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Article

Mitigating Corruption For Small Businesses In South Sudan: a Delphi Study

Joseph Z. Yeljak1*, Julie M. Ballaro[2], Nancy J. Arduengo[3]

1 University of Phoenix Phoenix, Arizona https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3856-8621, Email: jyauditcon@gmail.com
2 University of the Cumberlands, Williamsburg, Kentucky, USA https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9718-8817 Email: cs.jmballaro@gmail.com
3 University of Phoenix Phoenix, Arizona, USA https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5372-602X, Email: janeardu@email.phoenix.edu

Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative Delphi study was to gather a panel of small business entrepreneur experts to discuss the types of corruption they experienced, and to share the best strategies they developed and implemented for mitigating these challenges in their businesses located in South Sudan. Twelve small business owners volunteered to share their experiences on how their businesses were affected by corruption, and the strategies they implemented to transform their businesses. The entrepreneurs' expert advice underwent refinement through three rounds of questions before reaching consensus. Four themes emerged in support of the research questions. The findings revealed that successful entrepreneurs need to develop a solid business plan to include core ethical values, promoting good governance, with the mission to improve performance and increase revenue with honesty, fairness, respect, and accountability.

Keywords: Entrepreneurs, corruption, mitigate corruption, business plans, Delphi research

1. Introduction

According to the UN Convention against Corruption, as quoted by Dada (2014):

Corruption is an insidious plague that has a wide range of corrosive effects on societies. It undermines democracy and the rule of law, leads to violations of human rights, distorts markets, erodes the quality of life, and allows organized crime, terrorism, and other threats to human security to flourish (p. 180).

Corruption effects are far beyond the parties involved in the transaction to wider community where states are deprived from revenues which could be used for development and provision of services (Bullock & Jenkins, 2022).

The purpose of this qualitative Delphi study was to gather a panel of entrepreneur experts to discuss the types of corruption they experienced, and to share their strategies they developed and implemented for mitigating these challenges in their small businesses located in South Sudan. The panel of experts were comprised of small business entrepreneurs who have the knowledge and experience dealing with challenges such as corruption. The goal of the study was to gather entrepreneur experts and ask several rounds of questions to identify challenges and best strategies for mitigating corruption they experienced in their small businesses.

Statement of Problem

The entrepreneurs face a number of challenges running their businesses in South Sudan because of hurdles they face in the operation of the business combating corruption (Index, 2022). Although corruption is a worldwide phenomenon, the impact is greater on small businesses in South Sudan, thus making operating businesses in this environment unethical although profitable. To survive in a corrupt business environment, entrepreneurs must resort to unethical practices to compensate for revenue loss because of corruption. Such practices are selling expired goods, low quality goods and services, offering bribes to regulators to circumvent rules and regulations.

Research Question

The objective of the study was to ask questions to allow the entrepreneur experts to share their experiences regarding the corruption challenges they face in the process of providing goods and services to the public. The research question is: What are the solutions for mitigating corruption within small businesses located in South Sudan? By answering the three rounds of questions, the entrepreneurs shared how activities led to corrupt practices in the small business sector and how the corrupt practices affected different aspects of their business in South Sudan. The consensus among the experts revealed that entrepreneurs need to develop a solid business plan to promote good governance.

Significance of Study

The significance of this study stems from the fact that the results of this study may assist entrepreneurs mitigating corruption that is affecting their businesses. The results of this study are expected to lead to the following: (a) the knowledge gained from the results of this study may inform the leaders in both public and private sectors of the challenges faced by entrepreneurs while operating their businesses, (b) the knowledge may help the leaders shape and coin policies that mitigate corruption, (c) the leaders may change their mindset of hoarding public funds for private interest, but instead use these funds for public and national interest, and for building a betterment for future generations, (d) assist leaders and entrepreneurs to combat corruption, to establish ethical guidelines for operating businesses to promote good governance and improve leadership practices in African countries crippled by corruption.

2. Literature Review

The review of the literature included synthesizing prior research on small business' entrepreneurs, identifying corruption, and developing strategies to reduce corruption and promote ethical governance. The literature review includes historical and current prior studies supporting the purpose of the study. History of corruption that affects entrepreneurs and their businesses in South Sudan reverts to the beginning of the country itself and the region it exists in.

Weber (1964) is considered to be the first to develop the typology of corruption, understanding the corruption as a state sponsored bureaucracy operating in a democratic political system that conceived to be applying rules and acting in the public interest. Alemann's (1995) conceptualization of corruption consisted of seven-steps in a manner illustrated in Figure 1: The corrupter (the person offering bribe, i.e. buyer) seeks a rare good or service (a license, an order, or position) which is the product; the seller (the person to be bribed); the corruptee – the person who can assign and later receive an additional incentive (money or payment in kind) for the assignment above the normal price and the corruptee (Vargas- Hernández, 2009).

Corruption is considered inevitable and an integral part of informal political system ranging between gray agreed upon anomalies to a complete unacceptable illegal actions and organized crime (Damijan, 2023). Entrepreneurs are challenged by pervasiveness of corruption that affects their businesses in the form of bribery, clientelism, embezzlement and theft, collusion, fraud, gift-giving, and favouritism (Mukhtarova, 2023). These corrupt practices cause businesses to lose profits and therefore hinders their growth and the growth of the entire economy (Syafriadi et al., 2023).

Entrepreneurs discovered that shifts occur in their belief structure causing individuals to engage in managerial behavior in preference to entrepreneurial behavior at critical stages in the business life-cycle (Kirkley, 2016). The study further identifies cultural differences in individualistic vs collectivist cultures and the degrees to which entrepreneurial behavior is accepted within urban vs rural environments (Kirkley, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework supporting this study consisted of five theories which are the applied principal agent theory, public choice theory, social labelling theory, clashing moral values theory, and social entrepreneurship theory. Entrepreneurs who fall prey to the applied principal-agent theory are those in transport businesses who are forced by roadside tax collectors to pay bribes and obtain no receipts, or they risk their cargo being held for hours or days (Al-Faryan, 2024). The public choice theory applies to entrepreneurs who are obliged to pay bribes to municipality officials to avoid their businesses being closed illegally (Makhanya, 2024). The social labelling theory is concerned with labelling society into a group whose actions are not punished by law and others must abide by law. The social labelling theory also applies to labelling the country as more corrupt or less corrupt (Gouvêa Maciel et al., 2022). The clashing moral values theory applies to the various types of corrupt practices experienced by entrepreneurs operating businesses in South Sudan (Adoko, 2023). The five theories are excellent examples supporting the different levels of corruption that entrepreneurs in South Sudan experience.

The Social Entrepreneurship Theory

The social entrepreneurship theory provides a crucial role in driving sustainable development to foster social responsibility for entrepreneurs facing challenges with corruption (Nteere, 2021). The social entrepreneurship theory examines how individuals or organizations can develop and implement innovative solutions to social, cultural, or environmental issues by applying entrepreneurial principles, with a primary focus on creating positive social impact rather than solely maximizing profit, often through the creation of sustainable social enterprises (Alqaoud & Alhaimer, 2024). Entrepreneurs can integrate corporate social responsibility into their strategic company's business plan that generate social value alongside financial viability to enhance human lifestyle and environmental health (Alqaoud & Alhaimer, 2024; Nteere, 2021).

Method

Method and Design

A qualitative method with a Delphi design was chosen to be the most appropriate for answering the research question. A Delphi technique is a qualitative research design developed by Rand Corporation to forecast viable solutions to problems where data are incomplete, and where research is limited (Dalkey, 1969). Thus, a Delphi design was more appropriate for this study since the study seeks to investigate experts' experiences and solutions to the corruption targeting small businesses in South Sudan.

Population and Sample

The population of this study are small business entrepreneurs operating in South Sudan. South Sudan has a small business community that is escalating (BTI, 2024). The sample from the population was selected purposefully from the small business owners' operation in South Sudan. The sample size is 12 small business owners. The criteria for selection is that the business owner is 18 years or older and operates a small business in South Sudan for five years or more. According to Delbecq et al (1975), a sample from the population of 10-15 participants is sufficient for a Delphi study within a homogenous group.

Instruments, Validity, and Reliability

A field-tested instrument (questionnaire) was used for data collection. The field test for this study was conducted by three subject matter experts for the purpose of identifying and recommending removing inconsistencies and errors in the questionnaire. The results of the field test enhanced the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings. According to Powell (2018), the trustworthiness in a Delphi study is anchored on identification and selection of an appropriate panel of experts, and to employ control measures such as confidentiality and anonymity that are built into the design to encourage honesty and truthful feedback from the panel of experts.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study used a Delphi design to collect qualitative data from the panel of experts. Three rounds of data collection were employed. After obtaining IRB approval, prospective participants were contacted. When the volunteers accepted to participate, they were provided with an informed consent form. Once the signed forms were received, an open-ended questionnaire was provided to each entrepreneur. Data collected were analysed following the sequence of three rounds of a Delphi design.

The researchers analysed the data obtained from the participants in round one by using a six-steps approach to support thematic analysis. Responses collected from the first round of questions were analysed, edited, and returned to the entrepreneurs with the statement that the responses were the result from the first round of questions for the entire group. The participants in round two had the opportunity to verify Round 1 responses and to reflect on their opinion and were provided an opportunity to adjust or modify their responses after learning the answers of the other expert panellists. At round three, the participants were asked to rank their opinions from most important to least important for the entire group's responses collected from round two. Participants reached consensus at round three with a 71% agreement rate, which is a reasonable consensus (Hasson et al., 2000).

As common practice in a Delphi study, responses from round one, two and three are ranked, while continuous verification is important in a Delphi process for improving the reliability of the results (Skulmoski et al., 2007). This study used a QSR's NVivo14 Software to analyse data and identify emerging themes. The NVivo 14 Software was used to organize, analyse, and find insights into unstructured or qualitative data such as interviews, survey responses, articles and the like. Interpreting, analysing, and codifying the results from the three rounds of the Delphi process using the Nvivo14 Software generated themes in line with the study's conceptual framework. The Software assisted in revealing the connection between the themes in ways that were not possible manually, asking questions in a more efficient way, and rigorously supported findings with evidence (QSR International, 2021). Using Nvivo14 software enhanced the validity of the research findings (Johnson et al., 2020).

Findings and Interpretations

The purpose of the study was to gather a panel of experts to establish consensus on the nature of the types of corruption, main causes, the impact corruption has on small businesses in South Sudan, and the best strategies that could be used to mitigate the effects of corruption on the business. A consensus was achieved at the third round of questions. The findings revealed (1) abuse of power and ineffective laws, (2) deterioration of moral values, focus on personal gain, and weak internal controls among small businesses, (3) loss of revenue and deteriorating performance, and (4) strategies for mitigating effects of corruption on small businesses.

Abuse of Power and Ineffective Laws

Abuse of power is a form of corruption where a public agency abuses its mandate for personal gain without influence being external or extortion (Ertz et al., 2020). In such situations, corrupt governments rely on facilitating state agents expansively and who absolutely abuse and detriment citizens' rights for their personal benefit, complicit with that of their partners and external networks (Berkemeyer et al., 2018). An example of abuse of power by government agents (City Council officials) is their collecting money from traders, sometimes without issuing receipts to the payers, and these fees are collected for services they never render to those who pay, such as garbage collection for providing security for shops at night. Under conditions of abuse of discretion by established administration, the government functions at all levels to the disadvantage of the entire community (Warf, 2019a).

The abuse of power, which included ineffective application of laws, bribes, and kickbacks, became a daily common practice. Business owners resort to such practices to avoid paying higher taxes and levies and avoid closure. The study' panellists acknowledged paying bribes to government officials to allow a smooth operation of their business and avoid closure. Tran et al. (2022) asserted that these activities may allow businesses to circumvent stiff regulations and gain social networks that led to increases in business growth and financial gains.

Deterioration of Moral Values, Focus on Personal Gain, Weak Internal Control

The values that bind people to their families determines how they relate to organizations that they are employed in. If the family bond is stronger than the bond that obligates the entrepreneur to their employer, then the entrepreneur tends to use resources of the organization to benefit their family, clan, tribe or personal interest group (Fukuyama, 2004). White corruption is also known as white collar crimes, which include public corruption committed by individuals representing corporations or government (FinCen, 2017). White corruption is very common in context of family-based businesses (Meredith, 2006), although it is different in South Sudan because it is practiced in public institutions where nepotism is very common in staffing government positions and using public assets for personal or tribal gains (Nyaba, 2018).

Entrepreneurs in South Sudan are affected by corruption driven by personal gain where employees steal from the business exploiting weak controls, on the other hand when government officials collect levies, these funds end up int their pockets instead of depositing the funds into state coffers (Mayai, 2022). Participants also mentioned that roadside taxes collected from road users are never reported to government because sometimes those who collect taxes are never paid for numerous months resulting in despair and disgruntle; for this reason, many collect bribes or compromise their duty in exchange for personal gain (Gutmann & Lucas, 2018).

Loss of Revenue and Deteriorating Performance

Business owners decry loss of revenue because of different taxes and levies by the government agencies, such as South Sudan Revenue Authority, Municipality tax departments, and other regulators. Corruption disturbs entrepreneurs' businesses, and the public by impoverishing societies, depriving the poor of accessing public goods, and interferes with efficient resource allocation (Sampford, 2009; Warf, 2019a). Small business owners in South Sudan experience losses to corrupt officials; with a great portion of their business profits lost. These profits could have been used to grow the businesses. Money spent by business owners on these corruption related activities are funds that they could use for development of their business in terms of growth and expansion (Okpara & Wynn, 2007).

Effective internal control is an important mechanism for reducing corruption within small businesses to avoid commodities and assets loss. Thus, there is need for small business to implement appropriate internal controls to assist in reducing corruption (Wang et al., 2022). Some common practices revealed by the study is that some business owners embark on illegal activities that may be harmful to consumers such as repackaging expired goods and selling them to public, in addition to counterfeit activities and selling poor quality and hazardous goods to the public and contributing to the need for proper documentation and frequent audits (Castro et al., 2020).

Entrepreneurs as well as government must embrace internal controls to curb involvement of their employees in embezzlement, theft, and conversion of public resources, including money, into private resources (Werner, 2018). Because of the absence or weak internal controls over private and public, employees in public sectors use government money to buy furniture and other goods for their homes or use government vehicles for private trading purposes and use the money for personal benefit (Ilarious, 2021). Study findings indicate that public officials are main perpetrators of corruption and corruption among businesses is only a response to corrupt practices perpetrated by government officials. Thus. there is a need for government controls and reforms on corruption mitigation measures to help curb corruption in South Sudan for the prosperity of small businesses (Mosindi, 2020).

Strategies for Mitigating Effects of Corruption on Small Businesses

Mitigating corruption that affects businesses in South Sudan will enable businesses to thrive when government reinforce controls such as anti-corruption laws that will strengthen law enforcement agencies and bring skewed law enforcement institutions under control (Index, 2022). Sometimes entrepreneurs engage in corruption to prevent closure of their businesses and harassment from rogue government officials. Participants iterated the need for entrepreneurs to avoid engaging in corrupt practices and adhere to established code of conduct to mitigate corruption (Warf, 2019b).

One of the elements that deter efforts for eliminating corruption mentioned by the participants is deprivation of public employees' salaries for lengthy periods. Lack of good pay translates into destitution that force many employees including armed forces to collect bribes and compromise their duties. They need money to feed themselves and their families, hence resort to using their administrative powers to extort funds from businesses. Consequently, without appropriate measures such as adequate pay for officers, the fight against corruption may not be won easily by small businesses (Gutmann & Lucas, 2018).

Corruption could also be mitigated through collaboration among small businesses. Businesses could leverage business unions and associations such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry to help publicly discuss or address the issues faced by the business community in South Sudan and create a unified voice to advocate for the interest of businesses and influence policy changes and regulatory improvements that are geared toward enforcing anti-corruption laws (Fazekas, 2022).

Limitations

The study was limited to 12 expert panellists. The study did not include additional experienced small business owners because they were inaccessible or unwilling to participate. As a result, the majority of entrepreneurs did not participate in the study. Limited expertise and experience among the participants may limit the generalizability and transferability of the current research findings.

Although many people in the country speak of corruption as a menace that the citizens of South Sudan need to fight and eradicate, stepping up to fight corruption is a challenge because of its elusive nature and its magnitude; causing participants to be less vocal about the magnitude of corruption in South Sudan, contributing to the limitation of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Researchers may consider focusing replicating this study by including both small and large business managers, and employees, to increase the generalizability of findings to the business community across South Sudan. Conducting research on corruption within large business environments such as manufacturing can provide insight into the level of corruption across the country, contributing to the generalizability of findings (Landeta & Lertxundi, 2024).

Another recommendation is to conduct a quantitative study for the purpose of increasing the sample and reaching all sectors of business in the country; small, medium, and large businesses. The researcher therefore will be able to draw objective conclusions about larger groups and understand the behaviour by quantifying measuring phenomena. Quantitative research with descriptive research design is recommended because it provides an in-depth and accurate description of phenomenon [corruption] (Taherdoost, 2022), as it exists rampantly in South Sudan (De Waal, 2014). With quantitative research using surveys, the participants will remain anonymous and may contribute to an increase in participation.

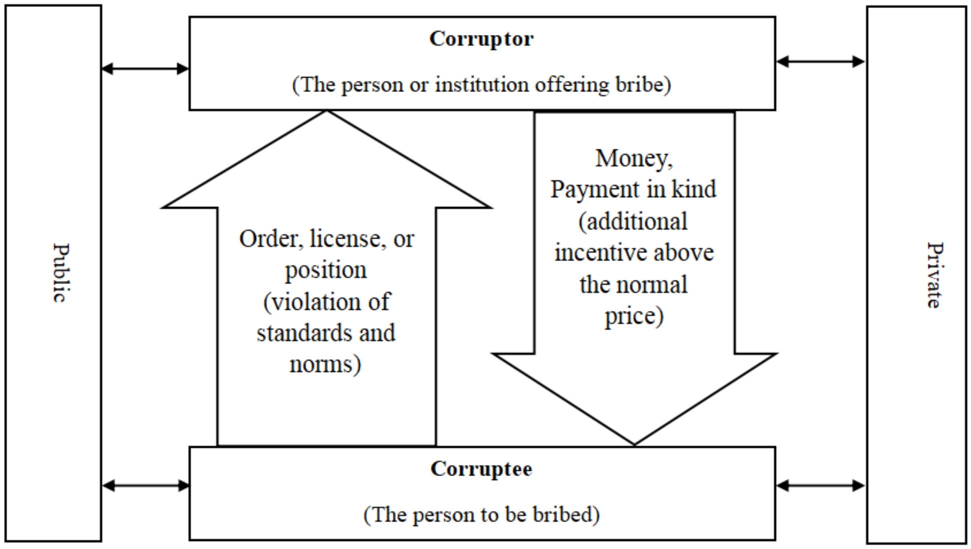
3. Conclusions

The study's findings addressed the problem, answered research questions and filled the gap in literature by documenting the nature, types, and reasons for corruption and suggested strategies for mitigating corruption that continues to adversely affect small businesses in South Sudan. Collaboration among businesses and the national government may assist in curbing corruption in businesses and in the country as a whole. Among the strategies recommended for fighting corruption is the development and implementation of training and awareness programs focusing on the causes and negative effects of corruption on business growth and society. The awareness and education training program may help reduce the motive for indulging in corrupt activities among business employees and government officials. For an anti-corruption institution to succeed, the national government must take drastic holistic measures including ensuring businesses comply with available regulations to curb corruption. The divergence in findings between the current study and previous research indicates the need for small businesses to include in their business plans strategies for implementing training and awareness policies to help mitigate the effects of corruption and promote core ethical values, good governance, with the mission to improve performance and increase revenue with honesty, fairness, respect, and accountability.

Appendix

Figure 1

Corruption Model



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