

Knowledge Management as a Determinant of Non-Governmental Organisation Strategic Plan Attainment

Yoram Siame

International School for Social and Business Studies, Slovenia
yoram.siame@chaz.org.zm

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to conduct a preliminary review of literature on the extent to which knowledge management can determine strategic plan Success of Non-Governmental Organisations.

Methodology/Approach: This article is informed by a comprehensive Literature research. The literature reviewed was identified through online searches using the key words; Knowledge Management and Strategic Planning and Knowledge Management, Non-Governmental Organisations and Strategic Planning.

The focus of this literature review is on Non-Governmental Organisations which only have a presence in Zambia and are not part of or affiliated to an international organisation and predominantly work in the health sector. The review mainly focused around literature published after 2001 and focused on Knowledge management and strategic planning.

Findings: The study found that any study in how Non-Governmental Organisations engage in Knowledge Management and how this impacts Strategic Plan success should take into account the unique capabilities and limitations that result from their unique role, governance, resource base and operational environment.

The study also found that very little research has tried to determine how Non-Governmental Organisation Strategic Plan attainment can be affected by Knowledge Management.

Keywords: Non-Governmental Organisation, Knowledge Management and Strategic Planning.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a review of literature on the extent to which knowledge management can determine strategic plan Success of Non-Governmental Organisations. It examines Knowledge Management, Strategic Planning and how NGOs interact with these concepts. The paper then seeks to establish the existence of evidence on the extent to which knowledge management can determine strategic plan Success in Non-Governmental Organisations. The paper also delves into the nature of NGOs and their Zambian historic background and regulation. The understanding of which is essential to understand how NGOs relate to any concept.

NGOS

Non-Governmental organisations are not for profit institutions that are not part of state structures, are not primarily motivated by commercial considerations or profit maximisation, and are largely self-governing (Hulme, 2001). The literature on Non-Governmental organisations suggests growing roles in international and local development participation with some authors contending their ability to exert influence over international policy agenda (Michele M. Betsill, 2001). The important role that NGOs play in shaping the development agenda is all but undeniable (José Braga de Vasconcelos, 2006).

Zambian Non-Governmental Organisations, also referred to as Civil Society Organisations, found fertile ground for growth after the political and economic liberalisation of 1991, which saw the country transition from socialism to a capitalist model. The diminished state capacities to provide public services created a need for complimentary mechanisms to fill in the gaps. As NGOs evolved, it became clear that they were taking on increasing prominence in facilitating community mobilisation, social accountability, advocacy, policy dialogue, mainstreaming, capacity building and information/skills exchange (McIntyre K & Carey S. 2009).

The work of NGOs has grown to encompass most development areas such as health, economy, education, water and sanitation, environment, and even governance (Moonga Hangoma Mumba 2010).

NGOs are governed by the Non-Governmental Organisations' Act No. 16 of 2009. The act regulates the scope of activities, geographical areas of operation, and prescribes sanctions for any breach. Under this act the Minister of Community Development is the final authority for determining matters relating to NGO registration and deregistration. An organisation can only operate if its proposed activities and locations of implementation are approved (Government of Zambia, 2009).

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Knowledge Management is concerned with using the brain power of an organization in a systematic and organized manner, in order to achieve efficiencies, ensure competitive advantage, and spur innovation (Andreea M. Serban, 2002). It typically involves the systematic collection, organizing, analysing, exchanging and utilising of an organisations knowledge and skills (Tsindeliani, 2019)

Knowledge Management is an increasingly important organisational competence, given the growing expectation and demand for innovations, accelerated change and a highly competitive environment. Such an environment requires the creation, sharing and utilisation of knowledge to develop a competitive edge (Syed H. Akhter, 2003). These factors are further cemented by the understanding that organisations knowledge is generated and resides in the experience and actions of individuals (Preethi Kesavan, 2021).

Cindy Hubert proposed that organisation maturity in knowledge management can grow from awareness; localised and repeated practices; common processes and approaches; measured and adaptive and finally reach the continuously improving practice level (Cindy Hubert, 2018).

Syed classified knowledge needed for organisational success and illustrated its role in helping an organisation achieve strategic objectives. He argues that; Strategic Knowledge gives an organisation a differentiable advantage; Tactical knowledge enables the organisation to gain an implementation advantage; informal knowledge creates bonding and a shared identity and transmits tricks of the trade; ethical knowledge enables an organisation to conduct its operations within the law; while todays redundant knowledge may prove critical in future (Syed H. Akhter, 2003)

While knowledge management research is skewed towards the private sector, it can play an important role in improving performance of non-profit oriented institutions (John Walsh, w.y). This has led to the increasing propensity among non-state actors towards gathering, storing, generating and applying knowledge as a strategic resource or key asset (Nagwa Babiker Abdalla Yousif et al, 2020).

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND NGOS

Knowledge management in NGOs is different from the 'for-profit' sector for a number of reasons. The profit equivalent in the social sector is heavily influenced by values such as justice, equality, equity, Human dignity and other altruistic but contested constructs. The project approach predominates NGO interventions and can be characterised by uncertainty, intermittency and abrupt ending. Knowledge is mainly recorded in reports and evaluations of programmes and projects (John Walsh w.y). Knowledge generated by such undertakings is mainly used in arguing for continuation with existing communities or to demonstrate an organisations credentials as a vehicle of choice in delivering development interventions.

Non-Governmental Organisations have multiple reporting lines to stakeholders such as regulators, funders, board members, volunteers, and beneficiaries (John Walsh w.y). This multi reporting foci

makes Knowledge Management a complex undertaking because of the unique perspectives, interests, information needs and formats of these stakeholders.

Non-governmental Organisations have to embrace evolving implementation paradigms and technologies. Themes such as community participation, Human Rights, Gender, and high risk populations have evolving emphasis and thus create the need to change programming approaches, resource allocation, values, skills, emphasis, information needs and even human resource requirements (John Walsh w.y). These changes are initiated outside the organisations engaged at community level. They are usually conceptualised in global platforms dominated by people from different cultures and very little regard for local context implications. It is not surprising to find an organisation implementing interventions to resolve unintended consequences created by the previous project.

Non-Governmental organisations are financially dependent on donors who contract organisations to deliver highly specified development outcomes. The power imbalance between the donors and implementing organisations creates an environment where there is an emphasis and incentive for reporting positive results and has the potential to minimise authentic learning (John Walsh w.y).

Non-Governmental Organisations work, relies on professional staff and volunteers. The later fill in Human Resource gaps, especially at community level where early adopters and influential community members can be more cost effective and acceptable to targeted populations. These volunteers come from a variety of backgrounds and require varying levels

of skills and competences to contribute to NGO work. Turnover among volunteers is high (John Walsh w.y). This can be attributed to the non-contractual relationship that characterises their affiliation.

This phenomenon creates the need for NGOs to structure their knowledge management approaches to a more diffuse group of people who would not be considered as part of the organisation in other sectors.

A Non-Governmental Organisation wishing to remain relevant, create impact and attract resources must therefore possess the capacity to reconfigure itself to the changing context and its demands. It should also create, retain and facilitate sharing of the knowledge needed to demonstrate the capacity to meet and where possible exceed sector standards.

While there is a growing appreciation for Knowledge Management in International organisations as evidenced by the presence of staff with Knowledge Management related job titles, local indigenous organisations are yet to purposefully pursue knowledge management (Lilian Wambui Wanyoike, 2020). This low appreciation has been found to contribute to lack of direction and consistency in Knowledge Management Initiatives (Lemlem Mekonnen Tarekegn, 2017).

While NGOs face challenges in employing knowledge Management to achieve success, they are known to use it to capture, retain and transfer valuable knowledge, enhance collaboration, improve the quality of project deliverables, and increase efficiencies by providing quality and timely information (Cindy Hubert, 2018).

A review of Civil Society Organisations involved in Human Immune Virus (HIV), Tuberculosis and Malaria activities in Zambia found that organisations did not have knowledge management systems to collect outcomes and best practices. This was attributed to a lack of a cross-learning culture; limited skills; poor documentation; lack of a repository for CSO-led innovations, lessons learned, and good practices (Treatment Advocacy and Literacy Campaign, 2021).

This has led to a collective resolve to Support the development of a collective knowledge management systems among CSOs (Treatment Advocacy and Literacy Campaign, 2021).

NGOS AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

Organisational planning is a complex undertaking involving multiple stakeholders making joint decisions about priorities, values, and capacities (Nelson, Sandra S. (2008). Strategic planning is a process to determine what an institution intends to achieve and how (Mohammad Khodadadi1, 2015)

The pressure of today's problems makes it challenging for many organisations to develop strategies for anticipating and dealing tomorrows problems (Syed H. Akhter, 2003). This is true for Non-Governmental Organisations.

The growth in the number of non-profit organisations has created an environment in which competition for mobilising increasingly scarce resources; demand for more efficiency and effectiveness; regulatory pressure for meeting governance and reporting standards and evolving donor demands for more transparent and professional management practices is an everyday NGO reality (Rozelia Laurett1, 2018).

NGOs have responded to these exogenous factors by assimilating practices which were originally conceived for profit-making institutions. One example of a practice which was initially focused on the private for profit sector, is strategic planning (Rozelia Laurett1, 2018).

Non-Governmental organisations have used strategic planning to inform medium and long term ambitions. Some Strategic Plan practitioners have argued that although strategic Plans are a common feature among Non-governmental organisations, they are developed as a result of tradition rather than strategic intent. In this regard an organisation may undertake strategic planning because of the expectation that every organisation should have a strategic plan and the knowledge that funding opportunities may require a strategic plan as part of mandatory documentation (Peggy M. Jackson, 2007). Strategic planning appreciation is also lacking because many of the NGOs that have grown from humble beginnings to attain success, have done so without a strategic plan or with one but not as a result of the document. Their growth can in many instances be attributed to the being identified as an ideal mechanism to implement a project leading to increased resource injection (Peggy M. Jackson, 2007).

Non-Governmental Organisation Strategic Planning is also a highly political process because of the need to demonstrate stakeholder participation. This lends the process open to diverse technical and non-technical stakeholders who can lay claim to having a legitimate right to inform the organisation's ambitions and the means by which they are achieved. The results of the strategic planning are also not divorced from contention as some stakeholders can brand NGO goals as a means for society good such as strengthening accountability or as tools for achieving foreign interests (Tvedt, 2002). The requirement for the Zambia NGO registrar to approve an NGOs activities and geographical boundaries to pursue such activities is an example of how strategic planning becomes subject to state and political permission. This situation has the potential to affect agency, a key attribute for creating and implementing a strategy.

Knowledge sharing between Non-Governmental Organisations is poor. The result of this information asymmetry is NGOs working in the same country or locality but not having knowledge about each other's activities (José Braga de Vasconcelos, 2006). This creates a challenge in strategizing to create a competitive advantage. The inadequate understanding of competing interests that this blind spot entails leads to challenges in preparing for and responding to opportunities and changes (Syed H. Akhter, 2003)

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND STRATEGIC PLANNING IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS

Strategic Plans and Knowledge Management are both geared towards helping an organisation to improve its competitive edge and productivity (Mohammad Khodadadi1, 2015). While many authors including Syed H. Akhter (2003) have argued that Knowledge Management is both the source and one of the desired results of strategic planning (Syed H. Akhter, 2003),

Researchers have made the link between knowledge Management and improved organizational performance. *Nagwa (2020) found that* knowledge management practices had a positive effect on organizational performance. John Walsh, found that knowledge Management aided NGO adaptive programming (John Walsh (w,y). Lemlem Mekonnen Tarekegn (2017) found that Organizational Knowledge application had a greater impact on Organisation Performance compared to information technology and organisation culture.

All the studies reviewed focused on how KM improves performance. Performance can be considered as a set of financial and non-financial indicators that provides information on the level of organizational achievement of results and overall set objectives (Chebii et al, 2019).

It is important to note that high performance is not synonymous to strategic plan success. This is especially true for organisations with opportunistic funding opportunities that are typical of NGO financing. An organisation can deliver a project but still fail to achieve core organisational objectives. Projects are not always a means to achieve organisational strategic plans. This is especially true for local

organisations which have to support core business through management and administrative fee deductions from projects.

To this end, the extent to which knowledge management determines strategic plan success among Non-Governmental Organisations remains largely unexplored.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the unique nature of Non-Governmental Organisations and how they engage with knowledge Management and Strategic planning. A lot can be said about how Knowledge Management can improve the success, scope, nature and extent of programmes implemented by an NGO. This however does not automatically qualify the actions as evidence of fidelity towards strategic plan intentions. Organisations can become highly successful at taking advantage of emerging opportunities that were not part of their strategic plan intentions. In the same vain developing a strategic Plan does not automatically equal to seeing it through.

The lack of appreciation and purposeful application of KM among local NGOs robs them of valuable knowledge which would otherwise be a strategic resource. For this reason, a research in this area would benefit both NGOs and the constituents they serve.

Understanding the unique contribution that Knowledge Management can play in Non-Governmental Organisation strategic plan attainment has the potential to help unleash the capacity of a sector that has a lot to contribute to uplifting the human condition.

If on the other hand the evidence suggests no relationship between KM and Strategic Plan attainment among NGOs, then policy makers would avoid wasting resources on an approach which would yield limited dividends, thus saving resources and time.

KEY QUESTIONS

Can Knowledge management make a difference in the effective implementation of strategic Plans? Are NGOs which employ Knowledge Management principles and practices more likely to succeed in achieving their strategic Plan Objectives than those that don't?

VALUE

This study aims to determine the Value addition of Knowledge Management in the effective implementation of strategic plans among non-governmental organisations in the health sector in Zambia. It can assist NGOs to succeed in their work by determining the utility of Knowledge Management as both a tool and intention in implementing their strategic plans.

RESEARCH CHALLENGES

The Ministry of Community Development and Social Services is responsible for NGO registration and regulation in Zambia. Efforts to get access to the database proved futile by the time of submitting this paper. It is hoped that this information will be accessed in time to inform the research on the extent to which knowledge management can determine strategic plan Success of Non-Governmental Organisations in Zambia.

This information will also inform the research on the sample size. The distribution of the organisations and their accessibility will also inform data collection methods.

The scanty data on NGO evolution in the country creates a challenge in understanding how they have evolved to their current forms and culture. In order to overcome this limitation, the research questions will have to include an enquiry on their history.