes well beyond simple economic survival. It embodies identity engagement, intergenerational transmission, and cultural valorization in a context of precarity and instability. Through their gestures, objects, and narratives, artisans perpetuate a collective memory rooted in local traditions while adapting practices to a shifting context. By asserting their know-how as the expression of a living culture, they help forge a rooted modernity that is creative and resilient at the same time. Contrary to dominant discourses that associate informality with illegality or irregularity, these artisanal practices testify to a genuine economy of recognition, where the act of creating becomes a response to exclusion and erasure. Far from marginal, these forms of organization and production reveal dynamics of social innovation and community cohesion that make informal craft an essential lever of identity reconstruction, local solidarity, and resilience in an uncertain world.

V. DISCUSSION

The results confirm the relevance of vulnerable entrepreneurship, proposed by Williams and Youssef (2014), for understanding the artisanal dynamics observed in Lubumbashi. The collected trajectories show that engagement in the craft is not a freely chosen option. It is a response to exclusion from the formal labour market, income instability, and the absence of a safety net. The testimony of a 62 year old artisan, "I never left this trade, even when the market collapsed after COVID 19," clearly illustrates constrained yet durable engagement that is grounded in necessity. This configuration echoes analyses by Kiptoo et al. (2024), who emphasize that informal crafts in East Africa rest on implicit norms of survival, family transmission, and community solidarity.

Beyond vulnerability, the results reveal a remarkable adaptive capacity that can be captured by the notion of entrepreneurial resilience (Bullough and Renko, 2013). The artisans in this study diversify products, negotiate flexibly, and pursue frugal innovation. As a jeweler puts it, "If you stay with a single model, you do not sell. You must always innovate." These strategies confirm that, even in the absence of institutional support, informal actors deploy practical intelligence and entrepreneurial agility that allow them to sustain activity within unstable contexts. Solidarity within the markets of Kalukuluku and Ruashi, expressed in the idea that "we do not see each other as competitors but as a family," constitutes social capital that is mobilized to offset economic fragility. This observation is consistent with Hasanah et al. (2023) concerning collective forms of resilience in artisanal economies.

The concept of cultural capital, reformulated by Bourdieu (1979) and extended by Throsby (2010), also clarifies the symbolic scope of artisanal practices. Far from being only market activity, production bears deep identity significance. The artisans interviewed link their work to collective memory, to family lineages, and to an aesthetic that is specific to the Katangese terroir. The example of malachite, "a stone from here," shows how natural resources are invested with meaning that goes beyond economic value. This confirms Vansina's insights (1984) on the memorial and identity role of crafts among Lubaic societies. It also nuances dominant Base of the Pyramid approaches (Prahalad and Hart, 2002) that are centered on market inclusion but do not always recognize the symbolic and heritage richness of artisanal practices.

In addition, intergenerational transmission, although omnipresent, appears threatened by precarious working conditions and by the disaffection of young people. The contrast between the will to transmit, "I want my sons to do as I do," and the aspiration of youth to more modern and more lucrative trades illustrate tensions between tradition and modernity, and between continuity and rupture. These tensions were already noted by Chen (2012) and by Alobo and Obaji (2021) in their analyses of informal economies in Central Africa.

Finally, the subjective logics expressed by the artisans, including pride, recognition, and dignity, reinforce the idea that informal craft constitutes an economy of recognition. Far from marginal, these activities play a fundamental role in identity construction, in social cohesion, and in urban resilience, particularly in mining cities such as Lubumbashi where formal alternatives are rare.

In conclusion, this study complements existing work by integrating a deeply cultural reading of informal entrepreneurship. It highlights the richness of artisanal trajectories as objects of transmission, symbolization, and resistance to marginalization. The intersection of vulnerable entrepreneurship, resilience, and cultural capital makes it possible to account for the complexity of these practices and to call upon public policies to recognize, support, and valorize these forms of popular economy that are often rendered invisible by conventional institutional mechanisms.

To respond to persistent vulnerability among copper and malachite artisans in Lubumbashi, the study proposes an integrated model for strengthening entrepreneurial resilience that is based on five complementary axes.

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

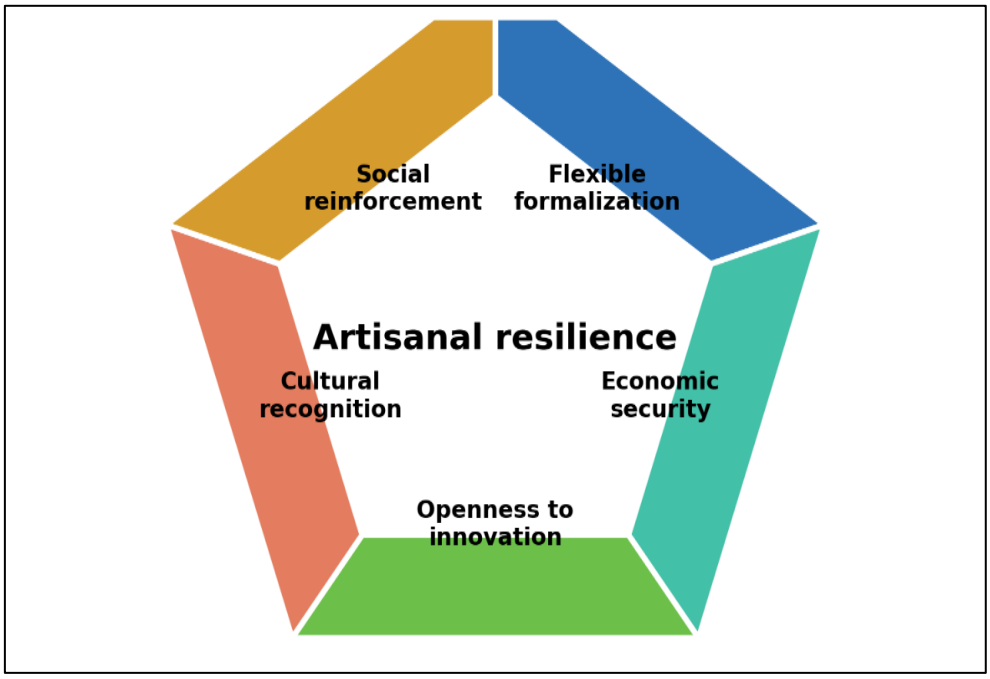

Fig 2. Integrated Model for Strengthening Entrepreneurial Resilience in Crafts

The model combines the following: flexible formalization that is adapted to the realities of informality and ensures minimal legal recognition, economic securitization that is grounded in product diversification, access to microcredit, and the structuring of fair commercialization circuits, social reinforcement through cooperative dynamics, community protection mechanisms, and the valorisation of local solidarities, cultural recognition of the trade as identity heritage through intergenerational transmission and symbolic valorisation devices, and finally openness to frugal innovation and digitalization that modernizes practices without altering authenticity. The model aims to articulate inclusion, sustainability, and dignity for a rooted and resilient craft sector.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study analysed the structuring and the sustainability of informal artisanal entrepreneurship in the copper and malachite value chain in Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Starting from the central question of why artisans remain vulnerable despite seniority and expertise, the inquiry sought to understand artisans' professional trajectories, the constraints that they face, and the resources that they mobilize in order to construct durable careers.

The objective was to identify logics of action, organizational forms, and symbolic and economic strategies that artisans deploy in order to maintain activity within a context of structural instability. To do so, a qualitative ethnographic methodology inspired by Grounded Theory was mobilized. It relied on semi-structured interviews, storytelling, and inductive thematic coding. Data analysis was carried out with the NVivo software package and followed an iterative process that combined open, axial, and selective coding. Validity was reinforced by triangulating the different empirical materials.

The results identified key dimensions that structure entrepreneurial dynamics in the informal craft sector in Lubumbashi. First, they reveal a diversity of initial motivations and entry modes that are often linked to precarity or to family transmission. Activity is progressively structured around empirical learning and flexible organizational forms. Despite significant seniority, artisans remain exposed to major structural constraints that generate persistent vulnerability. Various logics of remaining in the trade emerge. These are grounded in technical specializations, a strong identity charge, and subjective logics of recognition. Although threatened, intergenerational transmission constitutes an important symbolic pillar. Finally, the continuity of activity rests on the constant mobilization of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic resources. These resources allow artisans to adapt to market instability and to assert their place in the local socioeconomic fabric.

The major contribution of this study is to reveal informal crafts not only as an economic space of survival but also as an identity, cultural, and community space. By mobilizing a cross reading of vulnerable entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial resilience, and cultural capital, the study brings to light the symbolic richness and the social density of these practices, which are often rendered invisible in classical approaches to the informal economy. To respond to persistent vulnerability among copper and malachite artisans in Lubumbashi, the study proposes an integrated model that combines flexible formalization, economic securitization through diversification, microcredit, and fair circuits, social reinforcement through cooperatives, community protection, and solidarities, cultural recognition through heritage and transmission and symbolic valorisation, and openness to frugal innovation and digitalization. The objective is to

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep146

articulate inclusion, sustainability, and dignity for a rooted and resilient craft sector.

From a managerial perspective, the results call for a repositioning of public policies and of support programs for crafts. It is necessary to design instruments that are adapted to the empirical realities of artisans. These include flexible formalization, simplified access to credit, the structuring of collective spaces, the heritage valorisation of productions, and integration into official circuits in tourism, arts education, and fair trade. Symbolic recognition of the trade and the securitization of career paths could strengthen knowledge transmission and attract younger generations to trades that carry high cultural value.

This research has limitations. The declarative nature of the data, founded on artisans' narratives, exposes analysis to subjectivity or to retrospective reconstruction bias. The predominantly male composition of the sample limits insights into gender dynamics. The absence of perspectives from other actors, including clients, authorities, and institutional supporters, restricts systemic understanding. Future research could explore the diversity of artisanal practices in other neighbourhoods or cities by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Longitudinal studies would be useful for observing the evolution of trajectories under economic or social shocks. The analysis of policy effects, the digitalization of sales circuits, and the place of women in the value chain also merit deeper investigation. Finally, a comparison between urban and rural crafts would clarify territorial specificities and formalization logics in Central Africa.

REFERENCES

[1]. Banque mondiale. (2023). *Profil de la pauvreté en République Démocratique du Congo : Diagnostics et pistes de résilience économique*. Washington, DC : Banque mondiale. https://www.worldbank.org/

[2]. Bourdieu, P. (1979). *La distinction : Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit.

[3]. Bullough, A., & Renko, M. (2013). Entrepreneurial resilience during challenging times. *Business Horizons, 56*(3), 343–350. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2013.01.001

[4]. Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.

[5]. Comunian, R. (2020). Cultural capital and local development: A new theoretical approach. *Cultural Trends, 29*(1), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2019.1707231

[6]. Fabian, J. (1983). *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*. Columbia University Press.

[7]. Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago : Aldine.

[8]. Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

[9]. Hasanah, R., Sugiyarti, L., & Nisa, K. (2023). Artisan entrepreneurship and cultural preservation: A pathway to inclusive economic development. *Journal of Creative Economies, 11*(2), 55–72. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2023.02.004

[10]. Institut National de la Statistique (INS). (2022). *Enquête nationale sur l'emploi, le secteur informel et les conditions de vie des ménages*. Kinshasa : INS.

[11]. Kiptoo, L., Odhiambo, W., & Muriithi, S. (2024). Informal artisan entrepreneurship and resilience in Kenyan urban markets. *African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management, 8*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/2788490424123456

[12]. Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA : Sage.

[13]. PNUD. (2023). *Rapport sur le développement humain en République Démocratique du Congo : Inégalités et résilience communautaire*. New York : Programme des Nations Unies pour le Développement (PNUD). https://www.undp.org/fr/drc

[14]. Ratten, V., Jones, P., & Barbera, F. (2019). Artisan entrepreneurship: A review and research agenda. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research, 25*(4), 865–883. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEBR-03-2018-0150

[15]. Sem, P., & Cornet, A. (2017). *Méthodes et techniques de recherche en sciences économiques et de gestion*. Éditions PUL.

[16]. Throsby, D. (2010). *The Economics of Cultural Policy*. Cambridge University Press.

[17]. UNESCO. (2020). *Artisanat de la malachite au Katanga : Patrimoine, savoir-faire et enjeux de transmission*. Paris : Organisation des Nations Unies pour l'Éducation, la Science et la Culture. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/

[18]. UNICEF. (2021). *Les enfants dans les mines : Une réalité toujours alarmante en RDC*. Kinshasa : UNICEF RDC. https://www.unicef.org/drcongo/

[19]. Vansina, J. (1984). *Art History in Africa: An introduction to method*. Longman.

[20]. Williams, C. C., & Youssef, Y. (2014). Is informal entrepreneurship an incubator for new enterprise creation? *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research, 20*(1), 4–19. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEBR-06-2012-0063

[21]. Willame, J.-C. (1997). *Banyarwanda et Banyamulenge : Violences ethniques et gestion de l'identitaire au Kivu*. L'Harmattan.