Control Networks in Cameroonian SMEs: Influence of Selection Criteria on Performance Partners

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Abstract

The objectives of the present study are to understand and describe the criteria for selecting partners in networks of SMEs, whether these criteria can explain the performance of SMEs. From an observation of 54 Cameroonian SMEs in the manufacturing and logistics sectors, it appears that these SMEs (while selecting partners) took into account some very important criteria such as: price, quality, past relationships ; as a significant criteria, production capacity, reputation, and technical ability were taken into account. From literature, we know that when partners are selected using criteria developed properly, it has an influence on business performance, but we found that despite the inclusion of these criteria, it does not alter the opportunism of actors, which remains in the background selection, and therefore, does not explain performance.

Keywords: **corporate network, criteria for selecting partners, SMEs, business networks, control, performance**

JEL Classification : L140, M210, M410

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The 1980s were marked by a turbulent environment due to the development of information technologies and communication networks, increased competition between companies due to globalization, and the radical change in the structure of the market (supply now exceeded demand), shortness of traditional models (hierarchical and market), the aim of internationalization, and so forth. Businesses adapted to survive by offering goods and services that took into account the needs of the consumers who were becoming increasingly demanding in this environment where competition was growing. At the same time, technological progress (which shortens the life cycle of goods and services), pushed companies to engage in a race for productivity, which required massive investment. The rush for innovation was stronger.

In order to cope with these changes, companies developed new organizational forms: The cooperation that can take many forms (partnerships, joint ventures, alliances, business networking, business networks, virtual companies, business clusters, and so forth). For these forms, the company has no clear-cut border; it refers to its customers, suppliers, competitors, and so on. Faced with these changes, the small business was no longer able to do everything in-house; it tried to use its strengths and move towards its partners in carrying out rationalization. It focused on its core business and sought partners for effective and complementary activities in the search for flexibility, variability, optimal use of equipment, and competitiveness, so that it may consolidate its market position (Hammami, Burlat, & Campagne, 2001).

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Business networks continue to record increased development, but the complexity of their organizations and managements causes a high mortality rate between 37% and 70%, depending on the sector. According to Porter (1986), the life expectancy of these new forms of enterprise was 4.7 years in the United States, and in 1998, the same author showed that less than 40% of such businesses were able to attain an age of 4 years, and 15% were 10 years old. However, these partnerships often remain fragile and are prone to instability, with a high failure rate reaching 90% (Harrigan, 1985). According to Ngok evina (2008), several Cameroonian companies opt for outsourcing (more than 78.9% of the examined sample). If outsourcing presents a transfer of activities to a service provider, this means managing the heart of the company's business (Quélin, 2003). To this effect, for example, the Paris Airport has outsourced the majority of its business, and the company has a better competitive position in the industry. That the network is operating normally, it is necessary that each partner has an interest or has achieved its objectives and satisfaction levels. To achieve this, it is for each partner to develop the tools and techniques of management, in particular, to allow control to be transferred to reassure the achievement of its objectives.

According to Gulati (1998), research is abundant regarding the causes of formation of the network or its structure; it is not the same for the implementation and management, as both these areas remain poorly studied. Several authors have highlighted the low volume of work related to the theme of coordination of inter-organizational networks, including control (Hasrouri, 2007). Within a network, two types of control are often analyzed: one based on the contract, and the other based on trust. For many authors, the search and selection of partners is the crucial step for the success of the business network. The basis of a successful network hinges on the quality of its members. Several authors consider the complementarity of members as a key condition for the success of a network. We are interested in the selection of partners as a means of control.

Control allows measurement of performance. The roles assigned to organizational control are performance management and change management. The idea of performance is included in the logic objective-middle income. This refers to the concepts of efficiency and effectiveness. The change of management is to control the key factors of success and financial stability to achieve the objectives. The elements that define the performance of business networks are far too variable from one context to another and unknown. This lack of knowledge is reflected in the high mortality of these cooperative ventures. This brings in the question: Why is that the selection of partners can have an influence on the performance of the SME networks (in case of SMEs in Cameroon)? To our knowledge, no research work has focused on this issue. Hence, the objective of the present study is to understand and describe the criteria for partner selection in networks of SMEs in Cameroon, and to verify whether these criteria can explain the performance of these SMEs.

Our unit of analysis is the SME, which consists of very small businesses, small businesses, and medium-sized enterprises. To achieve these goals, we first considered an overview of the criteria for selecting partners, business performance in networks, and we ascertained whether there is a link between the selection criteria and performance of partners, and finally, we carried out an empirical analysis in this field.

Theoretical Approach : Criteria and Performance Partner Networks of SMEs

Thorelli (1986) regarded network management as a long-term relationship between the organizations. It replaces network cooperation (the only distinguishing element is the duration of the relationship) with three central parameters: The idea of cooperation enshrined in a conscious strategy or stress, the need to integrate this cooperative relationship into a long-term relationship between independent actors, and the need to follow and provide relationships. In our view, the corporate network is formed from two companies who have had a relationship for at least 2 years under various legal forms, while remaining legally independent to carry out a project, ranging from simple sharing to the realization of a common innovation.

➲ **Criteria for Selecting Partners in SME Networks :** Corporate networks are developing strategies increasingly used by managers, however, they still have relatively high failure rates (as mentioned above). Uncertainty is indeed the fundamental problem faced by all cooperations. To cope with this uncertainty, we must develop

Table 1. Summary Based Study on the Selection Criteria

criteria	References
Quality, delivery, net price, reputation and industrial positions, geographic location, reciprocal agreements, technological capability, communication systems, purchasing	[Wind and Robinson, 1968]
Quality, delivery, net price, technical capacity of the partner purchases	[Hinkle and al., 1969]
Price, quality, geographical location, capacity and ease of production, purchases	[Hakanson and Wootz, 1975]
Capacity and ease of production, technological capacity, financial position, industry reputation, internal organization, control operations, repair services, geographic location	[Wieters, 1976]
Delivery, procurement, and the net price of the product	[Anthony and Buffa, 1977]
Delivery, net price, technical capability, capacity, and ease of production partner, purchasing, design capacity of partner	[Browning and al., 1983]
Quality, delivery, location, partner attitude, on deadline delivery, capacity design	[Jackson, 1983]
Delivery, procurement, net price of the product	[Banerjee, 1986]
Quality, delivery, performance history of partner, capacity and ease of production, net price, technical capability, compliance with tender, reputation and position in the industry procedures, management and organization, location, shopping	[Gregory, 1986]
Net price, purchase process products	[Kingsman, 1986]

Source : Reproduced from A. Wehbe (2011). structuration des critères de sélection des partenaires : application aux projets de développement des produits nouveaux [*Structuring criteria for selecting partners: Application to the development of projects for new products*]. Thèse de Doctorat, université de Toulouse, France. p. 40.

methods and tools of control. In the present study, we will focus on the selection of partners. If the partners do not systematically exploit loopholes in contractual arrangements or formal institutional frameworks to which they are subject, it is because there are often other constraints, repeated interaction, reputation mechanism, and so forth that sanction long-term cooperation, and partners can make a comparison between the gains of defection and those of loyalty. The literature on partner selection shows the existence of a large number of criteria applied in this process. These criteria are based on key information to minimize the risk of opportunism that is likely to happen in all relations of cooperation.

In the process of selection of partners, Bandeira and Retour (2011) showed that there are five traditional criteria in the strategy literature: An adjusted strategy, the partner's capacity, compatibility of partner engagement, partnership based on the cooperation of members, and the control diet or control. They stressed that these tend to regard one partner at a time. However, most authors have emphasized the inclusion of more subjective criteria such as trust, stakeholder engagement, similar values, beliefs, relationships, and so forth. One research highlighted the impact of quantitative criteria for selecting partners on the financial health of companies. However, in the case of small businesses, financial management is often not well formalized, and financial data can represent a false reality of business results The following factors appear to be relevant in the selection of partners: the control diet, risk selection tools, previous links, adequacy and complementarity of resources, reputation actors, corresponding motivations, and trust. Wehbe (2011) conducted a study on the selection criteria for partners, and it is synthesized in the Table 1.

➲ **Performance of the Network of SMEs :** The performance of an organization remains a central challenge for research management. This term is widely used without a unanimous definition. The notion of performance has changed dramatically with the emergence and development of new forms of organizing economic activity. The elements that define the performance of these business networks are far too variable from one context to another and unknown. This lack of knowledge is reflected in the high mortality of these cooperative ventures (or networks). However, performance is measured on the context chosen according to strategy, and the criteria to measure effectiveness are diverse. For Capiez (2008), these dimensions are numerous and can be grouped into

two main categories, an objective dimension for measuring both economic (efficiency) and systemic (sustainability of the organization) performance , and a subjective dimension to measure the social (human resources and legitimacy of the organization) performance. To supplement the financial measures (of efficiency) preferred initially, control management offers a more synthetic approach, such as the "Balanced Scorecard" organized in four dimensions - financial, customer, process internal management, learning and growth, with indicators being qualitative, physical, and financial.

Meschi (2005) proposed some criteria, such as stock market competitive economic and financial measures (e.g., return on assets and return on equity), competitive measures (e.g., commercial viability and market share), market measures (e.g., abnormal returns), partner satisfaction, and survival part of all variables to assess the performance of business networks. For Thouraya and Mungall (2006), the rate of growth of a company was a measure of business performance. In case of studies on collaboration between high-tech companies, the indicator generally used is the degree of innovation. That said, they warned against the use of financial and accounting indicators for this purpose. According to them, financial returns are achieved through other mechanisms, and financial returns solely do not reflect the value of a collaboration.

In general, two types of measures of both objective and subjective indicators of performance are associated. For example, Brulhart and Favoreu (2006) defined two indicators of the success of a partnership: The objective indicator was the volume of trade between the partners, and the subjective indicator was the satisfaction of both the partners. In fact, a network is managed from the moment it achieves its objectives. The financial criteria, such as return on capital and profit growth, have two limitations: They do not necessarily reflect the totality and extend the objectives (you can have a negative result as the firm progresses and improves its competitive positioning and learning) when addressing the networks for which there is no creation of an independent entity, and there is no common ground on which to rest the calculation of the indicators.

Therefore, it seems that the notion of satisfaction of each party with respect to the relationship appears to be the most appropriate measure for evaluating the success of a partnership (Brulhart, 2002), and we added cost reduction to this list. Recent trends in literature have placed less emphasis on objective measures and more on the perception of performance by managers (Pansiri, 2005).

➲ **Partner Selection and Performance of SME Networks :** Studies on the success of business networks made in the last decade have indicated that performance assessment is a critical factor for success. However, a large number of studies on the performance of networks have only focused on the influence of the environment, the degree of interaction of partners, partner characteristics, and organizational characteristics of performance (Bandeira & Retour, 2011). Despite the importance of these research studies, very few have examined the influence of partner selection on performance, and as such, there is no available study with respect to influence of partner selection on performance in the Cameroonian context. According to Bandeira and Retour (2011), there would be a relationship between mate choice and performance of business networking . In the same way, Todeva and Knoke (2005) and Li and Liao (2007) reported that the selection of partners is important and influences network performance. According to Tonye (2006), sociologists, economists, and managers are of the opinion that where partners and the nature of links are selected and carefully defined, the network improves its responsiveness, flexibility, competitiveness, access to resources (including information ; improvements in terms of quality and quantity leads to a reduction in asymmetry that is often seen in transactions), reduces the risks of opportunism and uncertainty, as control over these areas breeds efficiency, helping to increase the financial capacity of each part. This allowed us to formulate the following main hypothesis:

Hypotheses

The selection criteria for partners has a positive influence on the performance level of the network of companies. The main hypothesis, taking into account different criteria for selecting partners, can be divided into two assumptions.

➲ **Hypothesis 1(a):** Very important criteria for selecting partners has a positive influence on the performance levels of various partners involved in the network.

➲ **Hypothesis 1 (b):** Significant criteria for selecting partners has a positive influence on the performance levels of various partners involved in the network.

Methodology

To test the afore-mentioned assumptions, information was collected from a sample of Cameroonian SMEs working with their partners as a network. Networks can be studied in two main ways: Either by using an inter-organizational approach based on the analysis of several case studies or by an intra-organizational approach, from the point of view of the company inserted in a network (Capiez, 2008). We preferred the second approach because it allows you to analyze a large number of companies (we analyzed the SMEs inserted in the network and not the performance of the network; the relationship is vertical or horizontal, the perception should be the same). We chose the non-probabilistic method, for which the sampling error is unknown, the procedure of using the judgment was to identify a representative sample. Among the non-probabilistic methods, we adopted the method by quota, which seemed more suited for our research. We conducted the present study with an approach in terms of skills and resources, and we were interested in SMEs in the manufacturing and logistics sectors. Data were collected by using a questionnaire that we adopted after an exploratory survey of managers of SMEs between February and July 2012 in Cameroon.

The dependent variable was performance; this variable was measured using items from the literature measured on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from *not at all agree* to *strongly agree*). A series of questions on the perceived notion of success or failure of involvement in the network by the company were posed to the respondents. This notion was apprehended from two types of measures, both objective and subjective. 'Objective' measures of improved performance were contained in three questions: One related to cost variation, another related to the development of quality of service, and the final question talked about the reduction of current assets and immobilization (Dumoulin, Meschi, & Uhlig, 2000). We added a fourth question - which was related to increase in sales. The subjective measure was contained in a question on overall satisfaction of engaging in the network. We had 11 items for questions on performance. For the dependent variable, criteria for selecting partners was measured by the items. For this concept - criteria for selecting partners - we retained the following criteria which seemed most relevant to managers of Cameroonian SMEs: price, quality, time, past relationships, the terms of the contract, tender, goal setting, production capacity, reputation, and technical ability.

➲ **The Sample :** The population of this study focuses exclusively on the Cameroonian SMEs where the number of employed staff was less than 100 and annual turnover was less than or equal to 1 billion. The sample consisted of SMEs in the logistics sector and manufacturing PMI. We believe that the manufacturing sector is one whose primary function is the economic transformation process in providing industrial raw materials for tangible products, or for final consumption, or for industrial consumers (Djeumene, 2004). Also, the manufacturing sector is composed of R-02 to R-24 branches of the nomenclature of the Department of Statistics and National Accounts Cameroon (DSCN). The businesses of these branches are usually consulted in the surveys conducted by the DSCN. For SMEs in the logistics sector, we define them as those which optimize physical flows consisting of movements and handling of materials, goods, and products from the sources of supply to the point of use (Darbelet, 2004).

It is important to know who could provide the requisite information we needed for the present study. It is for this reason that our questionnaire was answered by the director, the marketing and sales manager, technical manager, logistics manager, or the other closest collaborator of the director general. This was done keeping in mind the hierarchical order that was tasked to respond to our questionnaire to suitably fulfill its function and competence. The sample consisted of SMEs in Douala and Yaoundé west, southwest, and northwest regions because these cities and regions are home to about 79% of the SMEs in Cameroonian territory. Apart from

Table 2. Return of Usable Questionnaires and Sample Distribution

Information on the distribution of 100 questionnaires	Questionnaires	regions or cities	
Number of questionnaires returned	**Number**	**Cities or regions**	**Respondents**
Administered questionnaires:	100	Douala	30
Those who refused to answer the questionnaire without reason.	15	Yaoundé	15
Those who refused to answer because of "uncomfortable questions".	14	West	7
Questionnaire not filled completely.	9	South-west	1
Questionnaires abandoned by us following Missed appointments.	8	North-west	1
Questionnaires operated.	**54**	**Total**	**54**
Response rate: 54 %			

Table 3. Main Activities of Firms in the Sample

Main Activities		Frequencies	%	% Cumulative Frequencies
1	Industry Rubber and Plastic Art Manufacturing	2	3,7	3,7
2	Bakery	8	14,8	18,5
3	Management Consulting	3	5,6	24,1
4	Printing and Publishing	5	9,3	33,3
5	Processing of agricultural products	2	3,7	37
6	Manufacture of Beverages	7	13	50
7	Supply	4	7,4	57,4
8	Other Food Industries	13	24,1	81,5
9	Manufacturing Materials	4	7,4	88,9
10	Industry Articles Paper	2	3,7	92,6
11	Industry Manufacturing and others	2	3,7	96,3
12	Manufacture of Electrical and Mechanical Metal	2	3,7	100
	Total	**54**	**100**	

considerations of statistical accuracy and credibility, company policies, and financial constraints, we chose to interview 100 SMEs. The Tables 2 and 3 indicate a breakdown by region and activities of SMEs. The breakdown by city and regions are show in the Table 2.

➲ **Method of Analysis :** For data processing, we used SPSS, which allowed us to make the descriptive analysis. Factor analysis and correspondence analysis were used to check the scales. Specifically, we first performed a PCA on all the constituent items of exogenous variables (criteria for selecting partners), and then on all items of performance to avoid multicollineality. We tested the dimensionality of the identified factors and renewed each on a new PCA. Each time, we observed the distribution of the items on factors before and after the varimax rotation. The criteria proposed by Evrard, Pras, and Roux (2003) was used to purify the scales because we eliminated items with no contributing factor whose value was greater than or equal to 0.50. After studying the validity of the scales, we examined the reliability of the factors resulting from factor analysis using the measurement of Cronbach's alpha. Thus, when the value of alpha is equal to 1, the scale has good internal consistency and meaningful issues expected to measure the same thing. After regression and calculating the correlation coefficient, we observed if there was a relationship between the explanatory variables and the dependent variable.

Table 4. Item Analysis for Performance Components

	Components			
	1	2	3	4
Overall, we are satisfied with this association. r (Q36)			0,70	
We are very unhappy with the results of this association. (Q37)		-0,762		
The combination of our business with that partner is a success. r (Q38)				0,866
In general, we can say that the results of our association with these partners have far exceeded our expectations. (Q39)				0,633
If we were to conduct a performance evaluation of our association with these partners, it would be very unusual. (Q40)	0,597			
The partnership with these partners is very profitable. (Q41)	0,806			
This cooperation reduces costs. (Q42)	0,662			
This cooperation improves the quality of service (production). (Q43)	0,895			
This cooperation results in a reduction of current assets and fixed assets. (Q44)			0,817	
This cooperation enhances our turnover. (Q45)		0,648		
This cooperation allows us to be more competitive. (Q46)	0,902			

Table 5. Factors Used for the Performance Concept

	Performance	Commonalities
If we were to conduct a performance evaluation of our association with these partners, it would be very unusual (Q40).	0,644	0,415
The partnership with these partners is very profitable (Q41).	0,852	0, 726
This cooperation reduces costs (Q42).	0,754	0,568
This cooperation improves the quality of service (production) (Q43).	0,911	0,830
This cooperation allows us to be more competitive (Q46).	0,851	0,725
Eigenvalues	**3,264**	
% of variance explained	**65,284**	
Cronbach's Coefficient alpha	**0,85**	

Analysis and Results

The concept of performance is measured with 11 items. Among these 11 items, we had 2 items reversed, these are questions Q36 and Q38. We performed the test of relevance of the principal component analysis, called the KMO's test, which gave a value of 0.583 (which is considered good). Bartlett's test of sphericity gave a value of 275.799 with a very low threshold of significance (0.000) and we could accept the results of the factor analysis. The matrix component after rotation is presented in the Table 4. We found that with four factors, the first represented 36.28% of the variance, the second, third, and fourth factors respectively represented 17.19%, 12.40%, and 9.34% of the variance - which is weak. We noted that these are the questions that were reversed on the second, third, and fourth factors, and hence, we removed the factors second, third, and fourth, and we retained the Factor 1 on which we renewed the analysis. This time, the value of KMO's test came out to be 0.827 and the value of Bartlett's test of sphericity was 131.158 (significance = 0.000), which allows us to accept the results of the factor analysis.

The component matrix is presented in the Table 5. This unidimensional solution explained 65.284% of the variance, and the commonalities and components of each item are greater than 0.40. The component matrix in the Table 5 indicates that all items have a higher structural coefficient of 0.64. The items Q40, Q41, Q42, Q43, and

Table 6. Analysis of Items on the Criteria for Selecting Partners

	Components		
	1	2	3
Price	0,698		
Quality	0,626		
Deadline			0,881
Previous relationships	0,750		
The terms of contract			0,592
The tender	0,3		
Setting objectives	-0,687		
Production capacity		0,790	
The reputation		0,417	
Technical capacity		0,907	

Table 7. Factors Used for the Concept of Partner Selection Criteria

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Commonalities
Price	0,863		0,773
Quality	0,818		0,685
Previous Relationships	0,564		0,326
Production Capacity		0,586	0,677
The Reputation		0,889	0,813
Technical Capacity		0,893	0,805
Eigenvalues	**2,904**	**1,178**	
% of variance explained	**48,398**	**19,631**	
Cronbach's Coefficient alpha	**0,76**	**0,76**	

Q46 were retained for further analysis. To measure the internal consistency of these items, we investigated its Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which came out to be 0.85, which is considered to be very satisfactory because it is greater than the recommended minimum value (0.60). A comparison with the results obtained by Brulhart (2002) allows us to make the following observations: (a) we used items, like he did, to measure the performance of the partnership, (b) then we added four items retained by Dumoulin, Meschi, and Uhlig (2000) to measure performance, (c) we added items Q46, out of the first six items, two were selected, and out of the remaining four, the second set of two items were retained and the latter was chosen. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained by Brulhart (2002) was 0.92. The criteria for selecting partners was measured by using 10 items. We performed the KMO test and Bartlett's test of sphericity, which gave an acceptable value, so that we could accept the results of the factor analysis. The rotation matrix component is presented in the Table 6.

We obtained three factors, and the first factor accounted for 33.04% of the variance ; the second and third factors accounted for 18.51% and 13.58% of the variance respectively. The third Factor F3 is weak and was not retained. We noticed that the tender setting objectives and terms of contract had a low structural coefficient, we removed these items, and kept factors Factor 1 and Factor 2, which gave us a KMO's value of 0.728 . The value of Bartlett's test of sphericity was 102.692 (significance = 0.000), which allowed us to once again accept the results of the factor analysis. The component matrix is depicted in the Table 7.

The latter multidimensional solution explained 68.029% of the variance, and the commonalities and the components of each item were greater than 0.40, except for previous relationships. The component matrix in Table 7 indicates that all items have a structural coefficient greater than 0.65, except for previous relationships

Table 8. Criteria for Selecting Partners

N°	Proposals	Average	Standard Deviation
1	Quality	**4,80**	**0,63**
2	Price	**4,56**	**0,9**
3	Deadline	**4,31**	**0,99**
4	Reputation	3,43	0,74
5	Production Capacity	3,35	0,85
6	Technical Capacity	3,35	0,85
7	Setting Objectives	**3,20**	**1,16**
8	The Terms of the Contract	**2,81**	**1,17**
9	Previous Relationships	**2,80**	**1,02**
10	The Tender	**2,46**	**1,06**

Table 9. Pearson Correlation Assumptions 1a and 1b

		Performance
Important selection criteria	Sig	-0,061 (NS)
Pearson correlation	(bilateral)	0,662
	N	54
Considerable selection criteria	Sig	0,081 (NS)
Pearson correlation	(bilateral)	0,556
	N	54

(NS) Not significant

and capacity. The items price, quality, past relationship, reputation, technical capability, production capacity corresponding to F1 and F2 were kept for further analysis. To measure the internal consistency of these items, we investigated its Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which came out to be 0.76, which is considered satisfactory because it is greater than the recommended minimum value (0.60). These items were thus used for the first time for testing the hypotheses. The first factor - Factor 1- that was retained can be described to be a *very important criteria* for selecting partners and the second factor - Factor 2 - corresponds to the *significant criteria* for selecting partners. We classified them after sorting flat on all items of the concept and the results are presented in the Table 8.

By observing these results, we observed that emphasis was placed on quality, price, and dateline - this confirms our previous remarks. Reputation, technical capacity, and production capacity can be regarded as significant criteria for the selection of network partners. Setting objectives, contract terms, and prior relationships can be regarded as the means criteria, and finally, the lowest important criteria is the standard tender. The literature on partner selection shows the existence of a large number of criteria applied in this process. These criteria are based on key information to minimize the risk of opportunism that is likely to happen in all the relations of cooperation; however, the majority of authors have emphasized the inclusion of more subjective criteria such as trust, commitment, similar values, beliefs, relationships, and so forth. In conclusion, it appears that the selection criteria of the network partners of SMEs in our sample are objective criteria.

The correlation results are depicted in the Table 9. We observed from this table that there is no bilateral relationship between the very important criteria for selecting partners, significant criteria for partner selection, and performance of companies engaged in the networks. There was no requirement to perform regression to see the direction of the relationship. The assumptions of the hypotheses 1a and 1b, which have not been validated, reached the conclusion obtained by Bandeira and Retour (2011), who stated that despite the selection criteria of established partners, opportunistic behavior is witnessed, and also, as observed by Puthod and Puthod (2006), a partnership may fail even when both companies appear together as partner profiles, the existing relationships

often cannot avoid conflict. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find that companies who thought they had found the right partner get entangled in adversarial relationships.

Discussion

The criterion that are considered most important for the selection of partners are price, delivery, and quality. These results seem logical because the partners usually work with the right approach to time and must deliver quality products at reasonable prices to allow leeway to others to achieve the finished product. These results converge with those obtained by Wehbe (2011). The important criterion are production capacity, technical capacity, expertise, respect for procedures, and quality standards. As in the case of the above - mentioned criterion, operating just in time and network, the company must ensure that partners have the technical capacity and production can ensure the delivery of last minute orders.

Regarding performance, our results are similar to the conclusion obtained by Brulhart and Favoreu (2006), that satisfaction is an emotional state resulting from the appraisal of all aspects of the employment relationship of a company with another company. Thus, according to them, satisfaction can be seen as the overall affective evaluation focused on the partnership. In this sense, satisfaction assesses the objectives and the relevant and productive nature of the relationship. In addition, satisfaction appears as a rich concept that has the potential to be broken down into several categories respectively on different areas of the relationship (satisfaction with the objectives in general skills of the partner, the benefits reaped by the partnership, the cost / benefit ratio) (Table 10).

Regarding the assessments that managers have the performance of their company incorporated in networks, the results revealed the following factors: Improved sales, which came first, followed by the search for competitiveness, then improving product quality, and reducing costs. All these elements play an important role. These results are in congruence with the results obtained by Brulhart and Favoreu (2006).

Managerial Implications

Regarding the criteria for choosing partners, we say that companies are forced to drive their development projects, taking into account their partners, and equally their strengths and weaknesses. This inevitably leads companies to focus increasingly on the criteria for selection of these partners. A suitable partner can be a guarantee of success (which minimizes potential sources of conflict). Conversely, a partner who does not meet the

Table 10. Description of Items' Performance

N°	Proposals	Average	Standard Deviation
1	This cooperation enhances our turnover (Q45).	3,80	1,02
2	This cooperation allows us to be more competitive (Q46).	3,78	0,92
3	Overall, we are pleased with this association (Q36).	3,72	0,79
4	This cooperation improves the quality of service (production) (Q43).	3,69	1,08
5	The combination of our business with that partner is successful (Q38).	3,67	1,01
6	The partnership relationship with these partners is very profitable (Q41).	3,65	0,85
7	This cooperation reduces costs (Q42).	3,06	1,23
8	This cooperation results in a reduction of current assets and fixed assets (Q44).	3	0,99
9	In general, we can say that the results of our association with these partners have far exceeded our expectations (Q39).	2,98	1,02
10	If we were to conduct a performance evaluation of our association with these partners, it would be very unusual (Q40).	2 ,96	1,03
11	We are very unhappy with the results of this association (Q37).	1,80	0,59

expectations may lead a development project to a certain failure. Regarding performance, contextualizing the measurement of this concept in SMEs engaged in open networks presents important managerial opportunities for local businesses and public economic institutions in the region, and also for foreign companies wishing to collaborate permanently with local businesses. The study puts in place an operational, multi - perspective, and dynamic performance tool. This is a useful support for the success of collaborative actions.

Regarding the link between the criteria for partner selection and performance of these partners, if one relies on contractual theories, control mechanisms and evaluation partners will establish incentive structures to control relationships, thereby reducing certain costs of coordination.

Conclusion

The objectives of the present study were to understand and describe the criteria for partner selection in networks of SMEs; whether these criteria can explain the performance of SMEs. It appears that the SMEs, while selecting partners, took into account some very important criteria such as: price, quality, past relationships, and as significant criteria, capacity, reputation, and technical ability. However, we found that despite the inclusion of these criteria, they did not alter the opportunism of actors, which remains in the background selection, and therefore, does not explain performance.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

Studies like the present one often have a much lower generalization ability . However, in this case, we favored the internal validity at the expense of external validity. In addition, the results are specific to network organizations in the manufacturing and logistics sectors, and generalizability to other types of strategic partnerships is questionable. In addition, the data had been collected by interviewing respondents from both sides of the dyad partnership, and the respondents were not linked in pairs, and importantly, these respondents did not represent the diversity of Cameroonian SMEs. From these limitations, we can suggest possible extensions to our research. One possible research opportunity would be to extend the model study for other industries, to expand the sample to a larger representation, to consider other modes of control such as contracts' trust and culture, and see what may be their influences on performance.

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