Project marketing and the risk of environmental turbulence: Insights from three Nordic firms marketing projects to Nigeria

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This paper is an extract from my ongoing doctoral thesis which data were collected at two separate times. The first bothered on the perceptions about the nature of risks faced by the project companies in their marketing and management activities, while the second round data collection focused more on the sensemaking behaviour of the project marketers and managers. However, the second round of data collection has not been concluded at the time of writing this paper. This is an extract from the research thesis.

As projects have become an increasingly important part of the value creation process in many different industrial fields, the capability to sell and market projects has become essential (Jalkala et al. 2010; Grönroos, 1997; Skaates et al., 2002). Similarly, industrial product offerings have become increasingly complex and augmented (Günter B, Bonaccorsi, 1996) and as such project marketing becoming one of the dominating modes in international business (Hadjikhani, 1996; Günter, Bonaccorsi, 1996; Owusu, Sandhu and Kock, 2007; Skaates et al., 2002). In this vein, firms generally find international business opportunities to be inherently more risky than domestic ones (Ghoshal 1987; Miller and Bromiley 1990; Vernon 1985; Werner et al., 1996). Efforts to mitigate the effects of these environmental risks require understanding the local institutions which require organizations to conform to the rules and belief systems prevailing in the environment to survive (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Dacin 1997; Suchman 1995; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Xu and Shenkar 2002, Kostova and Zaheer 1999). As a result, Das and Teng (1996) and Miller (1998) suggest that global corporations may benefit from choosing strategies that take international risk factors into consideration in the strategy formulation process. In view of the foregoing, this paper looks at the issue of project marketing and the risk of environmental turbulence: Insights from three Nordic firms into project business in Nigeria. Risk management in projects should actually revolve around the whole process of the project beginning with the conception phase of the project up till the when it is eventually delivered. Most of the works done in risk management in project business concentrated on the management of the operational/installation phase of the project idea oblivious of the fact that the idea of marketing and doing projects in a particular environment is a risk on its own.

This research looks at project marketing and risk of environmental turbulence and management strategies using Nigeria as a case study. The research was conducted using three Nordic companies (Wärtsilä, Ericsson, and Sandvik) into project business in Nigeria. The overall objective of the study is to *identify and explain the nature of risks inherent in*

turbulent business environment that concern international project marketers and to explore relationships between the managerial perceptions of the forms of risks and firm-specific approach of handling them. It is a qualitative multicase study research which is especially useful when the focus is on 'how' and 'why' questions and on understanding the cases in their unique contexts, in the settings where they take place (Yin 2003; Stake 1995).

In line with the above objectives, the following questions were meant to be answered by the research:

1. What is the nature of risks inherent in the Nigerian business environment that concern international project marketers and what is the relationship between the managerial perceptions of the forms of risks and firm-specific approach of handling them? Which of these risk factors constitute the greatest risk and why?

2. How do project marketers assess the environment – do they have specific risk perception methodologies? What is the nature of risk management strategies used.

Defining project and project marketing

Project business is seen either as a form of export (Bergen, 1990; Hill, 2003; Vanhoucke, 2001) or as a later mode that develops as a result of the gradual process of knowledge acquisition and experience that enables firms to move from export via an agent to more involved modes (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, 1990a, b) or as a "hit-and-run" approach, i.e. to get rid of excess products or to gain business on short-term bases (Owusu, Sandhu, Kock, 2007: 696). It is ''the part of business that relates directly or indirectly to projects, with a purpose to achieve objectives of a firm or several firms'' (Artto and Wikström, 2005:351). According to Turner and Müller (2003), ''a project is a temporary organization to which resources are assigned to undertake a unique, novel and transient endeavor managing the inherent uncertainty and need for integration in order to deliver beneficial objectives of change''. *Project is a complex transaction designed specifically to create capital assets that produce benefits for the buyer over an extended period of time* (Tikkanen and Lindblom, 1986; Holstius, 1989; Skates, Cova et al., 2002).

Project sales and implementation processes entail complex negotiations between buyer and seller, as the details of the project are agreed upon during extensive buyer-seller interaction, often over a substantial period of time (Skaates, Tikkanen, & Lindblom, 2002). The individual project, seen from the project-selling firm's viewpoint, involves the following phases:

1. search – identifying project opportunities and relevant industry developments;
2. preparation – undertaking a feasibility study, preparing for the bidding process, establishing contacts with buyers and evaluating the competitive situation;
3. bidding – preparing the bidding documents after receiving the invitation to bid, and making decisions about price and use of local resources;
4. negotiation – which starts when the seller makes the preliminary offer for the project and ends with the signing of a contract;
5. implementation – delivering and supervising the project, training the buyer's employees and possibly creating after-sales systems;
6. transition – evaluating the project as a whole, building up knowledge for future offerings and possibly supplying additional services to the buyer

Background of study

In order to succeed and survive, firms must continuously monitor, respond and adapt to the influences of the external environment (Duncan, 1972). To this end, the external environment is regarded as comprising all the social, economic and physical factors that exist outside the boundary of the firm which affect the strategic decision-making behaviour of firms (Duncan, 1972). However, different environmental dynamics place different demands on different firms in terms of the way they structure their strategic functions and activities, i.e. production, finance, sales and marketing, procurement delivery, etc. in order to cope with the environmental circumstances (Phua, 2007:753) as these factors are constantly changing and the ability of firms to timely detect the changes and decide when to respond and how to best adapt to those changes, are critical to their long-term success, Phua, (2007) concluded. With established markets becoming saturated, multinational corporations (MNCs) have turned increasingly to emerging markets (EMs) in the developing world (London and Hart, 2004:350). With regard to the African countries which are regarded as developing, Owusu (2002:527) pointed out that though they are developing, but are countries with immense development deficit as shown by the dearth of basic amenities and of socio-economic and production infrastructure like electrical power, water, roads, and factories of the home-grown technology. In the same vein, these developing Africa countries are perceived as risky and unstable, leading to low positive expectations in medium to long-term business activities by the international business community (Owhoso et al. 2002). This negative picture stems from series of crises ranging from coup de tat, unstable polity, sit-tight government, ethnic militia, kidnapping, insecurity of lives and property, terrorism, unemployment, bribery and corruption, just to mention a few. The case environment being Nigeria, has lately been going through series of political and social upheavals which has been receiving global attention like the series of bombings (Abuja, Borno, Jos, Kano, Maiduguri etc.) and the kidnapping like the Chibok girls.

According to (Mushtaq et al., 1988:55), marketing to governments in less developed countries (LDCs) is rather complicated as physical and cultural differences, language barriers and political instability can make marketing opportunities in LDCs appear unattractive to international firms (Cateora 1983; Dawson 1985). Despite the uncertainties, the potential afforded by these markets (including Nigeria) is high (Mushtaq et al., 1988; Owusu, 2002; Ramamurti, 2003; London and Hart, 2004). As a result, it is helpful to consider the risk in the environment so as to be able to match efforts with outcome because in the case of volatile market conditions the effect of the political, economic, legal, and cultural environments is expected to be magnified (Cundiff and Hilger, 1988) which Chung and Beamish (2005:36) argued that it varies in their intensity according to whether the environment is stable or in crisis. Efforts to mitigate the effects of these environmental risks require understanding the local institutions which requires organizations to conform to the rules and belief systems prevailing in the environment to survive (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Dacin 1997; Suchman 1995; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Xu and Shenkar 2002, Kostova and Zaheer 1999).

Peng et al, (2008:921) noted that as researchers increasingly probe into emerging economies whose institutions differ significantly from those in developed economies, there is increasing appreciation that formal and informal institutions, commonly known as the ''rules of the game'' (North, 1990), significantly shape the strategy and performance of firms – both domestic and foreign – in emerging economies (Hoskisson, Eden, Lau, & Wright, 2000; Wright, Filatotchev, Hoskisson, & Peng, 2005). However, it is interesting to understand how these expatriates and local mangers of international foreign companies make sense of the

maddening turbulent events in the host country of Nigeria vis-à-vis their corporate culture. It is for this reason the institutional theory was combined with the sensemaking model to get a robust understanding of the issues of this research.

Extant studies of project marketing have touched explicitly on areas of network strategies and project marketing (Mattson, 1973; Cova, Mazet, and Salle, 1993; Bansard, Cova, and Salle, 1993; Cova, Mazet, and Salle, 1996; Welch et al, 1996; Cova and Hoskins, 1997), cooperation and networks (Liljegren, 1988; Cova and Allen, 1989), managing discontinuity of project marketing (Hadjikhani, 1996), project marketing success factors (Skaates, Tikkanen, and Lindblom, 2002; Artto et al., 1998), rituals in managing relationships (Cova and Salle, 2000), milieu and project marketing Cova, Mazet and Salle (1996) in INA-related publications but only a few had looked at the peculiarity of project marketing in the turbulent environments- infrastructure projects in emerging economies (Ramamurti, 2003; Salmi, 2000), risk in developing country infrastructure (Doh and Ramamurti, 2003), marketing to LDC governments (Mushtaq et al., 1998) and a few with regard to Africa- (Habiyakare 2009; Owusu, 2002, 2003; Nwankwo & Richards, 2004; and Owhoso et al., 2002; Bartels, Alladina, & Lederer, 2009; Owusu and Habiyakare, 2011).

However, due to the risk posed to international project marketing from the host environment, researchers have begun to recognize the effect of the environment especially the political risk on the success of project marketing operations (Hadjikhani, 1998; 2000; Hadjikhani and Häkansson, 1996; Hadjikhani and Ghauri, 2001; Mushtaq et al., 1998; Ramamurti, 2003; Salmi, 2000; Hadjikhani, Lee and Ghauri, 2008; Doh and Ramamurti, 2003; Hadjikhani and Sharma, 1999; Welch and Wilkinson, 2004). While several studies have also discussed both the nature of risks and strategies available for managing them (Slevin and Pinto, 1987; Pavlak, 2004; Hällgren and Maaninen-Olsson, 2005; Hällgren, 2007; Aaltonen and Sivonen, 2009; Ahola, 2009; Zarkada-Fraser and Fraser, 2002; Wang and Yuang, 2011; Miller, 1992; Miller, Lessard, 2001), none to my knowledge had specifically addressed the issue of risk management in project marketing, except those studies specifically addressing the risk in managing project operations like Doh and Ramamurti, (2003) Ramamurti, (2003), Salmi, (2000), Hadjikhani (1996) work on managing the discontinuity of project marketing and others dealing with project management. Obviously lacking in the literature is the explicit attention to the strategic influence of the environmental turbulence in the response strategy formulation in the developing countries that are generally known to be experiencing turbulence.

Nigeria as the case environment, has been undergoing series of turbulence in the recent years. Before 2009, Nigeria was battling with the problem of Niger Delta militancy which was accompanied with kidnappings of foreign expatriates for ransom and the destruction of government installations. Since 2009, Nigeria witnessed a new set of terror attacks by group in the name of Boko Haram which has been inflicting collateral damage in the northern part of Nigeria. It is reported that not less than 12,000 people have died so far in the attacks from Boko Haram since the struggle started and it does not look promising as bombings are experienced every week in the Northern part of Nigeria and lives and properties destroyed.

As a snapshot, when the violence started in 2009, between 26 and 29 July, over a thousand people were killed by the sect around Maiduguri, Bauchi, Potiskum, and Wudil; another 992 were killed in Jos in 2010; another 100-150 were killed in Damaturu on November 4, 2011; another 185 were killed on January 20, 2012; over 100 people were massacred in multiple Northern villages in Nigeria in July 2012. The Baga massacre of April 19-20 of 2013 which left about 228 people dead is still fresh in the mind of the Nigerians and the international

community while about 41 Yobe State school students were massacred in their sleep on April 6th of 2013. In April 2014 alone, not less than 71 people died in two 2 bombs exploded in a crowded bus station in the outskirts of Abuja, Nigeria, and 59 were reported massacred on February 25th, 2014 in Yobe. Between May and July 2014, an average bombing of 2 were carried out in the Northern part of Nigeria making that part of the country so risky to do business. The list of bombings and attacks is endless.

Methodology

In line with Skaates and Tikkanen (2003, p. 509), project marketing researchers have to construct their understanding along Pettigrew's (1985) three dimensions of context, content, and process. Thus, they suggested that it is fruitful to use intensive, focused, qualitative methods to create an understanding of the phenomena under study in their real-life contexts, based on multiple informants' own construction of their situations under study. The research under consideration is in line with the suggestion of Skaates and Tikkanen (2003, p. 509) with regard to the context (Nigeria), content (risk from turbulence), and process (risk management process). This research is a qualitative case study method approach. A case study is especially useful when the focus is on 'how' and 'why' questions and on understanding the cases in their unique contexts, in the settings where they take place (Yin 2003; Stake 1995). Case studies are well suited to interpretive sense-making (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) because they enable the rich contextual description essential to understanding by understanding an action through the actor's subjective experience of it. Though, some research cautioned against casual use of single key informant responses to represent organizational level constructs (Phillips, 1981; Seidler, 1974) and therefore, this research hopes to overcome this setback by the use of multiple cases to triangulate the data from the core case. Yin (2002:53) argues that, when you have the resources, you should prefer multiple case studies over single-case studies (see also Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991, while Leonard-Barton, 1990). Dyer and Wilkins (1991), on the other hand, argued vigorously in favour of the single-case studies. This particular research- project marketing risk management in turbulent environment is case studies that use interview methods in the data collection. The interview was conducted with the use of semi-structured protocol which 'can be used to study both 'what' and 'how' questions (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:82). In obtaining data for this research, two sets of interview protocols were designed and applied at two different time intervals. The first interview protocol was applied in between November and December 2013 on the project marketers of the case companies while the second set of interview protocol was applied in April, 2014. The first set of protocol was based on understanding the turbulent Nigerian environment, the nature of risks encountered, and the firm- specific approach of handling the risks. The second set of interview protocol focused on how the project marketers/managers perceived, made sense of the environmental turbulence and risks, and how that influenced their strategy. The second set of interview protocol was based on sensemaking, and reconfirming the responses made to questions about the environment during the first interview. It focused on how they indexed context- noticing cues about the situation, how they make attributions- drawing inferences based on identity and experiences, and the process of selecting schemas- enacting appropriate behavioural scripts.

Out of the 15 companies found useable for the research, only 4 indicated interest to participate in the research. In the same vein, data were collected from the 4 Nordic companies during the first round of data collection exercise, but was discovered that data from one of the cases could not be used as the project marketer/manager just assumed the position four

months before the research interview. The interviews were based on an open-ended format through the use of an interview guide (Patton, 1990; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Fontana & Frey, 1994). Two interview guides were used in gathering the data. The first interview guide was more about the turbulent Nigerian environment and divided into four parts (country-specific elements, decision-making elements, project-specific elements, company-specific elements). The second interview guide was about the sensemaking process of the environmental turbulence by the project marketers/managers. The second interview guide consists of four sections also (indexing context, making attributions, selecting schemas, general questions).

Discussion of research data
However, efforts were made to ensure case and data equivalence by ensuring that all the case companies were into project business as against consumer marketing, market projects in Nigeria, have done or won a project in Nigeria, and are from the Nordic countries. In order to collect the data required for the research, a semi-structure interview was applied on the project marketing personnel of the case companies by interviews. The case companies consist of Nordic firms (Wärtsilä, Ericsson, Sandvik) marketing projects and are doing projects in Nigeria, have marketing office in Nigeria.
However, my discussion of research result is categorised into the nature of risks inherent in the Nigerian environment, risk perception, risk handling approach, nature of turbulence and risks, and recipe for successful project business in Nigeria.

What is the nature of risks inherent in the Nigerian business environment that concern international project marketers?
With regard to the nature of risks inherent in the Nigerian project marketing environment, it was generally acknowledged by the managers that the Nigerian business environment is not different from any other environment even though as it is experiencing turbulence which is shown by the incessant bombings and kidnappings by the terrorist group by the name Boko Haram and the Niger Delta militants.
However, the major risk identified by the managers as affecting their project operations is the risk in government processes which is necessarily laced with corruption. In the same vein, changing government policies is generally acknowledged by the managers to affect their project business.

> *… kind of risks you face in the Nigerian business environment is the same that you'll face everywhere else.*

> *… in every business that the average Nigerian does, the Nigerian factor (corruption)comes into play.*

> *…like change in government policies, I think government policies in Nigeria have changed in the last 2years for more than three times as regards importation and exportation.*

> *… is the Niger-Delta militancy, and also the Boko-Haram in the North attacking government installations and also attacking many telecommunication installations and contractors. So those are the real risks that we face.*

…There is risk in government processes, not being on time, delaying things around your delivery, corruption….

…But there are two or three types of security- there is normal security- you want to move things, you go with some people who are security agents….

Managerial perceptions of the forms of risks

With regard to the managerial perception of the form of risks faced in the Nigerian project marketing environment, risk is perceived in government projects but saw no risk in the non-government projects. The reason being given lies in the belief that the government projects process is normally laced with corruption and seldom don't participate.

However, it was generally perceived that the image of Nigerian is bad but it is improving over the years and that was why it was suggested that it is better to be there than not being there as project marketers.

It is generally perceived by the project marketers that there's nothing new happening in Nigeria different from the rest of the world and the kind of risks you face in the Nigerian business environment is the same that you'll face everywhere else. Thus we could understand why they remain in Nigeria despite the turbulence.

… non-government very straight forward and government- not straight forward.

… the image of Nigeria may be bad when I came here, but 10 years after, we have been able to show that it's actually a country where despite all the difficulties, it's more interesting to be there than not being there.

… there's nothing new happening here different from the rest of the world. The situation is the same be it in India, Egypt and so on.

… for most of the people that have not been to Nigeria, thinking that it's a so risky place, it's just like any other normal country. The Nigerian people are nice and warmly. But people outside tell me that they are very dangerous. For me the answer is clear. I've lived here for 10 years. I go in and out as I like and no bad incidence.

… you find a lot of disparity between what they tell you outside and what actually is the case happening inside Nigeria.

… kind of risks you face in the Nigerian business environment is the same that you'll face everywhere else.

… many people that talk of Nigeria been this been that of course have not been here. They only listen to what they hear on television and that could be very dangerous because there are two types of news out there. The one they want you to hear and the real story.

…Though there are issues like Boko Haram, Niger Delta militancy and so what?

Firm-specific approach of handling risk

With regard to the firm-specific approach to the risk handling, it was confirmed by the managers that the normally do formal risk analysis and management and the result of this risk analysis determines where they do for projects and how they go about it. In practical terms, the managers acknowledged that they use security information normally obtained from independent security agents specializing in providing security information across the country *involve protection services for areas, times when travelling without would be deemed to be too risky).*

With the companies that have Nigerians as their project marketer/managers, they attributed their effectiveness to their being locals and understand the local environment better. this is further underscored by the corporations' deliberate policy to operate locally (*And because of all these inherent security risks, is the reason why our company is working globally but operate locally).* This can be classified as an adaptation strategy. Similarly, the companies employ the tactics of training the locals to do the job (*train locals, you understand the environment and then you live and survive in that environment).*

One major practice common with all these Nordics companies is their transparency attitude. They all attested to the fact that they rarely succeed in government projects simply because *we subscribe to the anti-corruption tenets. It's either you buy it or you don't buy. So if you don't learn to run business with justification and a very good heart, it's not going to work for us. In terms of project with the government, we cannot win it, because, my government tells me I cannot do anything outside the book. Some companies are able to do it. Are other European companies able to do it? No. All Western companies have the same policies.*
In line with this, the Nordic companies *prefer to influence by our talk leadership, technological leadership….*

Strategically, the companies use both the adaptation and avoidance strategies.

> *... Risk analysis and management is part of what we do. We do preliminary risk analysis. We assess what the major risks are- maybe commercial risks, information risks, operational risks, with some obviously come into play.*

> *…When it comes to travelling information, we do get them. But at as locals, we sometimes find our own ways of going there. Maybe we go in plain clothes.*

…And because of all these inherent security risks, is the reason why our company is working globally but operate locally. Meaning that it is a global company but the locals run the companies in each country because one, it give added value, two; they understand the culture of the country they are in and they'll be able to protect themselves and also understand how business work in that country. But, the most important is doing business with integrity and with the corporate value at heart.

…eliminate or try to curb this 'Nigerian factor' (corruption), it'll always come up. The reason I'm telling you is that we don't have such issues here. It's either you buy it or you don't buy. So if you don't learn to run business with justification and a very good heart, it's not going to work for us.

…With government policies, you need to understand them, be smart about how you handle them, and treat them fast because if don't treat them fast….

…The strategy for managing those risks roughly the same as in other countries. … involve protection services for areas, times when travelling without would be deemed to be too risky.

we deal with many government corporations and we subscribe to the anti-corruption tenets.

…In terms of project with the government, we cannot win it, because, my government tells me I cannot do anything outside the book. Some companies are able to do it. Are other European companies able to do it? No. All Western companies have the same policies.

…In many cases… has a way to avoid this kind of scenario. We prefer to influence by our talk leadership, technological leadership and grassroots usually in the way we address people.

For the 'area boys' problem in Nigeria, now at least there are specialist; that is people who actually specialize in negotiating this kind of situation and mediating the situation into truce. For Niger-Delta militancy, a lot of engineers have been employed and some of them are locals.

…Like I said, you use locals. In a way, locals understand the environment. You train locals, you understand the environment and then you live and survive in that environment. Then, you can do business in that environment.

How do project marketers assess the environment – do they have specific risk perception methodologies?

Basically, the managers acknowledged that the companies maintain intelligence network with the locals as a way of assessing the environment (*Of course you have very good intelligence*

networks that tell you to go ahead before you go and do business in such environment. That is the reality of the situation).

Similarly, some use formal technique like the Monte Carlo system to support the local intelligence (*A lot of people sit down together to do the risk analysis and identify all the risks. After it is identified, we weigh all the risks and say okay what kind of risks is this?).*

> *...Of course you have very good intelligence networks that tell you to go ahead before you go and do business in such environment. That is the reality of the situation.*

> *...we use mini-risk tool to determine the value of the risk. It helps you to decide how and what you want to do. A lot of people sit down together to do the risk analysis and identify all the risks. After it is identified, we weigh all the risks and say okay what kind of risks is this? Is it getting really enough time to say how do I rectify it? It uses a sort of Monte Carlo system. So when we are starting the project, what we do is we have what is called a "Decision Point", we call everybody together, apart from the mini-risk tool, there are some couple of other conditions and they all agree saying fine, this is what we must do.*

Discussions

The responses from the project managers indicate that the turbulence prevailing in the Nigerian business environment makes them to employ protection services because of the risky environment which adds to the cost of doing business and the practice of avoiding business in certain areas of the country.

However, what I found ironic in the whole exercise is the fact that these managers maintained that the turbulence experienced in Nigeria was not in any way different from what is happening in other countries. What I could deduce from their response is that a project marketer/manager must be vast in risk management capability.

CONCLUSIONS

As acknowledged by the project marketers/managers, one can conclude that to do a successful project business in the turbulent Nigerian environment, effective...*Risk analysis and management is required.* Also, the use of locals as a way of intelligence gathering, and

benefits of knowing where to go and when to go is achieved. In the same vein, working through the network of both the local and Nordic association in Nigeria will help ensure successful project business. Project companies wishing to succeed in turbulent Nigerian environment and any other similar environment will necessarily be vast in risk management capability. Common to all these Nordic companies is that they avoid project process deemed corrupt and so distance themselves from politics- this is a good point for companies wishing to stay out of troubles in the turbulent Nigerian environment.

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