

Project Management Success in a Troubled Environment: The Mobile Telecommunications Sector in Mogadishu, Somalia

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Abstract

This paper considers the nature of project management success in Somalia in the mobile telecommunications sector during a period of warfare. The principal form of research was personal interviews of 52 business owners and managers in Mogadishu, the capital city of the country. It was found that most businesses were operated on the basis of international best practice despite the fact that the ongoing violence caused people to behave in different ways and to have different priorities. Compromises were made by managers to the conditions they faced but a commitment to ultimate profitability was maintained.

Keywords: international best practice, mobile telecommunications, project management, Somalia, war

1. Introduction

Projects, project management and project success are related but not identical concepts. It is quite possible, for example, for projects to be successful while the project management is not and so forth (Munns & Bjeirni, 1996). This is particularly true in volatile environments in which pragmatic responses to business difficulties are likely to be required. Success can also be defined in different ways and it is evident that what constitutes success in financial terms may not constitute success with respect to non-financial, operational considerations (Nedzinskas *et al.*, 2017). The investigation into the relationship between these concepts has, consequently, changed over the years, as project management (“... a professional and scientific specialization that differs from traditional management by the generally limited, temporary, innovative, unique, and multidisciplinary nature of projects” (Ika, 2009)) has come to be seen as distinct from management *per se*. An alternative approach to project management success, in the context of a volatile environment, would be to consider it to be subjective in nature and constructed by individuals who are themselves embroiled in complex situations which do not yield simple solutions (*ibid.*). When the environment is as volatile as that of Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, where violence is endemic and the government is either on the verge of collapse or has already collapsed, then it is evident that any definition of project success must engage with other variables, e.g. physical survival, protection of the community as a place where commercial relations can continue and support for such law and order as continues to survive. One of the respondents to this research project observed, “... when the government is not here for the people, then business must take over.” In situations such as this, as Bourdieu (1972) would have expressed it, both the habitus, which is the physical embodiment of cultural capital and the field, which is the expression of the habitus in the world in dynamic action, are traumatically ruptured in the event of warfare. Management practice will also, necessarily, be revolutionized.

Somalia, a coastal country located on the Horn of Africa, has had a troubled history since emerging from Italian and British imperialism as the Somali Republic in 1960. A military coup in 1969 was succeeded by a civil war in the 1990s that led to the evisceration of the country’s institutions such that it became considered a ‘failed state.’ This concept, much contested, places the reasons for failure on crises which are local in nature and the failure of local leaders is critical, while in reality the “imperial history of global capitalism” is the principal cause of the crisis that is manifested in a local origin (Jones, 2008). This crisis, of course, results from the uneven development that drives the spread of capitalism through colonialism. It resulted in the breakdown of the central

state and the rule of law. In place of the central state, local communities reverted to traditional or religious systems that had served them in the pre-colonial era. Commercial operations were, necessarily, severely hampered in these circumstances since there was no guarantee of property rights or of normal banking activities. In addition, there is of course the relentless violence and the disruption this causes. The violence has been intensified by the fact that: "... covert commandos and drone strikes assisted by a secret CIA base in Mogadishu, are routine (Anderson, 2017)." Famine, or the threat of famine for large proportions of the population, have become persistent presences (Samator, 1992).

Somalia has suffered from endemic violence since its period of post-colonialism following the withdrawal of the British in 1960 was succeeded by the assassination of the first elected president and the imposition of military rule in 1969. Civil war began in 1990 and the severity of the fighting has led to the breakdown of government institutions and the judgement made by a number of outside observers that the country had become a failed state. The vacuum that has replaced the government has enabled banditry to thrive in rural areas and for terrorist groups to seize and cement power over territory of their own. Opportunistic piracy of ships passing through the Gulf of Aden or Indian Ocean has attracted a major international response and drone strikes and physical incursions into Somalia by US forces has become a common occurrence. The minimal level of infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, has brought about vulnerability to natural disasters such as drought in a part of the world that has suffered from severe famine in recent years (Ford, 2013).

To try to repair some of the damage done to the social fabric of the country, traditional patriarchal tribal practices have been returned to use and local courts dispense justice based on Shariah principles. These alternative means of social control have been able to continue. There have been some examples of foreign direct investment into the capital. While this has been quite limited among private sector companies (e.g. Powell, Ford & Nawrasteh, 2006), the changing nature of cross-border investment, with greatly reduced fixed asset and transaction costs resulting from developments in communications technologies, have meant that numerous small-scale investment projects have taken place with shops in urban areas selling international products and under international management and with increasing numbers of managers with experience of international management education. However, investment has been much more substantial among public sector interests as governments from Saudi Arabia to Turkey have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in ports and transportation infrastructure as a means of gaining access to or control of maritime traffic and services (Fick, 2018). This has brought the state into some regional confrontations and struggles on an asymmetric basis, since the Somalian state lacks the capacity to uphold national interests. On the other hand, the low level investments and the much improved connectivity now available means that there are opportunities for local businesses to try to persevere. However, it is not clear what impacts the very volatile environment will have on the definition and practice of project success and project management success. This leads to the research questions. First, what are the impacts on project management that are caused by this volatile environment and how is the management style affected by them? Second, does the specific nature of the mobile telecommunications industry have any implications for the nature of project management as a result?

This paper uses analysis from a programme of qualitative research to investigate these issues and to try to conceptualize a model of project management applied in the warlike conditions of Mogadishu. It continues with a description of the methodology employed in the project, followed by the findings, discussion and conclusion. Implications for management practice are drawn from the findings and presented in the discussion.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on a programme of qualitative research conducted in Mogadishu during 2018, combined with analysis of secondary data and ethnographic observation. Given the nature of the possible population of business owners, managers and executives, it was decided that a quantitative approach would not be practical. This was because physical access to many parts of the city was not possible and, when it was possible, this was on an unpredictable and temporary basis. Services such as telecommunications and the post cannot be depended upon and, consequently, it was not likely that a properly representative sample could be achieved. Further, there is an understandable lack of trust in the country which means that people, even the most well-educated, are unwilling to speak to people they do not know or to whom they cannot obtain a reliable introduction. This is in addition to the general reticence that is to be found in less developed (and sometimes developed) economies when being requested to answer questions – respondents fear that they will be tricked into revealing something that may be used against them at some stage in the future (Lynn, 2003). As a result, it was necessary to choose a method that would enable the researchers to begin with respondents with whom a relationship of trust already exists and then seek access through those respondents to other potential respondents. This approach is a form of the snowball method (Heckathorn, 1997). While the snowball method can be successful in cases such as this, it runs the risk

that there will be excessive homogeneity within the sample achieved, on the basis that people are likely to be willing to recommend are people quite similar to themselves (Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017). This is particularly true in the case of contemporary Somalia, where tribal relationships have emerged again as being important in structuring the nature and extent of personal networks. It has been necessary, therefore, to pay attention to the possibility of achieving a degree of heterogeneity in the sample as much as is possible under the circumstances. Nevertheless, there are certainly limitations to what might be achieved in this context. Somalia is an Islamic society in which women are excluded from forms of public life such as retail and retail management. Within the population of all people in those jobs then, all or nearly all share a similar demographic profile in terms of being male and having been able to participate in or benefit from some form of international education.

After consultation with the secondary data, initial pilot interviewing and discussions with experts in research methodology, a semi-structured interview agenda was drawn up and then refined and amended as the interviewing progressed and more knowledge became available concerning the issues affecting respondents. This approach is used to guide discussion such that respondents broadly discussed similar subjects but each one had the opportunity to explore further areas which are of particular relevance and importance to them, which might not be of the same importance or relevance to many or even any other respondents. The approach is an efficient response to the presence of scarce resources such as time especially when it is not possible for the researcher to conduct iterative interviews with the same respondents (Jamshad, 2014). In all, interviews were conducted with 52 respondents who were business owners or operators in the sector of mobile telecommunications retailing and servicing. This sector has been chosen for investigation because companies began operations in the era of violent conflict and continue to be operational now and, also, mobile telecommunications have become an essential component of daily life for individuals and organizations. Indeed, in a situation in which people can be separated from family members if chaotic conditions, the ability to keep in contact through one's own resources is a necessity *ne plus ultra*.

Interviews were either audio recorded or accompanied by extensive note-taking for subsequent transcription at the earliest possible opportunity. Interview transcripts were subsequently interpreted into English from the original Somali or Arabic by the principal researcher, who is a native speaker of those languages. The interview transcripts were entered into an electronic database, together with relevant secondary literature and the contents of the research diary. The research diary was a repository of notes, observations and souvenirs made by the principal researcher according to ethnographic principles. This approach, together with what has come to be known as "quasi-ethnographic research," has been adopted as a means of approaching "... the problems of the 'limitation of asking' and that 'people don't always do what they say,' and to develop a 'thick description' of the lived experiences of [respondents] (Elliott, 2003)."

The contents of the database were then used in a form of content analysis that was confirmatory or directed in nature because tags and keywords were identified independently of the data through knowledge of likely concepts to be analysed, which is the method described by Hsieh & Shannon (2005), when researchers will "... begin coding immediately with the predetermined codes." The results of this process of content analysis are presented in the next section.

3. Findings

3.1 Telecommunications in Somalia

Despite the many problems brought about by fighting and the lack of a functioning central government, some sectors such as the telecommunications sector have nevertheless thrived (Nurhussein, 2008). Prior to the war, Somalia had only 8,500 fixed lines to support a population of some ten million people and these were nearly all located in Mogadishu. A great deal of the existing infrastructure was destroyed in the fighting (Feldman, 2007). However, it is possible that the absence of regulations and supporting services may act as an incentive to further investments in some cases (Konkel & Heeks, 2009). Such investment is likely to be unevenly distributed, though and, therefore, likely to contribute to uneven development in the country concerned. The investment is likely to be concentrated in areas with more favourable conditions. Further, investment may not involve most up-to-date or expensive equipment because of the very real possibility of future damage (Mohamed & Childress, 2010). A number of companies have opened services in the country, including notably Hormuud Telecom, which was established in Mogadishu in 2002 offering voice and SMS (short message) services to a few thousand customers and which now has more than four million subscribers, 800 service centres and a mobile network covering more than 80% of the territory of south and central Somalia (Hormuud Telecom, 2019).

Other companies are supported by foreign investors. There is both concern and excitement about the burgeoning presence of Chinese investment as Somalia becomes an entry point in Africa for the One Belt and Road

campaign. Much of the investment from China is expected to be resource-seeking in nature (Staff Reporter, 2017). However, the country has also funded numerous projects related to infrastructure and has also sent more than 400 members of medical teams to Somalia (Lei, 2019).

Investment in the telecoms industry brings a number of jobs as well as online and communications services that can directly assist in improving the quality of people's lives. It represents an important component of the country's labour market policy, as expressed in the recently announced National Employment Policy (NEP), which concentrates on three priority areas: strengthening the private sector and promoting micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, supporting productive economic sectors for job creation and strengthening labour market governance. In doing so, there is a need for "... developing friendly regulations for private sector development, favourable fiscal policy and access to finance for expanding business activities (ILO, 2019)." Important priorities include ensuring the ease of doing business, ensuring the protection of local products against foreign or imported products, adopting innovation in business practices and enhancing the capacity of young workers (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, Somalia, in common with most of East Africa, suffers from a lack of structural transformation in the economy, which means that only 1% of the country's merchandise exports is accounted for by manufactured goods (ADB, 2019).

3.2 *Motives for Investment*

The identification of opportunities for investment projects is critical in the context of Somalia, since it is subject to the individual assessment and evaluation of the owner/investor considering environmental effects, social settings and political impact and capturing the idea of the highest opportunities in the market to deliver sustainable and profitable projects. According to the interview results, various factors are involved in the determination of appropriate projects to be selected and implemented, considering the business environment of the organization:

3.3 *Cost and Profit*

Profit is acquiring revenue over the lifetime of an invested project. Businesses usually strive to earn enough profit for growth and survival in the long-term. Management tries to maximize its income through providing services to the people and obtaining earnings as a reciprocal process. Profit is legitimate earnings in business transactions but it is not over-accentuated here because it is not only earning income but responding to the needs of society and participating in the economic improvement of the country. "The creation of this company or project was based on two main objectives: first, to serve the people and, second, was to get profit from this service so it was mutual interest and increase the life chances of the people" (interview PM Telecom). Profit is the driving cause of initiating business projects, since without profit no business investment would be possible to undertake in challenging circumstances and violent environments.

3.4 *Market Demand*

A shortage or absence of services and goods in the market and increases of their demand by the people indicates gaps in the market for specific goods or services, while investment of required services would solve some of the needs of the community and would give profit to the investors. Mobile telecommunication services are early business responses to the market demand in the area of telecommunications, as one of respondents stressed. Basically, the needs in the local market are determined through observation and individual assessment and discussion with colleagues. Some respondents believed that need assessments are costly and expensive and should not be adapted. However, this was not a universal view.

3.5 *Time Frame*

In business prospects in a violent environment, the time frame is a critical concern. Project investment with duration of less than one year is preferable owing to the requirements of a troubled environment, as well as the basic goals and return of investment. In project planning, various alternative concepts should be considered together and then managers will select the best alternative from the set of all possible solutions. One of the respondents described the importance of the time frame in project investment in the context of a violent environment "Time contributes to the success of a project and constitutes a critical parameter to accomplish the project so that we mostly used to select and prefer projects with short time periods or duration, less costs and potential for profitability, because it gives opportunities for easy to control and monitor projects if any unexpected interruption occurs. For example, if war erupted in the project location or an important figure in project management got kidnapped. In such cases, you need alternative options, so we are used to striving with instable situations where you don't know what might happen at any minute," as one respondent graphically observed.

3.6 Human Capital

The quality and motivation of people working for a particular investment is considered important for the success of a project. Traditional clan measurement techniques are used for the selection of employees for security purposes and the approval of traditional leaders in the project environment is sought. Problem solution skills, knowledge, experience, technical competence and other requirements are evaluated after tribal measurements in the workplace have taken place. A candidate is referred or recommended by traditional community leaders and public figures as, for example, Deputy Operations Director; one of the respondents said, “Well, there has been a great shortage of telecommunications, people fled to overseas and neighbouring countries, while some others are displaced internally, so the need for telecommunications is strongly enhanced so that we started this project with a view to being able to reach far areas in the villages. At first, the initial period was challenging because of the materials required, shortage of well qualified human resources and even then you cannot trust everyone that you have to work with. So, you need strong recommendations and guarantees.”

3.7 Success Patterns

For the fulfilment of the research objectives, all participants of the study were asked to illustrate how project success might be achieved in a violent environment. The responses from the 52 participants have been accumulated categorized and analyzed through content analysis. The answers were diverse and have been used to draw various conclusions. One Project Manager, a respondent in this study, said: “Well, a lot of factors lead to the success of projects, including planning, knowledge and skills. However, the most remarkable of the success factors is society collaboration, technology and top management support. Without the support of society and management, not one step of work can be taken, while society acceptance and its collaboration offer protection from any problem that might happen because of people being involved in different ways at the project workplace.”

The most frequent answers from respondents describe the importance of society engagement, management support, leadership, team work and technology. These patterns contribute to the success of investment projects in the telecommunications sector in a violent environment. There is also the engagement of society leaders at the work environment of the project and the operations work of the company, while achieving the acceptance of traditional leaders at the work environment provides safe protection for the works and resources of the company and good leadership gives better direction for the team and seeks collaboration with society through providing work opportunities. Leadership affects many aspects relating to the work, such as the attitude of employees, encouragement and work performance are also associated with the outcome of the project. Transformational and transactional leadership styles are the two major leadership styles expected to achieve success. A transactional leader can achieve the expected level of performance by introducing employees to work specifications, becoming aware of required goals and having all people attain the required output. Transformational leadership is individual and makes changes in the team. Most such people are enthusiastic and attempt to ensure that every member succeeds. Project failure or success relates to the employee attitudes and workplace behaviour. Project work is collective responsibility team oriented, with team members helping each other so as to achieve the successful delivery of the project. If one fails, then it may be that the while team fails to deliver project work and, so, research participants emphasized the team as the necessary factor for the success of the project. One of the interviewees stated that “... good leadership and the satisfaction of the employees, management efforts and technology to offer better work environment for the employees and provide necessary facilities to deliver the work” (Employee, Company B). Technology has been defined as a physical and informational component, physical components comprising items such as products, tools, equipment, blue prints, techniques and process. Technology relates to obtaining certain results, resolving certain problems and competing tasks with particular skills, knowledge and asset exploitation.

4. Discussion

As violence and disorder have led to the fragmentation of society, the agencies of the central government have mostly stopped being operational and, in the vacuum created, people have resorted to pre-modern tribal systems and religious practices. These may not be perfect in the contemporary world but they do have the virtue of offering a means by which society can continue to some extent. This has also meant that business has been able to continue, although without government services or having to pay any taxes. In some cases, as respondents observed, business activities have replaced the government in being able to provide some of the basic services people need to survive in a troubled environment. In such a situation, therefore, it is possible to consider the implications for project management in an environment in wartime. Based on the responses of the respondents, the lessons of international business have been learned such that people will do as much as they can to follow

standard procedures wherever possible but will supplement these activities with others following tribal norms when necessary. This has meant, for example, that it has been possible in some circumstances to continue operating the business in the absence of banking and, indeed, money, since pre-existing social relations come into play which regulate the level of trust among the various actors involved and enabled the system to continue. Insofar as contemporary project management skills do not contradict these tribal systems, then they continue to be useful and are expected by managers.

The telecommunications sector is particularly important to consider in this case because it represents a means by which basic services can be replaced by personal means. Instead of public service networks providing information about what is happening, the mobile telephone enables individuals to join or form their own networks that distribute information and enable the coordination of activities. In some senses, therefore, the business sector literally replaces the public sector, within limitations, by providing the capacity to promote mobility by providing information about nearby events and activities. In kino-political terms, that is, the mobile telephone reduces limitations to mobility and, by doing so, acts as a form of empowerment to ordinary people (Sheller, 2018:12-3). This issue is worthy of further consideration in the Somali context.

Above all, perhaps, the lesson of this research is that the business that can continue under such stressful conditions will do so and will only do so if basic business priorities are followed: that is, it must be profitable in the short-term or, at least, have the capability of yielding a profit at some stage in the future. Although there is some scope for adopting other criteria for determining project management success, as discussed above, these are not permanent solutions or the basis for a continuous settlement of the distribution of scarce resources. In other words, there are different ways to meet the requirements of people in a war-torn situation and if the configuration of a business does not offer business success as commonly considered, then an alternative configuration must be chosen. Capitalism continues with its characteristic pattern of creative destruction even with bombs falling and guns sounding.

5. Conclusion

The findings reported in this paper are drawn from a programme of qualitative research conducted in the capital of Somalia, Mogadishu, during a period of extensive violence and societal fragmentation. This situation has framed the nature of the research in that the original intention to determine the nature of project management success in the context of Somalian society has become the investigation of the nature of project management success in the context of warfare. It is not entirely clear whether the standard research design process used in this case is sufficient for the examination of commercial issues during violence and this is an additional research limitation to be acknowledged as well as all those other limitations that are attendant upon qualitative research. However, a transparent approach to the issue has been attempted. Further, in terms of time and space, it is difficult to estimate whether the type of violence people have suffered in Mogadishu is the same as that suffered by other people elsewhere and, consequently, whether this has affected the responses that have been received in this project. Clearly, there is a need for further research in these areas and, also, longitudinal research in Somalia to try to identify changes in opinion if and when peace is ever restored.

Kerzner (2009:3) noted that a project can be considered closed when there has been verification that all of the work that has been accomplished, contractual closure of the contract, financial closure of the charge numbers and administrative closure of the paperwork. The success of the project can then be assessed in terms of whether the project has been completed within time, within cost, at the desired performance or technology level, having utilised the assigned resources effectively and efficiently and the work has been accepted by the customers. In the context of mobile telecommunications in current day Somalia, it appears that the project management process seems to be irrevocably compromised because it is not possible to conclude a specific project according to sound managerial principles insofar as this is possible but, when it is not possible, reversion to a pre-modern form of tribal relations enables society and the businesses embedded within it to continue to operate to a reasonable level of efficiency. This is the basis of the answer to the first research question. As for the second research question, it is evident that the ability of people to keep in contact with each other has come to be regarded as even more important than before. Consequently, managers in this sector feel that they have a social duty to keep their businesses open and to provide services to the public. This has led some respondents to accept that non-standard business practices should be employed (e.g. operating without the hope of long-term profits) so long as the need exists. This seems to be worthy of further exploration both in Somalia and elsewhere.

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