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Abstract

In developing countries, International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) have taken active and complementary roles in sustainable human development. Despite the role of INGOs in development, the issues of sustainability, availability of funds, and supportive leadership have remained a major challenge in developing countries. The concept of competitive advantage has been recognized as a central building block in strategic management and an important precedent to organizational performance. Competitive advantage is a deliberate effort by the organization to align its internal conditions and capabilities with changes in the external environment. This study sought to establish the mediating effect of competitive advantage on the relationship between strategic leadership and performance of international non-governmental organizations in Kenya The study was anchored on strategic leadership theory, upper echelons theory and resource-based view theories. For methodology, descriptive cross-sectional survey design covering 277 respondents was adopted. Semi structured questionnaires were used to collect data. The study findings indicated that data collection tool/questionnaire was reliable as Cronbach alpha was greater than 0.7 for all variables. The results indicated a significant mediating effect of competitive advantage on the relationship between strategic leadership and performance of international non-governmental organizations in Kenya. This means that the influence of strategic leadership on performance is indirect through competitive advantage. The study concluded that both competitive advantage and strategic leadership concurrently influence organizational performance positively. It is recommended that international non-governmental organization must be able to identify their competitive advantage.

Keywords*: Strategic Leadership, Competitive Advantage, Performance, International Non-Governmental Organizations & Kenya.*

1.0 Introduction

A basic task of strategic management is to build and maintain competitive advantages of an enterprise, which makes it possible to achieve above average results from its business activities (Cegliński, 2016a). Depending on the major leaning, a firm may pursue either cost focus or differentiation focus. Whereas both cost and differentiation strategies are generic in nature, focus strategy tends to be market segment specific. Cost focus exploits differences in cost behavior in some segments, while differentiation focus exploits the special needs of buyers in certain segments. The intensity of competition in an industry determines its profit potential and competitive attractiveness. The key to developing competitive advantage lies in exhaustive and continuous analysis of the environment, understanding and overcoming the system barriers that obstruct the attainment of organizational goals. An effective strategy recognizes these barriers and develops decisions and choices that circumvent them. According to a report by UN-Habitat (2016), in recent years, International Non-governmental Organizations in Kenya have come under immense pressure from the donors to prove that they are meeting their objectives in the most efficient and effective ways. Since donors are demanding, more transparency on how disbursed funds are utilized, the organizations are under greater scrutiny to monitor the impact of aid, not just the input and output but the whole operation. As a result, the recipient organizations are forced to be more result oriented, accountable, and transparent in their operations (Wassenhove, 2011).

Demison *et al*. (1995) argue that leadership is concerned with balancing competing forces for the creation of superior value to customers and rewards to organizational members. Although it is assumed that strategic leaders are crucial drivers of organizational performance, little research has been delineated to investigating the indirect influence of strategic leadership on performance through competitive advantage. International Non-Governmental Organizations face many complex and diverse range of issues such as implementation of strategic plans that are adversely affected by changes in unanticipated disaster response, withdrawal of funds and shifting donor interests. Okorley and Nkrumah (2012) observed that despite the roles played by INGOs, the issues of strategic leadership and performance have remained a major challenge. Consequently, the study sought to answer the question: What is the role of competitive advantage on the relationship between strategic leadership and organizational performance? The study objective was to determine the mediating role of competitive advantage on the relationship between strategic leadership and organizational performance.

Research hypothesis

H_0: Competitive advantage does not mediate the relationship between strategic leadership and performance of international non-governmental organizations in Kenya.

2.0 Literature Review

Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership has attracted diverse definitions over time. Rowe (2001) defined strategic leadership as the ability to influence others to voluntarily make day-to-day decisions that enhance the long-term viability of the organization, while at the same time maintaining its short-term financial stability. According to Hitt *et al*. (2012), strategic leadership is the ability of the leader to predict, maintain flexibility and empower organizational members to create the necessary strategic change. Deeboonmee and Ariratana (2014) view strategic leadership as the aptitude to operate successfully and deliver extraordinary performance. Yukl (2010) describe strategic leadership as the power to influence organizational effectiveness and the creation of competitive advantage by managing the internal and external environment. According to Scottish Social Services Council (2016), strategic leadership is operationalized using six key capability indicators. These are visionary, self- leadership, motivating and inspiring, empowering, collaborative and influencing and creativity and innovation. House and Baetz (1971) proposed the strategic leadership theory which gives organizational leaders the ability to create and re-create reasons for the organization's continued existence. Strategic leadership takes measures to structure the organization in ways that makes it efficient for exploiting strategic opportunities in the external environment. Therefore, organizational performance depends on a confluence of interacting forces that are managed by strategic leadership.

The resource-based view conceives superior performance as a firm specific phenomenon deriving from resources that are scarce, valuable, and imperfectly imitable. In the lens of the resource-based view, strategic leadership is a higher order organizational resource unique to each firm and with varying capabilities for the creation of competitive advantage that yield above average performance. Upper Echelon theory argues that the characteristics of top managers influence how the type of decisions made, methods used to arrive at choices by the organization and the consequences of organizational decisions. Demison *et al*. (1995) argue that leadership is concerned with balancing competing forces for the creation of superior value to customers and rewards to organizational members. Although it is assumed that strategic leaders are crucial drivers of organizational performance, little research has been delineated to investigating the indirect influence of strategic leadership on performance through competitive advantage.

Competitive Advantage

The concept of competitive advantage has been recognized as a central building block in strategic management and an important precedent to organizational performance. Within the contemporary meaning, the term competitive advantage implies superior performance in the industry. Competitive advantage is obtained when an organization develops or acquires a set of attributes or strategy execution actions that allow it to outperform its competitors (Wang, 2014). Porter (1985) defines competitive advantage as the extent to which an organization is able to create a defensible position over its competitors. Building on Porter's framework, Wang (2014) defines competitive advantage as the ability of a firm to develop or acquire a set of attributes (or execution action) that allows it to outperform its competitors. Porter (1985) explains that competitive advantage develops when the firm can create value to customers at a cost lower than competitors. Wang (2014) observed that competitive advantage is developed when the organization acquires superior traits that enable it to perform better than its rivals in the industry. In this connection, Amit and Schoemaker (1993) argued that resources may become a source of competitive advantage to the extent that they are scarce, appropriable, and specialized. Competitive advantage is revealed, when the strategies chosen by an organization and their subsequent execution are more profitable than those of its close competitors or when it outperforms them in significant results areas including, for example, market share, product quality or technological advancement (Huff *et al*., 2009). Inherently, several enterprises are not able to exceed such prescribed standards (Huff *et al*., 2009). This constitutes ascribing features of uniqueness and exceptionality to competitive advantages.

Therefore, they can be treated as a sine qua non for achievement of organizational success (Haffer, 2003). Grant (2010) links organizational success to creation and sustenance of competitive advantage. However, the creation of competitive advantage is difficult in highly volatile and competitive markets where prediction of industry forces is difficult.

The resource-based view argues that sustainable competitive advantage is only attained when an organization has distinctive resources. The resources may be physical, financial, human capital, informational, legal as well as organizational. Competitive advantage creating resources must meet the criteria of being rare, valuable, imperfectly imitable and do not have strategic equivalents (Barney, 1991). A basic task of strategic management is to build and maintain competitive advantages of an enterprise, which makes it possible to achieve above average results from its business activities (Cegliński, 2016a). Development of competitive advantage is a necessary condition to the success of an organization. Porter (1985) proposed two major pathways to creation of competitive advantage. The pathways comprise low cost and differentiation strategies. He argued the two pathways were necessary in the creation of consumer value giving buyers the reason to prefer a particular firm's offer over rivals in the industry. The third pathway commonly known as focus is a variant of both cost and differentiation. Depending on the major leaning, a firm may pursue either cost focus of differentiation focus. Whereas both cost and differentiation strategies are generic in nature, focus strategy tends to be market segment specific. Cost focus exploits differences in cost behavior in some segments, while differentiation focus exploits the special needs of buyers in certain segments. In cost leadership, a firm sets out to become the low-cost producer in its industry. The sources of cost advantage are varied and depend on the structure of the industry. They may include the pursuit of economies of scale, proprietary technology, preferential access to raw materials and other factors. If a firm can achieve and sustain overall cost leadership, then it becomes above average performer in the industry, provided it can command prices at or near the industry average. The organizations that are successful in achieving cost leadership usually have access to the capital needed to invest in technology that brings costs down. Low-cost strategy is delivered by efficient logistics and low-cost resources like labor, materials and facilities and a way of sustainably cutting costs below those of competitors (Porter, 1985).

Performance

Organizational performance is an organization's ability to achieve its goals by using resources in an efficient and effective manner (Daft & Marcic, 2013). Organizational performance consists of the actual output or results of an organization that are measured against its intended outputs, goals, or objectives. Owing to recent pressures attributed to technological and competitive changes faced by several industries, performance measures and measurement continue to be critical to the tracking, management, and improvement of organizational progress. Therefore, understanding the scope, frequency, and relevance of different performance measures available to executives is essential to the process of integrating the different dimensions of organizational performance (Gomes, Jabbour, Adriana & Charbel, 2011). Over the last two decades, the focus has moved from performance management system design (Neely *et al*., 1995) to the design and deployment of enterprise performance management systems (Neely, 2005).

A balanced presentation of both financial and non-financial measures is required for effective performance measurement, since no single measure can provide a clear performance assessment

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on critical areas of the business (Buichi, 1994). The balanced scorecard is a performance measurement framework that added strategic non-financial performance measures to traditional financial metrics; it is adopted to give managers and executives a view that is more 'balanced' regarding the organizational performance (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). According to Johnson (2008), there has been increased usage of balanced scorecards by organizations in the past decade as a way of widening the scope of performance indicators. The study adopted the sustainable balance score card framework to measure organizational performance.

Relationship between Strategic Leadership, Competitive Advantage and Performance

Pearce and Robinson (2005) postulate that brilliant strategy may put an organization on the competitive map, but only solid execution sustains it there. Wernerfelt (1984) posits that to gain competitive advantage, it is incumbent upon a firm to exercise strategic flexibility through prudent strategic leadership, by effectively leveraging on new technologies, building core competencies, exploiting global markets and strategic alliance or competitive strategies.

New competitive business landscape requires building core competencies and strategic leadership for survival, superior performance, and sustained market leadership (Hitt *et al*., 2012). With more donors, seeking cost-shared models, it is key that INGOs leverage on existing resource capabilities and innovative ways of delivering the desired outcomes. Organizational performance is influenced by the choice of leaders and consequently their efforts in creating competitive advantages. Powell (2001) argues that superior performance follows competitive advantage. Therefore, competitive advantage and superior performance are materially equivalent. Empirical literature (Barney, 1991; Quigley & Graffin, 2017) report that that strategic leadership contributes to performance through competitive advantage. Whereas competitive advantage does not exist by itself, it is created by strategic leadership. In turn, competitive advantage once established and sustained leads to superior organizational performance. Hence, the focus of leadership is the creation of competitive advantage with ultimate focus on superior organizational performance.

3.0 Methodology

Research Procedure and Sample Characteristics

The study used stratified random sampling design. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), stratified random sampling design aims at achieving unbiased representation of the population. In stratified random sampling, the population was categorized based on their thematic area of intervention. Target population was made up of 900 respondents. Simple random sampling was used to choose the respondents from the sampled organizations. The study adopted the Slovin formula (Slovin, 1960) to determine the sample size. This is a random sampling technique formula used to estimate sample size. The Slovin's formula was used to calculate the sample size (n) given the population (N) and the margin of error (e).

n= N / [1 + N (e) 2]

Where:

N= Target Population

n=required size

e= error term

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The sample size; n= 900/ (1+ 900*0.052)) = 277

The study used primary data. Primary data were collected through semi-structured questionnaire. Statements in the questionnaire were constructed using nominal and ordinal scale. The targeted informants for the study were the INGOs country directors, or their equivalent such as Chief of Party, program directors, and operations directors. Reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach alpha > 0.7. The study objective was tested using inferential statistics. Path analysis as proposed by Barron and Kenny (1960) was used to test the mediating effect. Partial mediation takes place if by controlling the mediation variable, the relationship between independent and dependent variable become insignificant. Goodness of fit was tested using coefficient of determination (R^2). Overall significance of the model was based on ANOVA/F test. Individual significance was tested using t test. The results were interpreted using coefficients and P-values. The findings were presented in tables.

4.0 Results

Sampling adequacy test was done to confirm the structures of the study variables. Sampling adequacy test indicated that strategic leadership statements, competitive advantage statements and performance statements were correlated (p-value<0.05), thus, three factors model was valid.

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

		Strategic Leadership	Competitive advantage	Performance
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.859	0.84	0.828
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1240.276	513.835	1399.045
	df	171	36	253
	Sig.	0	0	0

Hypothesis Testing

Objective: To determine the mediating role of competitive advantage on the relationship between strategic leadership and organizational performance. The following hypothesis was formulated and tested.

H_0: Competitive advantage does not mediate the relationship between strategic leadership and performance of international non-governmental organizations in Kenya.

To test mediation, the study used path analysis four steps method as proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). Mediation takes place when the following four conditions are satisfied. Condition one; relationship between independent variable and dependent variable must be significant. Condition two; relationship between independent variable and mediation variable must be significant. Condition three; relationship between mediating variable and dependent variable must be significant. Condition four; by controlling the effect of mediating variable, the relationship between independent variable and dependent variable must be insignificant. The models for testing hypothesis were as follows.

$P = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SL + \varepsilon$

$CA = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SL + \varepsilon$

$P = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CA + \varepsilon$

$P = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SL + \beta_2 CA + \varepsilon$

Where.

P = Performance

CA = Strategic Leadership

CA = Competitive Advantage

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Table 2: Results for Mediating Effect of Competitive Advantage on the Relationship Between Strategic Leadership and Performance of International Non-Governmental Organization in Kenya.

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics: R Square Change	Change Statistics: F Change
1	.723[a]	0.522	0.52	1.24709	0.522	186.995
2	.565[a]	0.319	0.315	1.93013	0.319	81.047
3	.508[a]	0.258	0.254	1.53563	0.258	62.937
4	.725[b]	0.525	0.52	1.22772	0.02	92.937

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	290.821	1	290.821	186.995	.000[b]
	Residual	265.946	171	1.555		
	Total	556.768	172			
2	Regression	301.933	1	301.933	81.047	.000[b]
	Residual	644.497	173	3.725		
	Total	946.43	174			
3	Regression	148.414	1	148.414	62.937	.000[b]
	Residual	426.825	181	2.358		
	Total	575.239	182			
4	Regression	280.166	2	140.083	92.937	.000[c]
	Residual	253.226	168	1.507		
	Total	533.392	170			

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients: B	Unstandardized Coefficients: Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients: Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	5.41	0.962		5.621	.000
	Strategic leadership	0.715	0.052	0.723	13.675	.000
2	(Constant)	5.718	1.389		4.117	.000
	Strategic leadership	0.679	0.075	0.565	9.003	.000
3	(Constant)	11.252	0.926		12.151	.000
	Competitive advantage	0.401	0.051	0.508	7.933	.000
4	(Constant)	4.872	1.013		4.811	.000
	Strategic leadership	0.617	0.062	0.625	10.026	.065
	Competitive advantage	0.129	0.049	0.165	2.64	.090

a. Dependent Variable: Performance

b. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic leadership

c. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic leadership

d. Dependent Variable: Competitive advantage

e. Predictors: (Constant), Competitive advantage

f. Dependent Variable: Performance

g. Dependent Variable: Performance

h. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic leadership, Competitive advantage

The findings indicated that in step one the influence of strategic leadership on performance was significant (R^2 = .522, F = 186.995, P-value = .000<.05, β = .723, t = 13.675, P-value = .000<.05). The first condition of mediation which stated that independent variable should be significantly related to dependent variable in the absence of mediating variable is met. The second step revealed that strategic leadership influences competitive advantage significantly (R^2 = .319, F = 81.047, P-value = .000<.05, β = .565, t = 9.003, P-value = .000<.05), thus satisfying the second condition which states that independent variable should be significantly related with mediating variable. The third step showed that competitive advantage significantly influence performance (R^2 = .258, F = 62.937, P-value = .000<.05, β = .508, t = 7.933, P-value = .000<.05). The third condition which states that mediating variable should be significantly influence dependent variable was met. The fourth and final step indicated that the influence of strategic leadership on performance was insignificant in the absence of competitive advantage (R^2 = .525, F = 92.937, P-value = .000<.05, β = .165, t = 2.64, P-value = .000<.05), thus satisfying the condition which states that by controlling the effect of meditating variable, the effect of independent variable on dependent variable should be insignificant. All four conditions of testing mediation were satisfied thus competitive advantage mediates the relationship between strategic leadership and performance of international non-governmental organizations in Kenya. The hypothesis that competitive advantage does not mediate the relationship between strategic leadership and performance of international non-governmental organizations in Kenya was not supported.

5.0 Discussion

The study found out that competitive advantage mediates the relationship between strategic leadership and performance of international non-governmental organizations in Kenya. The findings concurred with Wernerfelt (1984) who posited that to gain competitive advantage, it is incumbent upon a firm to exercise strategic flexibility through prudent strategic leadership, by effectively leveraging on new technologies, building core competencies, exploiting global markets and strategic alliance or competitive strategies. The results support resource-based view theory which argues that organizations that enjoy distinctive internal capabilities and favorable changing external circumstances create competitive advantage in the industry (Hart, 1995). This means competitive advantage is a deliberate effort by the organization to align its internal conditions and capabilities with changes in the external environment. Leadership plays a fundamental role in the process of aligning the organization to external conditions through resource deployments, supporting and nurturing internal excellence that altogether create competitive advantage. In essence, strategic leadership is the propeller that drives organizational performance through competitive advantage. The findings further conform to Powell (2001) who argued that superior performance follows competitive advantage. Therefore, competitive advantage and superior performance are materially equivalent. The findings add on to the industrial organization theory which holds that how firms conduct themselves influences their performance. However, the behavior of the organization is intertwined with leadership.

6.0 Conclusion And Recommendations

The main objective of the study was to determine the mediating role of competitive advantage on the relationship between strategic leadership and performance of international non-governmental organizations in Kenya. The study concluded that competitive advantage mediates the relationship between strategic leadership and performance of international non-governmental organizations in Kenya. The study further concluded that that both competitive advantage and strategic leadership concurrently influence organizational performance positively. Leaders create competitive advantage by aligning the internal resources and capabilities with the realities in the external environment.

The study recommended that international non-governmental organization must be able to identify their competitive advantage. This should then be used to make the organization unique and be able to operate above competition rather than copying what other organizations are doing. It was also, recommended investigation of the role of leadership style on competitive advantage and performance.

7.0 Limitation of the Study

The study was limited to International Non-governmental organizations; thus, views of local NGOs are not captured in the study. Data used in the analysis were collected using semi structured questionnaires which did not give respondents a chance to explain their views in context. Strategic leadership is at top management level thus questionnaires were to be administered at the higher level of the organization. Given the challenge in getting access to senior leadership in such organizations based on restricted work schedule, it took a longer time to get the response.

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