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Strategic Entrepreneurship Alliances and Sustainable Growth of Small Businesses in Nigeria: The Nexus

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STRATEGICENTREPRENEURSHIPALLIANCESANDSUSTAINABLEGROWTHOFSMALLBUSINESSESINNIGERIATHENEXUS

Strategic Entrepreneurship Alliances and Sustainable Growth of Small Businesses in Nigeria: The Nexus

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Keywords: strategic entrepreneurship, strategic alliances, vertical integration, horizontal integration, and sustainable business growth.

I. Introduction

Many of the world's most thriving firms operate on more than one line of business and continent. They diversify their product line and revenue base, segment their business, and ally with other successful firms for growth and business sustainability (Hazarika & Alwang, 2013). If a company wants to grow, sustain and succeed in business, or enjoy a successful career in the corporate world, it is imperative to strategically collaborate with other firms. To achieve this, firm owners/ operators need to maintain a network of business connections.

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Strategic Entrepreneurship (SE) can typically be conveyed as organizationally substantial innovations within prevailing firms that involve the blend/integration of prospects and advantage-seeking actions (Lall, 2015). Nzitunga (2015) noted that SE constantly shapes entrepreneurial activities through a strategic perspective by helping firms raise their organizational performance and develop linkage advantage through increasing profit and market share value. This marriage (alliance) when strategically done between two or more companies, agrees to pursue a set of agreed objectives while remaining an independent organization.

In a contemporary business environment, SE is fast gaining ground, particularly in reputable firms and businesses across the globe, especially those companies that strive to cultivate more entrepreneurial orientation in their pursuit to maintain a competitive edge over their rivals (Oloda, 2017). Strategy and entrepreneurship are sovereign paradigms, but their amalgamation helps to produce value for esteemed customers, which is one of the reasons that firms exist, gain, and maintain economic benefit for businesses as claimed by Anoke and Okpanaki (2022). A significant component of strategic entrepreneurship is the convergence of entrepreneurial opening-seeking and strategic edge acts, which catalyzes innovation, business expansion, and wealth generation. It is obvious that in today's global, dynamic and depressed business environment orchestrated by novelty Covid 19, strategic entrepreneurship now concentrates more on capacity building through innovative creation, business improvement, corporate business venturing, stimulating business competitiveness, exploring new business potentials, building stronger firm capabilities, vertical and horizontal diversifications, harvesting from current business networking, consolidation through business synergy and managing firm actions across different established contexts in which contemporary business exist (Igbokwe & Elikwu, 2019). All these are geared towards building a sustainable business environment and enterprise.

Strategic alliance denotes the strengthening of a firm's key areas through the association of strategic third parties alliance, which fosters the company's capacity to collaborate over time as a means to lessen

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or eradicate uncertainties and entrance barricades (Kalwani & Narayandas, 2013).

Strategic entrepreneurship alliances and networks have become great tools that firms and industries use to acquire the human and material resources needed to compete effectively and efficiently in today's dynamic business world (Hakansson, 2014). In addition, Awotide, Abdoulaye, Alene, and Manyoung (2015), claimed that strategic alliances and strategic networks especially now that social media drives the economy, can help firms not only source but develop the required resources, capabilities, and competencies needed for the smooth running of an organization. Strategic networking and collaboration are pivotal for entrepreneurial firms, partially because of the role resources play in the development and sustainability of a firm to compete effectively against other rival firms (Bouka, 2015).

Sustainable improvement touches on the prominence of intergenerational justice and equity, ensured by preserving capitals that investors can fall back on in the future. In this context, sustainable business growth primarily entails the sustainability of enterprises involved in the diverse sphere of ventures and the absence of strategic entrepreneurship to ensure access and efficient utilization of capital and needed resources to develop local capacity utilization through firm operations and inter-generational equality, which is the recognition of sustainability on a long-term scale to meet of future demands (Stoddart, 2011). Emas (2015) explains that sustainable and supportable business growth is anchored on weak and strong sustainability concepts; Strong sustainability, on one side, acknowledges the special qualities of natural resources (material, human capital, and human relations) that cannot be replaced by manufactured capital, in contrast to weak sustainability, which explains that only capital matters and that manufactured capital is an adequate replacement for natural capitals (Stoddart, 2011).

Muritala, Awolaja, and Bako (2012) opined that the barriers to sustainable business growth in Nigeria, which have hindered many businesses are not just limited to access to long-term bankrolling and lack of entrepreneurial capacity; they also have the combined effects of adequate market access, low information flow, low levels of business literacy on the part of entrepreneurs and poor prior industry knowledge before investing, poor links between various systems of the sector, low knowledge of operating capacities concerning business skills, attitudes, and a lack of required infrastructure. In addition, the government of Nigeria has also focused on creating small enterprises across a variety of economic sectors due to the mono-economy (oil-dependent) character of the nation to diversify the economy (Akewushola, Tijani, & Adeleke, 2018).

In Nigeria, small business owners have suffered greatly as there has been a ceaseless, constant, and consistent absence of basic business infrastructure and vital public services to aid the production process and timely distribution of raw materials and finished goods; inadequate power supply, high cost of acquiring appropriate technology and machinery, poor and incompetent management procedures, which have resulted to the inability of business operators in this part of the word to engage the services of professionals; use of outdated instruments and methods of production is pronounced due to the owner's inability to access new technology; coupled with weak industry linkages and poor access to the global market, which are all factors working against a sustained business growth (Anoke, Osita, Eze, & Muogbo, 2021). Lastly, strategic entrepreneurship alliance practices are conspicuously missing in the system, resulting in swift and steady weakening in strategic and creative thinking processes, hindering appropriate and timely decision making by entrepreneurs, which is required for business growth; absence of capacity building by small business operators to stimulate and exploit new business opportunities innovatively and create competitive edge thereby supporting companies to function efficiently and effectively and leverage on quality by integrating digital talent with enterprises to overcome and sustain customers' demand, This study, therefore, probes the relationship between strategic entrepreneurship alliance and sustainable growth of small businesses in Nigeria. This study limited its scope to Abuja Metropolis, Nigeria. This is because Abuja is the seat of power of the most populated country in Africa (Africa giant) with many business innovative opportunities and springing up of businesses that require collaboration for optimal growth and sustainability.

The major aim of this study is to examine the linkage between strategic entrepreneurship alliances and small businesses' sustainable growth in Nigeria. Specifically to;

The major aim this study is to examine the linkage between strategic entrepreneurship alliances and small businesses sustainable growth in Nigeria. Specifically to;

1. Examine the effect of vertical coalitions on sustainable business growth
2. Establish the effect of horizontal coalitions on sustainable business growth,

From the specific objectives, the following hypotheses are posited;

Ho1: Vertical associations have no significant effect on sustainable business growth in Nigeria

Ho2: Horizontal associations have no major effect on sustainable business growth in Nigeria

II. Conceptual Clarifications

a) *Concept of Strategic Business Alliance*

An alliance in business is a connection between two persons, a group of people, or a state that comes together for their mutual benefit or to accomplish a common goal. Whether or not the agreement entered is explicit, the parties involved in the alliance are duty-bound to keep to the rules of the contractual agreement (Ponomarenko, 2016). A strategic alliance (SA) is therefore a type of partnership that supports a company's core business strategy, fosters competitive advantage, and deters rivals from entering a monopolized market. Strategic partnerships allow businesses to pursue their shared interests by combining their resources, talents, and core competencies to create, produce, or sell goods and services (Abbah, 2015). Similar to joint ventures, strategic alliances have gained popularity as tactical alternatives for businesses seeking cooperation with both domestic and foreign partners. Access to information, resources, technology, and markets is provided by alliances and networks (Akinnagbe, 2010). Morris, Kuratko,, and Schindehutte, (2011), argued that networks play even more crucial competitive functions for innovative businesses. For instance, networks provide entrepreneurial businesses legitimacy when they collaborate with another, well-known, and esteemed organization.

Additionally, Morris et al, (2011), noted that alliances can foster affairs between entrepreneurial firms' customers. Besides, the formation of new independent business ventures often is based either on the network ties of a specific entrepreneur or of an entrepreneurial group in the case of business ventures by superior and bigger firms in terms of networking, finance, and connection. Specifically, it is argued that sources of ideas for new business ventures often come from social networking. Therefore, networking is a major source of entrepreneurial prospects (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 2013). Most crucially, network connections can help entrepreneurs access the most vital resources needed to launch and run a new business. The quantity and depth of network linkages are thus positively correlated with the performance of entrepreneurial firms (Nzitunga, 2015)

b) *Vertical and Horizontal Integration*

Ngige (2007) posits integration strategies as measures taken to consolidate a firm's activities to gain more control of critical external variables directly affecting the business. Integration can be broadly subdivided into two activity types, vertical and horizontal integration.

Vertical integration according to Abbah (2015), comprises two strategies; forward and backward combination. Forward business integration implies gaining complete or partial ownership or better control over the line of distributors or retailers along the distribution chain. It also involves linking with firms producing similar products in alliance or merger and acquisition (Morris, et al., 2011). Backward integration, Mamman, Aminu, and Adah (2013), saw as activities of a firm to create its independence or action by acquiring ownership or increasing its control of suppliers of vital inputs. Horizontal business integration on the other hand is seen by Anand and Khanna (2012), as a plan for taking over or exerting more power over a company's rivals. It can also be used as a growth strategy and involves acquisitions. Thus, Teece, et al., (2013), opined that a firm desirous to consolidate its market position would adopt horizontal integration, as this tends to eliminate or minimize competition.

Yuhua (2014) described the benefits of strategic alliances to SME development in three ways, Productivity gain, which involves outsourcing products and services to enable SMEs to produce better or cheaper, enhance technological specialization, and achievement of economies of scale; therefore giving SMEs a certain degree of bargaining power. The adoption of strategic entrepreneurship gives specialized SMEs access to a reliable market; as inter-industry connections based on shared specialization typically extend beyond arms-length transactions to include, among other things, delivery schedule coordination and product standardization (Mendola, 2007), thus encouraging a long-term loyalty on the part of her esteemed customer. Strategic entrepreneurship-induced alliances according to UNCTAD (2011) promote factor-cost advantages, a state in which SME operators are privileged to have unlimited access to inexpensive production factors, mostly lower labour expenses, due to the unpretentiousness of the workplace or a non-unionized staff. Price competition is typically strong when the production process is standardized and the required technology is available, forcing businesses to consistently decrease prices and achieve significant advances in efficiency (Zamir, Sahar, & Zafar, 2014).

Additionally, the benefits of SMEs strategic alliances which are the basis for SME development allow partners to scale quickly, build innovative solutions for their customers, enter new markets and pool valuable expertise and resources. In a business environment that values speed and innovation, the strategic business alliance is a game-changer (Anoke & Okpanaki, 2022). The prerequisites for such a flexible and smooth running of the coordinated system, however, are technology innovation and multi-skilled labour which are seen as drivers of systematic business alliance.

c) *Empirical Evidence*

Igbokwe and Elikwu (2019) studied the implications of strategic entrepreneurial alliances on small business growth in Nigeria. The research adopted a cross-sectional survey design and a deductive technique. A sample size of four hundred and eighty-seven (487) registered small businesses in Delta State, Nigeria was used for the study. The gathered data were analyzed and tested using multiple regression. It was revealed that strategic alliances have a great impact on Nigeria's small firms' ability to grow sustainably and advised that small firms should join any strategic partnership (vertical or horizontal) to achieve long-term business success.

The study of Igbokwe and Elikwu (2019) though well carried out, was done in the South-south part of Nigeria dominated by multinational oil companies. It is important to validate or otherwise the result using another geopolitical zone in Nigeria (Abuja, North-Central).

Nwaokocha (2017) identified the several ways in which divestment of non-core undertakings by SMEs through strategic business alliance have aided the sustainability of SMEs in Nigeria. Field observations, reference to relevant literature, and a questionnaire was adopted to source the required information through the survey of 613 SMEs. The findings revealed a strong and affirmative association between cost decrease and access to capital. It equally recorded a strong and adverse association with risk reduction. The study recommended that limitations to SMEs sustainability can be enhanced by persistent divestment of 'non-core' actions by the SMEs operators.

Nwaokocha (2017) did not state the population of the SMEs in the study area from where the sample of 613 SMEs was drawn.

Gul (2011) examined vertical, horizontal, dissimilar integration, and un-diversification strategies and their effect on firm performance. 147 respondents drawn from Danish manufacturing firms were used as a sample. The study covered the years 2009 to 2005. The result revealed that horizontal (allied) integrated firms are overtaking the corporate performance of unrelated diversified firms in terms of profit-making.

The study of Gul (2011) did not yield any recommendation for future reference.

Antonio, Felipe, Roberto, and Mauro (2016) studied a model where entrepreneurial orientation is allied with strategic alliance when influenced by its top management and entrepreneurial orientation functioning as a multidimensional construct. Data collected from 101 firms in Brazil were analyzed using structural equation modeling. It was discovered from the result that enhancing companies' entrepreneurial orientation like risk-taking, is vital in promoting a firm's strategic alliance. It was recommended that entrepreneurial orientation should be used to intensify strategic alliance and firm performance, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

d) *Theoretical Standpoint*

The reasons for the establishment of strategic alliances have been described from numerous theoretical viewpoints. However, the resource-dependence principle is used to drive home this study. The Resource-Dependence Theory (RDT) was publicized by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) when they submitted that having control over risky resources by one firm will make other companies dependent on it. According to the notion, businesses are varied in terms of their resources and capabilities even though they are engaged in the same industry. In general, the idea contends that businesses often lack all of the resources required of them to continue to have a competitive edge over and above their rivals. Therefore they need to ally and collaborate with other firms gaining from their core competencies, human and material resources for survival. As a result, a strategic tie is typically a workable inter-organizational arrangement that can reduce uncertainty, and risk and improve access to resources and business visibility that will boost organizational performance. RDT, which emphasizes a firm's capacity to develop, build, sustain, and maintain a competitive lead by obtaining valuable resources and market positions, has become an important explanation for the persistent firm level of performance (Tebrani, 2003). A strategy that makes use of a company's distinctive resources and abilities results in a competitive advantage. The use of RDT will highlight the things that the parent resource corporations prefer to control and the methods by which they do so to lead the market.

III. Methodology

The study employed a survey research design to investigate the relationship between strategic entrepreneurship alliances and the sustainable growth of small businesses in Nigeria. The influence of one variable on the other was explained using the statistical tool of multiple regression.

Three thousand and fifteen (3,015) small-scale enterprises in Abuja Metropolis made up the study's population which was derived from Enterprise Agency of Nigeria's Facts Book (2021). A structured questionnaire was used as the major research tool to obtain data from the sampled respondents. Using the Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins (2001) model of minimum sample size determination, 520 copies of the questionnaire were administered while 488 were dully filled, returned, and used.

The initial questionnaire was subjected to content validity testing to ascertain the study instrument's validity. Cronbach's alpha was used to indicate the reliability or internal consistency of the items inside the study's structure, and it provides an average value of 0.86 for the questionnaire.

IV. Data Analysis Techniques

The multiple regression techniques were used to assess the relationship between the variables. Strategic Entrepreneurship Alliance is measured by vertical integration (Forward Integration (FOI) & Backward Integration (BAI)) and Horizontal Integration (HOI), while sustainable growth of small businesses (SGSBS) is the dependent variable.

This study adopted the model ofIgbokwe, and Elikwu (2019) with slight modifications as stated below.

STENAL = *f (FOI + BAI + HOI)*.. *(1)*

Therefore, the specific model for the independent variable adopted is:

STENAL = f (FOI, + BAI + HOI ;) .... *(2)*

Where: STENAL = Strategic Entrepreneurship Alliances (SEA)

FOI	=	Forward Integration
BAI	=	Backward Integration
HOI	=	Horizontal Integration
STENAL	=	Strategic Entrepreneurship Alliances

SGSBS = f(FOI, + BAI2 + HOI:)…………………………………………………....*(3)*

The econometric equation for the model is specified as

SGSBS = Bo + B,FOI + BABAI2 + B3HOI; + u/..*(4)*

V. Results and Discussions

Test of Hypotheses

The two formulated hypotheses in this study were approached with the aid of t-statistics contained in the regression results at 5% significance.

Regression Results on the impact of strategic entrepreneurship alliances (FOI, BAI, HOI) on small business's growth sustainability

Model 1: SGSBS = Bo + B, FOI1 + B2BAI2 + B3HOI: + u.. *(5)*

Included observations: 488

Table 4.1: Regression Result

Variables	Coefficient	Std Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
FOI	0.162376	0.043547	3.728819	0.0002
BAI	0.025632	0.051432	2.498359	0.6186
HOI	0.101348	0.036974	2.741118	0.0065
C	0.150939	0.366459	1.411886	0.6807
R-squared	0.618419	Mean dependent var		8.098327
Adjusted R-Squared	0.613549	S.D dependent var		3.121032
S.E of regression	1.940199	Akaike info criterion		4.177994
Sum Squared resid	1773.019	Schwarz criterion		4.239056
Log Likelihood	-991.5405	Hannan – Quinn Criter		4.201999
F-statistic	127.2176	Durbin-Water Stat		1.539894
Prob (F-Statistics)	0.001886			

Source: Authors' Computation, 2022 (E-views 12.0)

SGSBS = 0.15 + 0.16 FOI + 0.03 BAI + 0.10 HOI ………………………………. *(6)*

SEE = 0.36: 0.04, 0.05, 0.03

t= 1.42: 3.73, 2.49, 2.80*

F= 127.2: Prob (F-statistic) = 0.0019*

R2 = 0.6184: Adj. R2 0.6141

From table 4.1, it is seen that the calculated t-value for FOI (3.73), BAI (2.50), and HOI (2.74), while the tabulated value is1.96, fewer than 95% confidence levels. Both null hypotheses (HO1 & HO2) were rejected since the estimated t-values for FOI (3.73 > 1.96), BAI (2.49 > 1.96), and HOI (2.74 > 1.96) are all higher than the tabulated value (1.96) conclude that vertical and horizontal alliances (FOI, BOI & HOI) have major influences on the growth and sustainability of the small business. This suggests that entrepreneurship *strategic alliances have a major influence on small businesses' growth sustainability in Nigeria.* This finding is in tandem with the findings of Igbokwe and Elikwe (2019) who found that strategic alliances have significantly impacted Nigeria's small firms' ability to grow sustainably. It equally contradicts the study of Nwaokocha (2017) who recorded a strong and adverse association between strategic alliance and he growth of the small business through risk reduction.

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

The relationship that exists between strategic entrepreneurship alliances and the growing sustainability of small businesses in Nigeria was investigated. It was hypothesized that vertical and horizontal integrations have no significant effect on sustainable business growth in Nigeria. The result from the analysis revealed that both vertical and horizontal integrations are strongly related to the growth and sustainability of small businesses in Abuja Metropolis and by extension Nigeria. This portrayed the fact that a strategic alliance enables a company to reach a broader audience, and search for new, creative ways to increase its clientele.

It is therefore recommended that small businesses desirous of growth and expansion through improved competitive positioning and gain entry to new markets, supplement critical skills, and share the risk and cost of major developmental projects should strategically ally and collaborate with other firms to ensure a continuous flow of inputs for uninterrupted operations resulting to effective, efficient and reliable product distribution chain that guarantees firm's growth and sustainability.

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Ethical Consideration

It is noteworthy that all ethical issues were stickily adhered to during this research work. Oral permission was sought and granted before the questionnaire was administered to the sampled respondents. Covid-19 protocols were viscously observed before, during, and after the research period. Participants were assured of utmost confidentiality of data provided as the information supplied is for research purposes only.

Competing Interest

The authors of this study unanimously declared that no competing interest exists herein and the manuscript is not been considered for publication in any other journal house except Global Journal of Management and Business.

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