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Sababu and Contextual Transition Capacity: Social Capital as a Missing Barrier in Circular Economy Transitions among SMEs in Freetown, Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are often seen as key players in promoting circular economy (CE) transitions, but most studies on CE barriers focus mainly on wealthy areas. This article develops a context-sensitive explanation of SME CE transition capacity in Freetown, Sierra Leone, combining desktop analysis with qualitative field materials from 20 marketplace actors (12 semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions) and complementary online ethnographic observation of market discourse around CE by-products. Iterative thematic analysis generated three interlocking clusters of contextual transition capacity barriers: (1) Market competition and affordability: "CE products are for rich people"; (2) Consumer understanding of CE and by-products: cost, symbolism, and socio-cultural drivers; and (3) Sababu as a contextual barrier/enabler: social capital and market reciprocity. Sababu is theorised as contextual social capital, relational legitimacy embedded in identity, networks, and reputational pathways that structure consumer reciprocity and market access under conditions of high uncertainty and weak formal assurance mechanisms. SMEs that lacked sababu faced ongoing challenges with demand and being seen as legitimate, even if they had the right skills, investments, or unique products, while some SMEs with fewer traditional advantages were able to succeed through trust and support built on sababu. The article adds to the study of circular economy transitions by broadening the idea of "transition capacity" to include relational legitimacy as an informal support system that influences circular economy results in low-income, post-conflict urban areas, and it suggests ways for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to develop strategies and policies that create fair and inclusive circular markets.

INTRODUCTION

Circular economy (CE) has moved from a niche sustainability concept to a central policy and business agenda, positioned as a response to the ecological and socio-economic costs of linear "take–make–waste" systems by reducing virgin resource dependence, lowering emissions, and opening new value-creation pathways through reuse, repair, remanufacturing, and recycling (Ellen MacArthur Foundation [EMF], 2013; Kirchherr *et al.,* 2017). However, CE transition trajectories remain highly uneven across geographies. While many Western economies have cultivated supportive ecosystems, finance, standards, infrastructure, and consumer markets, SMEs operating in emerging-market contexts confront different baseline conditions, including infrastructural deficits, fragmented supply chains, constrained purchasing power, and institutional inconsistencies that complicate straightforward policy transfer and "best-practice" replication (Leach *et al.,* 2022). As a result, CE is not merely a technical shift in materials management but an embedded socio-economic transition shaped by how markets are organised, how value is perceived, and how trust is produced and sustained in everyday exchanges.

Although CE scholarship has generated robust accounts of common adoption barriers, regulation, infrastructure, consumer demand, and skills (Dey *et al.,* 2022; Sharma *et al.,* 2020), these framings can under-specify the ways political economy, informal governance, and culturally mediated market dynamics set up "transition capacity" in certain areas (Leach *et al.,* 2022). To address this gap, this article draws on an in-depth qualitative study of CE-oriented SMEs and marketplace actors in Freetown to develop a contextualised typology of transitional capacity barriers grounded in the lived realities of producers, consumers, and intermediaries. It makes a distinctive theoretical contribution by conceptualising sababu (Wurie, 2007), a locally salient form of social capital, as a mechanism that can enable or constrain CE transition capacity by shaping consumers' reciprocity, legitimacy, and market access beyond price and product attributes.

CE transition capacity relies not just on technical skills or policies, but also on how trustworthy and legitimate circular products and producers seem to consumers in everyday markets, where there is a lot of uncertainty and formal rules are not consistently applied. In such contexts, consumer reciprocity, which is supported, recommended, and repeatedly patronised, often operates through relational logic that converts social recognition into economic opportunity, thereby acting as an informal "market infrastructure" alongside price, quality, and availability. Sababu captures this relational dimension. It structures how SMEs gain (or lose) access to reputational

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pathways, social endorsements, and community-based acceptance, which can stabilise demand for CE byproducts and moderate the effectiveness of more conventional transition interventions. The study therefore asks, what contextual transition capacity barriers do SMEs in Freetown face when moving from linear to circular models, and how does sababu structure these barriers? The rest of the paper reviews key studies on CE and social capital, outlines the methods for the qualitative research, identifies three main types of barriers with a focus on sababu, and concludes with recommendations for SME strategies, policy development, and future research on CE transitions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CE transitions, SMEs, and the "missing social"

The literature on circular economy (CE) transitions and SME adoption has expanded rapidly, yet it remains characterised by two interlocking debates that are rarely discussed together, especially in emerging markets, where informal institutions and relational exchanges are central to economic life. The first debate concerns CE transition capacity: how firms, and SMEs in particular, acquire the organisational capabilities, resources, and external support needed to move from linear production and consumption patterns toward circular practices amid regulatory, infrastructural, and market constraints. The second debate concerns how the adoption of CE is influenced not only by technical feasibility and planning but also by trust, meaning-making, and the social relations through which consumers evaluate products, producers, and waste-derived materials. It is important to connect these debates because small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are often used to test circular innovation, but their success depends on how institutions, markets, and social relationships are set up in a specific context, which traditional barrier frameworks may not take into account. This review combines research on the challenges SMEs face in adopting circular economy practices with ideas from social capital and consumer reciprocity studies to show where current discussions about the transition to a circular economy are lacking, especially in explaining how local trust and relationships affect demand, market access, and the success of circular business models.

SMEs and CE Transition Capacity Barriers

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) play a key role in circular economy (CE) transitions, but they face significant challenges because they are often the primary sites where circular practices are tested, while also being the least able to absorb uncertainty, compliance costs, and market volatility. CE definitions generally focus on the idea of closing material loops by reducing, reusing, recycling, and recovering resources, which happens at different levels: individual businesses or products, industrial networks and supply chains, and broader policy and societal systems. This multilevel orientation implies that an SME's capacity to "be circular" is never purely internal: it is co-produced through the broader environment in which the firm is embedded, including regulatory coherence, infrastructure availability, and the coordination of supply chain actors. Accordingly, "transition capacity" is increasingly framed as a combined function of (a) organisational resources and capabilities, managerial skills, learning routines, investment capacity, and product development competence, and (b) enabling conditions supplied by policy and market ecosystems that stabilise demand and reduce innovation risk (Božič & Dimovski, 2019; Hekkert *et al.,* 2007). Research on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the circular economy often points out problems that occur when the support from the system does not match the efforts or creativity of the firms: this happens when companies want to innovate but don't get enough help from the system, or when there are incentives. A common finding shows that unclear, complicated, or costly rules related to the circular economy create major problems, especially for smaller firms, because they face more administrative challenges than larger companies (Hartley *et al.,* 2020). Such misalignment can undermine investor confidence and impede experimentation, especially when licensing, taxation, or standardisation regimes do not recognise or reward circular activities relative to conventional linear competitors.

Beyond regulation, the literature points to infrastructural and market-facing constraints that can disrupt circular business models. CE SMEs often rely on dependable collection systems, accessible processing facilities, stable supplies of recoverable materials, and distribution channels that can deliver circular products to customers; when these conditions are weak or inconsistent, transaction costs rise and circular operations become precarious. On the demand side, even when SMEs succeed technically in transforming discarded materials into usable outputs, they may encounter consumer scepticism toward products perceived as made from "waste", reflecting concerns about hygiene, durability, social status, and symbolic value, dynamics that can suppress willingness to pay and reduce repeat patronage (Corvellec *et al.,* 2022). These external barriers interact with internal capability constraints, skill gaps, limited absorptive capacity, and organisational inertia, which can make it difficult to redesign products, reconfigure processes, or sustain learning under competitive pressure (Sharma *et al.,* 2020). Taken together, this body of work suggests that SME CE adoption is less of a linear "implementation" challenge than a contingent transition process shaped by the interaction between firm-level capability building and system-level coordination, where breakdowns in policy coherence, infrastructure, consumer meaning-making, and organisational learning can jointly constrain transition capacity (Božič & Dimovski, 2019; Corvellec *et al.,* 2022; Hartley *et al.,* 2020; Hekkert *et al.,* 2007; Kirchherr *et al.,* 2017; Sharma *et al.,* 2020).

Furthermore, recent evidence indicates that circular transitions are frequently constrained by weak waste

systems, uneven enforcement, and demand-side behaviours that shape uptake and willingness to participate in recycling and recovery pathways (Dejrah, 2024; Rahman *et al.,* 2025). These findings reinforce the need to treat circular transitions as socioinstitutional and behavioural processes and not solely as technical optimisation problems.

The Under-Theorised Role of Social Capital And Consumer Reciprocity

While CE is often framed in policy and business discourse as a technical and managerial program that optimises material flows, redesigns products, and improves resource productivity, critical scholarship cautions that CE transitions are also moral, political, and socially mediated processes that redistribute value, reconfigure responsibility, and shape whose livelihoods are protected or made precarious (Corvellec *et al.,* 2022; Gregson *et al.,* 2015). This is relevant for SMEs because their survival hinges on the everyday "social life" of markets: trust, reputation, and legitimacy can determine whether circular products are accepted, whether suppliers and intermediaries cooperate, and whether consumers interpret waste-derived goods as innovation or stigma. In other words, CE transitions unfold through institutions and infrastructures, but also through meanings and relationships that structure how people evaluate risk, quality, and moral worth. Where formal standards and enforcement are limited, market actors frequently rely on social heuristics, who is known, who is respected, and who is recommended, to make exchange possible. Consequently, treating CE adoption as a purely technical diffusion challenge risks misdiagnosing why apparently viable circular ventures stagnate or fail in relational organised economies.

Social capital theory offers a useful lens for analysing these dynamics because it conceptualises how resources and opportunities flow through networks, recognition, and durable social relationships rather than through formal market mechanisms alone (Bourdieu, 1986; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). From this perspective, legitimacy is not simply a branding outcome; it is a socially produced asset that conditions access to customers, credit, information, and protection against uncertainty. Social capital can be enabling, mobilising support, creating reputational spillovers, and lowering transaction costs, but it can also be exclusionary, distributing opportunity unevenly and reproducing hierarchy through preferential access and informal gatekeeping. For CE SMEs, this dual nature is important because circular business models often need coordination (like collecting, sorting, processing, and redistributing) and regular customers, both of which rely on trust and the ability to turn social recognition into steady demand and teamwork. In settings where the everyday economy is shaped by dense community ties, consumers may "buy relationally," rewarding those perceived as socially proximate or morally deserving and withholding patronage from those perceived as outsiders, regardless of the technical product's merit.

Research on consumer reciprocity supports this idea by showing that buying choices, especially in small businesses, are often influenced by community connections, relationship marketing, and how people view the seller's character, rather than just by comparing prices and quality (Gilboa *et al.,* In relational markets, repeated transactions can function as social signals: buying becomes a means of sustaining social bonds, affirming identity, and honouring obligations, while refusal to buy can communicate social distance or distrust. This suggests CE transition capacity may be partly determined by locally specific forms of relational legitimacy that amplify or undermine technical efforts: even when SMEs innovate successfully in converting waste into products, uptake can stall if the producer lacks the relational standing through which consumers confer trust; conversely, firms with strong relational legitimacy may achieve market traction despite weaker technical capabilities because social endorsement stabilises demand and facilitates diffusion. Building on these insights, this study introduces the concept of sababu as a contextually grounded mechanism through which social capital and consumer interactions shape circular transition capacity in Freetown, positioning relational legitimacy as a core explanatory variable rather than a marginal "soft factor" in circular transition research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a mixed qualitative research design to generate a contextually grounded account of circular economy (CE) transition capacity barriers among SMEs in Freetown. The design combined (i) desktop research to map the broader structural and institutional conditions shaping SME operations and CE-relevant practices with (ii) online ethnography to observe and interpret everyday market narratives, seller–buyer interactions, and circulating meanings around "waste-derived" products and (iii) semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to elicit in-depth experiential accounts from marketplace actors. This multi-source approach was used deliberately to capture both the "macro" constraints often highlighted in CE transition literature (policy, infrastructure, affordability) and the "micro" relational dynamics through which SMEs gain legitimacy, secure patronage, and navigate competition in a dense urban market. The empirical focus was the Freetown SME marketplace, where CE-orientated ventures operate alongside conventional linear businesses and where consumer decision-making is frequently shaped by trust, proximity, and reputational cues.

Data were generated from 20 participants actively engaged in the SME marketplace ecosystem, including SME operators and relevant intermediaries involved in production, distribution, and consumption-facing roles. Data collection comprised 12 semi-structured interviews and two FGDs, complemented by online ethnographic observation of marketplace discourse and product positioning. Semi-structured interviewing facilitated

comparability among participants while allowing for the exploration of locally relevant issues as they arose (e.g., perceptions of CE by-products, informal competition pressures, and relational forms of market access). FGDs were used to surface shared norms, contested interpretations, and collective sense-making processes that are often less visible in one-to-one interviews, particularly regarding consumer perceptions, community expectations, and the social mechanisms through which legitimacy is produced. Together, these methods provided triangulated insight into how SMEs interpret and respond to CE transition opportunities and constraints, and how those constraints operate across organisational, institutional, and socio-cultural registers.

Analysis followed an iterative qualitative coding process consistent with established thematic approaches (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Coding began with descriptive codes closely tied to participants' language and the observable features of the data (e.g., "pricing pressure", "supplier instability", "waste stigma", and "trust cues"). Through constant comparison across interviews, FGDs, and ethnographic notes, codes were progressively refined into axial codes that captured relationships between barriers (for instance, how affordability interacts with perceptions of waste-derived products, or how market competition shapes SME willingness to invest in circular inputs). Axial codes were then consolidated into three thematic clusters representing contextual transition capacity barriers. Analytical memos were used to document coding decisions, emerging patterns, and deviant cases, strengthening interpretive transparency and supporting the development of coherent, evidence-based themes that connect empirical claims to the data corpus.

Ethical procedures were tailored to the realities of a small and socially networked marketplace where participants may be identifiable through role, product type, or public reputation. Following established guidance on the limits and risks of anonymity in ethnographic research, the study used anonymised participant identifiers, avoided unnecessarily granular contextual markers, and applied careful quote selection to preserve meaning while reducing traceability (Walford, 2018; Saunders *et al.,* 2014). In reports, emphasis was placed on analytically relevant patterns rather than naming specific businesses or neighbourhood identifiers; potentially identifiable details were generalised if doing so did not compromise interpretive validity. These measures were essential not only for participant protection but also for ensuring data quality, as credible confidentiality protections improve the likelihood of candid accounts in settings where market relationships and reputations directly affect livelihoods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Three clusters of contextual transition capacity barriers

Market Competition and Affordability: "CE Products are for Rich People"

Market competition and affordability emerged as a first-order transition capacity barrier for CE-orientated SMEs in Freetown because circular production was widely interpreted through the lens of household constraint and everyday price discipline. Participants consistently described a market in which purchasing decisions are dominated by immediate affordability rather than longer-term environmental benefits and where SMEs operate with thin margins and limited ability to absorb shocks. Within this context, CE ventures faced a structural disadvantage: circular inputs were often more expensive to source; processing was less standardised; and operational uncertainty, particularly around input availability and production consistency, made it difficult to stabilise unit costs. As a result, SMEs struggled to price competitively against linear alternatives that benefit from established supply chains, economies of scale, and more predictable input streams. The barrier is not simply that consumers prefer cheaper products; rather, affordability acts as a mechanism through which uncertainty, informality, and limited system support translate into constrained CE uptake, as price becomes the decisive proxy through which consumers evaluate feasibility and risk.

A recurring theme was the construction of CE offerings as "premium" goods. Even when SMEs did not intentionally position themselves as high-end, participants reported that circular products were frequently perceived as pricier because they were novel, differentiated, and sometimes associated with "special" production processes. This perception was compounded by consumer scepticism toward "waste-derived" materials where quality is uncertain; consumers often require either lower prices to compensate for perceived risk or higher prices to signal durability and status, both of which can disadvantage SMEs seeking mainstream uptake. One participant summarised this perception bluntly: "CE products are for rich people" (Participant CM4). In analytic terms, this quote captures how circularity can be symbolically coded as an elite preference rather than a mainstream solution, particularly in contexts where consumption is tightly tied to survival strategies and where environmental narratives may be secondary to immediate economic necessity. The effect is a demand-side ceiling: SMEs can generate interest, but interest does not reliably convert into sustained purchasing if price points exceed what households interpret as "reasonable" given prevailing incomes and inflationary pressures.

Participants further linked affordability challenges to the absence of a supportive CE ecosystem that would otherwise lower the cost of circular operations. Without consistent collection and aggregation systems, SMEs often bear additional search and transaction costs to secure inputs. Where processing infrastructure is limited, firms may need to adapt labour-intensive methods or rely on small, fragmented networks that do not guarantee volume or quality consistency. These constraints raise per-unit costs, which then shape pricing strategies in a highly competitive marketplace. Importantly, participants did not portray pricing as a purely managerial choice; rather,

it was experienced as an outcome of systemic conditions: the costs of sourcing, sorting, and transforming circular inputs, combined with limited external incentives (subsidies, tax relief, preferential procurement, or infrastructure support), narrowed the feasible pricing corridor. In practice, such constraints created a dilemma: pricing higher risks reinforces the "rich people" framing and loses cost-constrained customers; pricing lower risks leads to unsustainable margins and business failure.

Market competition intensified this dilemma by increasing the penalties for experimentation. SMEs described competing not only with other CE ventures but also with established linear businesses whose products are widely available, culturally familiar, and priced to match everyday purchasing power. In such conditions, CE SMEs must often invest more in the consumer's explanation of why the product is safe, durable, and worth its price, yet they have fewer resources to carry out prolonged market education. The market therefore disciplines circular innovation: consumers compare on immediate value, competitors can undercut on price, and the SME has limited room to "wait out" demand formation. This dynamic suggests that CE transition capacity in Freetown is partly governed by a form of market stratification in which circularity risks becoming a niche, captured by wealthier consumers or organisations rather than scaling into the mass market.

This finding indicates that affordability and competition operate as interacting constraints that shape CE adoption trajectories. The "premium" perception is not merely a branding issue but a structural outcome of higher circular input costs, unstable operations, and the absence of enabling ecosystem support that would reduce transaction costs and de-risk production. This discovery has direct implications for both strategy and policy. For SMEs, it highlights the necessity of pricing models that align with everyday purchasing realities and of product narratives that decouple circularity from elite consumption; for policymakers and ecosystem actors, it points to the importance of interventions that lower the cost base of circular ventures, through infrastructure, aggregation systems, and targeted incentives, so that circular products can compete on price without sacrificing viability.

Consumer Understanding of CE and By-Products: Cost, Symbolism, and Socio-Cultural Drivers

Consumer understanding of circular economy (CE) and its by-products emerged as a multidimensional barrier that extends beyond "low awareness" and into the deeper social logics through which goods are evaluated, trusted, and socially positioned in Freetown's heterogeneous marketplace. Three interlocking dynamics consistently shape consumer decision-making, as portrayed by participants. Cost discipline, product symbolism, and socio-cultural drivers such as religion, social class, lifestyle aspirations, and education. In practice, such an approach means that adoption of CE by-products is rarely a simple matter of communicating environmental benefits; rather, it depends on whether circular products align with consumers' everyday constraints and their social interpretations of what a product "means", who it is "for", and what kind of person one becomes by using it. These perceptions are particularly salient where CE outputs originate from materials culturally coded as "waste", because waste is not only a material category but a moral and symbolic one, associated with impurity, risk, and low status, or alternatively with ingenuity and responsibility, depending on the social frame through which it is interpreted.

In interviews and group discussions, participants emphasised that price pressure was decisive, even for consumers who expressed admiration for CE initiatives. Environmental intention and moral approval did not reliably translate into purchasing when household budgets were constrained and market prices volatile. As one participant noted, "The current economic situation… makes price the key factor…" (Participant CM7). This statement captures a crucial mechanism: under economic stress, price becomes not merely one attribute among many but the primary heuristic through which consumers manage uncertainty, especially when product performance is difficult to verify prior to purchase. In such circumstances, CE SMEs face a "double bind": circular goods may carry higher production costs due to input collection, sorting, and processing, yet consumers may demand lower prices to compensate for perceived risk or unfamiliarity. The outcome is that cost discipline compresses the space for market formation: consumers may agree with the idea of circularity, but their capacity to act on that agreement is constrained by immediate affordability and the availability of cheaper, familiar linear substitutes.

However, the findings also show that consumer evaluation is not reducible to price sensitivity alone. Participants depicted markets where goods hold symbolic importance, acting as indicators of identity, respectability, cleanliness, modernity, and social mobility. In this interpretive landscape, CE by-products can be read in competing ways. For some consumers, "waste-derived" can evoke suspicion, questions about hygiene, durability, and social embarrassment, especially if the product's origin is visible or widely discussed. For others, circularity can signal innovation, responsibility, or alignment with global sustainability narratives, particularly among consumers with higher education exposure, environmental literacy, or lifestyle aspirations tied to modern consumption. This symbolic ambiguity is important because it affects how much explanation a product needs and whether people see circularity as a benefit or a risk to their reputation. Critically, symbolic evaluation is socially stratified: the same circular product can be seen as "smart and modern" in one social group and as "cheap or questionable" in another, producing fragmented demand and complicating SME scaling strategies.

Socio-cultural drivers further mediate these symbolic readings, making adoption contingent on local norms

rather than universal CE messaging. Participants pointed to factors such as religion and moral expectations (e.g., cleanliness, purity, and what is considered appropriate to bring home); social class and status signals (what is acceptable to be seen using); lifestyle practices (how households organise their daily routines and maintenance); and education (how people interpret and trust technical explanations). In effect, CE by-products enter markets already structured by moral economy: products are evaluated not only for function but also for their congruence with cultural expectations and social reputations. This argument helps explain why "awareness campaigns" alone may be insufficient; information does not automatically override the meanings attached to waste, nor does it dissolve the social risks associated with being an early adopter in tight communities where reputations circulate quickly.

This particular finding resonates with critical CE scholarship, which argues that the category of "waste" is not a neutral input but a contested and socially constructed object and that perceptions surrounding waste-derived materials influence how people adopt them (Corvellec *et al.,* 2021). In Freetown, the barrier is therefore best understood as a meaning–market interaction: CE SMEs must navigate both the economic rationalities of cost-constrained households and the cultural-symbolic frameworks that determine whether waste-derived products are acceptable, desirable, and socially safe to consume. The practical implication is that demand-building for circular products requires more than environmental messaging; it requires culturally competent market translation, narratives and design choices that reduce stigma, communicate safety and durability in locally credible ways, and align circular offerings with status-neutral or status-enhancing meanings.

The evidence suggests that consumer "understanding" should be conceptualised as a layered phenomenon: (1) economic capability and price discipline shape what is possible; (2) symbolic interpretation shapes what is desirable or socially risky; and (3) sociocultural norms shape what is legitimate within households and communities. For CE transition capacity, this implies that even technically successful circular production can stall if SMEs cannot convert circularity into locally resonant value, value that households can afford, trust, and integrate into their social worlds.

Sababu as a Contextual Barrier/Enabler: Social Capital and Market Reciprocity

A central and novel finding is that SMEs were not only constrained by organisational and institutional barriers; they were also constrained by sababu, described by participants as an "extra layer" of the transition capacity challenge that remains under-examined in mainstream circular economy (CE) transition scholarship. While dominant CE barrier frameworks foreground regulation, infrastructure, skills, and finance, the Freetown marketplace data indicate that these factors do not fully explain why some CE-orientated SMEs struggle to gain traction and others persist. Instead, SMEs' ability to sustain experimentation and learning, core requirements for CE transition, also depends on whether they possess sababu, a locally salient form of social connection and relational standing through which trust, legitimacy, and market access are negotiated in everyday exchange (Yu and Wyness, 2023; Wurie, 2007).

In this framing, sababu operates as a relational infrastructure that shapes consumer reciprocity, who is supported, recommended, and repeatedly patronised, particularly in contexts where formal quality assurance is limited and "waste-derived" products can trigger uncertainty. Consequently, technological competence and circular innovation may be necessary but insufficient if an SME cannot secure the relational legitimacy with which markets allocate credibility and opportunity; similarly, Sababa can amplify otherwise modest technical capacity by stabilising demand through endorsements and loyalty. The subsections that follow define sababu as articulated by marketplace actors, show how it functions as both a barrier and an enabler, and specify the mechanisms through which it conditions trust, patronage, and the survival prospects of CE-orientated SMEs in Freetown's competitive marketplace.

What is Sababu?

Participants characterised sababu as a socially embedded mechanism that distributes market credibility, reciprocity, and economic opportunity in everyday exchanges. Rather than treating purchasing as a purely transactional decision, respondents framed patronage as something that is socially produced, earned through perceived character, demonstrated respect, and relational proximity, and reinforced through networks of recommendation and communal validation. In this sense, sababu functions as a locally meaningful "relational currency" that shapes whether a business is regarded as legitimate, trustworthy, and worthy of support. Crucially, participants emphasised that sababu is not fixed: it can be cultivated through ongoing social conduct, bestowed through association with respected persons, transferred through networks and endorsements, or inherited through kinship and long-standing community ties. It therefore operates across multiple relational registers, identity, family connection, perceived moral standing, and social obligations, making it a pervasive feature of how markets coordinate trust in contexts where formal guarantees may be weak, unevenly enforced, or costly to access.

Across accounts, sababu was explained through concrete practices and interpretations rather than abstract theorising. Participants spoke of how gifts, assistance, reciprocity, and participation in community responsibilities could generate goodwill that later translates into customer loyalty and business stability. Equally, they noted that political views, social affiliations, and community identity can shape whether one is perceived as "inside" or "outside" local networks of belonging. Importantly,

participants did not present the practice as an optional "soft" factor; instead, sababu was described as a practical mechanism through which consumers and intermediaries reduce uncertainty. When product quality is difficult to verify in advance, especially for newer products or those made from unfamiliar inputs, buyers rely on who the seller is, how they are spoken about, and whether trusted social ties stand behind them. Sababu thus becomes a decision rule: it is a way of answering the question, "Can I trust this person/business enough to try and keep buying?" even before detailed product evaluation occurs.

Participants also stressed that sababu has a negative valence. It can become "bad" and produce reputational chains that quickly erode patronage. This defect is not merely the absence of social connections; it is an active social judgement that can circulate through communities and networks, shaping collective behaviour toward a business. As one participant explained, "I lacked Sababu in the community I was operating… they'll walk away" (Participant EN2). In this account, the withdrawal of patronage is not primarily triggered by product failure but rather by a relational deficit, an inability to access the social endorsement needed to be considered a credible market actor. The mechanism is cumulative: once a business is framed as lacking sababu, the cost of proving reliability increases, because each consumer's decision is shaped by what others are already saying and doing. This dynamic is especially consequential in dense urban marketplaces where information travels quickly and where social relationships overlap across economic, family, religious, and political spheres.

Instead, participants described "good sababu" as a powerful enabling condition, so influential that it can appear to override conventional business fundamentals. One participant summarised this perceived power bluntly: "All you need in Sierra Leone is good sababu…" (Participant AC3). While such a statement is rhetorical, analytically it signals the degree to which relational legitimacy is understood as a prerequisite for market access and survival. It suggests that, according to the participants' experiences, Sababu can stabilise demand, generate repeat patronage, and attract support even when other resources (capital, marketing, and operational sophistication) are limited. In this sense, sababu acts like an informal market infrastructure: it lowers transaction costs (less persuasion is needed), increases trust (risk is socially buffered), and accelerates diffusion (recommendations travel through networks). The implication is not that product quality is irrelevant, but that quality must be "socially readable" and socially endorsed to translate into sustained purchasing in relational markets.

Analytically, the participant accounts align closely with social capital theory, which conceptualises how resources and opportunities flow through networks, recognition, and durable social relationships rather than formal market mechanisms alone (Bourdieu, 1986; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Sababu can be understood as a locally expressed variant of social capital that transforms recognition into economic benefit by influencing reputational trajectories, customer acquisition, and resilience in the face of uncertainty. It also resonates with relationship marketing insights suggesting that small-business customer experience and loyalty are often structured through relational ties, community attachment, and perceived character rather than only price–quality trade-offs (Gilboa *et al.,* 2019). These texts help situate sababu as more than a cultural curiosity. It is a mechanism through which market reciprocity is organised and through which the viability of innovations, including circular economy by-products, can be enabled or constrained.

Taken as a definitional finding, therefore, sababu should be understood as a context-specific relational legitimacy resource that can be accumulated, exchanged, and depleted, with direct consequences for patronage. Its significance for CE transitions lies in the fact that circular products often require consumers to cross a trust threshold, accepting new materials, new meanings, and sometimes new price points. Where formal institutions provide limited assurance, sababu becomes one of the primary pathways through which that threshold is crossed, shaping whether experimentation is rewarded with demand or punished with withdrawal.

Why Sababu Matters for CE Transition Capacity

Sababu is relevant for the circular economy's (CE) transition capacity because it determines whether SMEs can convert circular production into sustained market demand and, therefore, whether they can survive long enough to learn, adapt, and stabilise circular operations. Across participant accounts, transition capacity did not map neatly to conventional enablers, such as institutional support, formal organisational expertise, or marketing reach. Instead, respondents repeatedly described cases in which SMEs with relatively limited technical or institutional advantages nonetheless achieved stronger market traction because they possessed "good sababu", while other SMEs with investment, skills, or comparatively sophisticated product strategies struggled to gain or retain customers due to a perceived deficit of sababu. This pattern is analytically significant because it indicates that CE transition capacity is not only a matter of compliance readiness or production capability; it is also shaped by the relational infrastructures through which trust and legitimacy are produced in everyday markets. In effect, sababu can determine whether the market grants an SME the "social permission" required for circular innovation to be economically survivable.

A key mechanism is risk management under uncertainty. CE products, particularly those made from discarded materials, often require consumers to cross a trust threshold: they must believe the product is safe, durable, and socially acceptable, even when formal standards, warranties, certifications, or consumer protection are weak, unevenly enforced, or inaccessible. In such contexts, participants suggested that consumers frequently rely on socially mediated heuristics, who is selling, what others

say about them, and whether trusted networks endorse them, rather than on technical information alone. Sababu functions as a trust proxy that lowers perceived risk at the moment of purchase. Where sababu is strong, buyers are more willing to "try" a product, to tolerate minor imperfections, and to return for repeat purchases; where sababu is weak, consumers may interpret the same imperfections as evidence of unreliability and withdraw immediately. For CE SMEs, whose early-stage operations often involve variability in input quality and production consistency, this difference is decisive: sababu can provide the tolerance window necessary for iterative improvement, whereas its absence can collapse the learning period before the model matures.

A second mechanism concerns market access and diffusion. Participants described patronage as being socially distributed; recommendations, referrals, and informal endorsements act as primary pathways through which small businesses acquire customers and stabilise demand. When sababu is present, it generates reputational spillovers; customers are not simply buyers but carriers of legitimacy who extend trust through their networks. This aspect accelerates diffusion in ways that paid marketing often cannot replicate, especially for SMEs with limited resources. Conversely, a sababu deficit constrains diffusion because consumers are less willing to recommend a business that is not socially validated; even satisfied customers may remain silent if association carries reputational risk. For CE by-products, which may already face stigma due to their waste origins, the diffusion effect becomes particularly sensitive to sababu: the same product can spread through networks when relational legitimacy is high or stagnate when legitimacy is contested, irrespective of technical merit.

A third mechanism is resilience under competitive pressure. In Freetown's competitive marketplace, SMEs face price undercutting, imitation, and rapid shifts in consumer sentiment. Participants suggested that sababu can operate as a buffer against these pressures by anchoring loyalty and reciprocity beyond the immediate transactional calculus. When consumers feel a relational attachment or moral obligation to support a business with "good sababu", they may continue purchasing, even if a competitor offers marginally lower prices or if supply interruptions temporarily affect availability. This loyalty is not irrational; it reflects a social economy in which buying signals support, belonging, and shared identity. In contrast, SMEs lacking sababu are more exposed to competition because their customer base is thinner and more price-sensitive, and they lack the reputational insulation that can prevent minor setbacks from becoming major demand collapses.

Together, these mechanisms explain why the study observed "unexpected" performance patterns. Sababu can expand its modest technical capacity into a viable market presence, while its absence can neutralise investments in skills, technology, or product quality by limiting trust, referrals, and tolerance for early-stage variability. This conclusion does not imply the insignificance of technical-regulatory factors; rather, it suggests that relational legitimacy mediates their effects. Policies that focus solely on training, equipment, or compliance may yield limited outcomes if they do not account for how legitimacy is granted and how consumer reciprocity is socially organised. Likewise, SME strategies centred solely on product improvements and formal marketing may underperform if they neglect the relationships through which credibility is secured in local markets.

The broader implication is that CE transition capacity in Freetown is co-produced through a dual infrastructure: the formal infrastructure of policy, supply chains, and technical capability, and the informal infrastructure of trust, recognition, and reciprocity encapsulated by sababu. Understanding this duality is essential for explaining why CE products are trusted, purchased, and sustained in uncertain markets. It also provides a more realistic foundation for intervention design: strengthening CE ecosystems requires reducing material and regulatory barriers and engaging with the relational conditions through which consumers decide what is safe to buy, socially acceptable to use, and worthy of repeated support.

Discussion

Extending CE Transition Capacity with Contextual Social Capital

This article's core theoretical move is to extend "transition capacity" beyond its dominant technical–regulatory framing to incorporate contextual social capital, sababu, as a mechanism that materially shapes circular economy (CE) outcomes in low-income, post-conflict urban markets. By foregrounding relational legitimacy, trust, and consumer reciprocity as forms of informal market infrastructure, the argument shows that CE transitions are not determined only by skills, finance, policy coherence, or physical systems for collection and processing, but also by whether SMEs can access the socially mediated pathways through which credibility, patronage, and repeat purchasing are allocated. In contexts where formal guarantees and standards are weak or uneven, sababu operates as a decisive trust proxy that can amplify or neutralise technical capability, helping explain why some circular ventures scale despite limited resources while others stagnate even with investment and expertise.

From "Universal Barriers" To Contextual Configurations

The findings reaffirm a widely reported set of "conventional" CE transition barriers for SMEs: capability gaps, infrastructural deficits, supply-chain fragility, and demand-side scepticism. Yet they also show why treating these constraints as universal, context-free checklists can be analytically misleading and practically ineffective (Corvellec *et al.,* 2021; Sharma *et al.,* 2020). In Freetown, these barriers do not operate as isolated obstacles that can be removed one by one; they behave as contextual configurations, mutually reinforcing bundles shaped

by affordability pressures, institutional unevenness, and culturally mediated consumer evaluation. This point matters because a large share of CE policy and business guidance remains implicitly "transfer-orientated", assuming that instruments validated in high-income settings (standards, green procurement, certification, consumer education, and innovation finance) will travel with minor adaptation. The present study supports the counter-argument that CE transitions are socially embedded and politically situated and that the same intervention can produce different outcomes when the underlying market institutions, enforcement conditions, and household constraints are fundamentally different (Leach *et al.,* 2022).

A configurational lens helps clarify how barriers compound. For example, limited infrastructure is not merely a logistical constraint; it raises transaction costs and input volatility, which subsequently increase prices, intensify consumer price sensitivity, reduce demand stability, and discourage investment in circular experimentation. Similarly, "consumer perception" is not simply a knowledge deficit; it is entangled with symbolic concerns (status, purity, and respectability) and the practical realities of constrained purchasing power. Information campaigns alone may not change behaviour if affordability and trust remain unresolved. In this way, the findings push CE scholarship away from additive models (more finance + more awareness + better regulation) and toward a view of SME transition capacity as an emergent property of interacting economic, institutional, and socio-cultural conditions.

This view has direct implications for how "best practice" is interpreted. In developed-economy contexts, CE ecosystems often include predictable input streams, relatively reliable infrastructure, enforceable standards, and consumer protection regimes that partially substitute for interpersonal trust. In such settings, firms can lean on certification, warranties, and institutional credibility to reduce buyer uncertainty. In emerging-market urban contexts, especially those marked by post-conflict legacies and institutional unevenness, these formal substitutes may be weak or selectively available, which shifts the burden of coordination onto informal mechanisms and relational infrastructures. The implication is not that high-income CE approaches are irrelevant, but that their effectiveness depends on whether the receiving context has analogous "supporting scaffolds". Without those scaffolds, the same policy package may inadvertently widen competitive gaps, benefiting well-connected incumbents or larger firms while leaving SMEs exposed to risk and volatility.

A contextual configuration approach also strengthens explanatory precision: it allows us to move from the statement "SMEs face barriers" to the more policy-relevant question "Which barriers bind, for whom, and under what conditions?" In Freetown, affordability and competition appear to function as binding constraints that shape the salience of other barriers; consumers' interpretations of circular by-products are filtered through immediate economic reality; and institutional gaps amplify price and quality uncertainty. This suggests that CE interventions aimed at SMEs should be sequenced and bundled in ways that reflect local constraint structures, for instance, coupling capacity-building with mechanisms that lower input volatility and cost, or pairing consumer communication with credible trust-building signals and channels that fit local market practice. Put differently, addressing a single barrier in isolation may fail because the remaining configuration continues to reproduce the constraint.

The discussion reinforces a broader transition insight: CE is not a simple template but rather a contextual transformation shaped by local political economy, cultural meaning-making, market organisation, and trust (Leach *et al.,* 2022). For CE research, this approach supports a shift toward empirically grounded theory that treats "context" not as background detail but as a causal force that configures barrier interaction and intervention effectiveness. For practice, it implies that accelerating CE in emerging-market cities requires designing policy mixes and business strategies around the realities of affordability, institutional unevenness, and socially mediated market coordination, rather than assuming that models developed in materially different settings can be extended "as-is".

Sababu as Relational Legitimacy: A Missing Variable In CE Adoption Models

Identifying sababu as a factor that affects the ability to transition to a circular economy highlights that relational legitimacy is often overlooked in many models of circular economy adoption, especially those that only consider price, awareness, and product performance when looking at how demand is created. Most theories about how CE spreads assume that once companies can turn waste into safe, useful products, the market will pick up if consumers know about it and the price is right. Freetown's evidence complicates this assumption by showing that consumer reciprocity is socially organised. It is mediated through identity, networks, and reputational pathways that shape who is trusted, who is recommended, and who is granted the "benefit of the doubt" in uncertain markets. In this sense, sababu operates as a form of informal market infrastructure that governs exchange when formal infrastructures (standards, warranties, certification, consumer protection) are weak, uneven, or inaccessible. As a result, technically viable CE SMEs may still fail if they cannot secure the relational legitimacy through which everyday markets allocate credibility and sustained patronage.

This reframing has two implications for CE scholarship. First, it suggests that "consumer perception" should not be conceptualised narrowly as an informational deficit to be corrected through education but rather as a relational judgement embedded in social life. Consumers assess producers as well as products, and their evaluations are influenced by the company's social status, its

endorsements, and the risks of supporting it. In markets where household budgets are constrained and product quality can be difficult to verify ex ante, especially for waste-derived goods, trust becomes a scarce resource, and relational legitimacy becomes a primary heuristic for reducing uncertainty. Sababu identifies a unique way this trust works in Freetown, showing how being close to others and being recognised for good morals can lead to steady demand, while a lack of these factors can make even better products unstable in the market.</

Second, the finding expands social capital theory by showing that being recognised in relationships is not just a background factor for starting a business, but also a key way to help move towards sustainable changes. Social capital scholarship has long argued that networks and recognition shape access to resources and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). The present study adds that, in CE transitions, social capital also shapes the ability to translate circular innovation into market uptake, because it structures reciprocity and patronage pathways. Sababu acts as a barrier to making transitions when it's missing, making it harder to build trust, limiting referral options, and decreasing patience for early changes; but when it's present, it helps lower costs, speeds up acceptance through recommendations, and protects businesses from competition. This insight helps explain why some small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with fewer technical resources continue to succeed while others with better capabilities do not improve: having good relationships can change how we expect capability to affect performance.

Importantly, Sababu also clarifies why policy and program interventions that focus exclusively on building technical capacity may underperform. Training, equipment, or finance may enhance production capacity; however, in the absence of legitimacy pathways that transform potential into patronage, the intervention may fail to yield sustained sales. Conversely, interventions that unintentionally privilege already well-connected actors can amplify inequality by reinforcing relational advantage without addressing affordability and infrastructure. This aspect does not imply that policymakers should attempt to "engineer" social capital directly, an approach that can reproduce patronage or exclusion, but it does imply that CE interventions should be designed with an explicit understanding of how legitimacy is granted, how trust circulates, and how reciprocity is organised in local markets. For practice-orientated practitioners, the implication is that CE adoption models and enabling strategies should incorporate relational legitimacy alongside cost, infrastructure, and awareness as a key explanatory variable, particularly in contexts where informal institutions play a decisive role in market coordination.

This positions sababu as a bridge between CE transition studies and broader work on socially embedded markets: it shows that circularity is not only a matter of closing material loops but also of navigating legitimacy loops through which communities decide what is acceptable, trustworthy, and worth supporting. Recognising relational legitimacy as a missing variable, therefore, strengthens the explanatory power of CE adoption models and provides a more realistic foundation for intervention design in low-income urban settings. In simple terms, sababu shows that just being technically capable doesn't guarantee success in the transition to circular economy; it's also about whether circular economy small and medium enterprises (SMEs) can connect with the social networks that make their products trusted and financially viable.

Future Research for Contextual CE Transition Capacity

Future research can build on these findings by operationalising a Contextual CE Transition Capacity (C-CTC) construct that treats SME circular transition likelihood as a configurational outcome jointly shaped by five interacting domains: (1) organisational capabilities (managerial competence, learning routines, absorptive capacity, and investment readiness); (2) the institutional and infrastructure environment (policy coherence, enforcement consistency, access to collection and processing systems, and availability of standards or quality assurance); (3) market competition and cost structures (price discipline, input volatility, economies of scale, and the competitive advantage of linear incumbents); (4) consumer perceptions, including the symbolic and moral meanings attached to "waste-derived" products (purity, status, hygiene, durability, and identity signalling); and (5) relational legitimacy/social capital, articulated here through sababu as a locally specific mechanism that converts recognition and network endorsement into patronage, tolerance, and diffusion. Treating these domains as mutually reinforcing rather than additive is critical; for example, infrastructural deficits raise costs, which intensify price sensitivity and amplify symbolic scepticism, whereas relational legitimacy can either buffer these pressures through trust and loyalty or magnify them through reputational withdrawals. Methodologically, operationalisation could proceed through mixed-method designs that combine qualitative mechanism mapping with quantitative measurement, e.g., developing context-sensitive scales for relational legitimacy and symbolic perception, modelling interaction effects, and using comparative case designs across cities to identify which configurations most reliably predict CE SME survival and scaling.

Such an agenda responds directly to calls to interrogate CE as a socially embedded transition rather than a technical optimisation exercise (Corvelle *et al.,* 2021; Gregory *et al.,* 2022). It also raises new questions for both research and real-world application: how relational legitimacy can take the place of formal institutions when rules and enforcement are weak; how stigma and symbolism affect people's willingness to pay for circular by-products when money is tight; and how policy mixes can be arranged to ease "binding constraints" without creating new forms

of exclusion through informal gatekeeping. Comparative research could look into whether similar mechanisms to sababu exist in other low-income urban markets with different cultural names and if their impacts change based on the type of product, gender roles in the market, or different industry value chains. The main benefit is a clearer understanding of how to successfully transition to circular economies, showing not just if CE SMEs use circular practices, but also if they can keep using them, connecting circular material flows to the relationships, institutions, and cultural factors that decide if the transition works.

Practical Implications

The findings translate into practical implications for both SME strategy and public policy by foregrounding sababu as a form of relational infrastructure that can materially shape the viability of circular business models. For managers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), this means that planning for a transition to a circular economy should include relational legitimacy as well as operational capability, pricing, and product development. Sababu should be treated as a strategic, yet ethically sensitive, resource: managers can cultivate "good sababu" through intentional community engagement, consistent and visible pro-social behaviour, and reliable reciprocity that signals respect, trustworthiness, and accountability. At the same time, social capital can slip into exclusionary gatekeeping, so firms should avoid strategies that perpetuate nepotism, partisan patronage, or discriminatory favouritism. Instead, legitimacy-building should be orientated toward inclusive trust production, transparent customer care, fair dealing, community presence, and demonstrable product integrity so that relational credibility supports CE diffusion without entrenching inequity. At the same time, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) should combine their efforts to build trust with actions that meet customer needs and improve their skills: educating consumers about affordable options and the real benefits of circular economy (CE) products, and providing targeted training to improve production quality and business practices. Finally, because circular operations depend on stable material flows, SMEs should invest in supply chain relationships, especially with collectors, processors, and distributors, to reduce input volatility and lower transaction costs, thereby decreasing the price premium that often triggers scepticism toward waste-derived products.

For policymakers and ecosystem actors, the key takeaway is that the success of CE SMEs cannot be achieved just by talking about it; it needs fair reforms that fix the unfair conditions that put circular businesses at a disadvantage compared to traditional ones. This includes improving the ease of doing business (simplifying administrative burdens and reducing arbitrary enforcement), establishing CE-friendly regulations and incentives that recognise and reward circular activities, and investing in infrastructure that reduces discriminatory access to collection, sorting, and processing systems. In contexts where linear products benefit from more mature supply chains and favourable market conditions, complementary incentives are especially important to reduce CE price disadvantages. Some examples are tax breaks for specific groups, subsidised access to processing facilities, preferential public procurement for verified circular outputs, or performance-based incentives linked to job creation and waste diversion. Such measures can avert a scenario where SMEs compete solely based on price, compromising quality or labour standards, and thereby perpetuating the social harms commonly associated with linear economic models. In short, CE acceleration in low-income urban markets requires policy mixes that reduce circular cost penalties, strengthen material infrastructure, and support inclusive market formation, while recognising that trust and legitimacy are not peripheral concerns but core components of transition capacity.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the ability of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Freetown to transition to a circular economy (CE) is shaped by various interacting challenges rather than just Alongside familiar impediments, capability limits, uneven institutional support, infrastructural fragility, affordability pressures, and scepticism towards waste-derived by-products, the analysis identifies Sababu as a consequential, under-theorized mechanism through which markets allocate credibility, reciprocity, and repeat patronage. Conceptualised as contextual social capital (relational legitimacy embedded in identity, networks, and reputational circulation), Sababu helps explain divergence in SME outcomes: some technically viable circular ventures stagnate when legitimacy cannot be secured, while others maintain demand despite weaker conventional enablers because trust and endorsement reduce perceived risk and stabilise market access. The contribution is therefore both empirical and theoretical: extending "transition capacity" to include relational legitimacy clarifies why CE diffusion cannot be modelled as a purely technical, price, or awareness problem in low-income urban markets where formal standards and consumer protection provide limited assurance. Future research should test analogous mechanisms across cities and examine policy mixes that build circular markets without reproducing exclusion.

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