

**SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS STRATEGIES TO OPTIMIZE SYSTEMIC COMPETITIVE
SUCCESS IN THE PARANAENSE RAIN FOREST REGION ARGENTINA**

Keller, Patricia

Universidad Nacional de Misiones

Facultad de Ciencias Económicas

Carrera de Posgrado Doctorado en Administración

Campus Universitario Ruta 12 Km. 7 ½ Miguel Lanús, Misiones, Argentina

E-Mail: VRS.IVB@arnet.com.ar

ABSTRACT

The objective of the present article is to present a systemic analysis scheme to contribute to the comprehension of the functioning of the different competitive levels to which the organizations are submitted: macro (level affected by the national policies), meso (external environment) and micro (organization). It is in this wide and complex mainframe, where the organizations have to build their own competitive advantages, and formulate the most appropriate strategic frame for this purpose, baring in mind the implications of having a regional current high cultural heterogeneity. To achieve the effective management and ensure the favorable present and future evolution of the enterprise, its strategic frame has to include the three dimensions of sustainable development. Coherent with the systemic perspective, the functioning of an approach, which considers the relations among enterprise and its stakeholders, is illustrated, and the three needed elements to achieve the effective management in the present context: openness to the environment, consideration of complexity

and strategic frame; and the underlying internal logic that guides enterprise's decisions and actions. Finally, from the system (or enterprise) towards its external environment, competitive advantages can be build, at the meso level, through cooperation, alliances and intermediate organizations.

KEY WORDS Human Resources, Paranaense Rainforest, Systemic Competitiveness, Strategy, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

At the present organization's race to improve competitiveness and maximize the generation of financial benefits, it is seldom recognized in advance:

- at the external level, the complexity of the organizational's environment and,
- at the internal level, the implicit risks that cause the erosion of the actual competitive advantages and the development of those potential ones, due to the implementation of the chosen competitive strategy.

At the micro level (organization), these strategies are, for industrial sectors, basically three:

1. Global Cost Leadership, in which efficiency and minimization of costs are the keys to success.

2. Differentiation, with which the whole industry perceives the product and / or service (post selling) as unique, which means that there are many different modalities to implement this strategy.

3. Focusing or Concentration, which is oriented to satisfy a specific segment of products or a geographical market, that perceive the singularity of the offered product and / or

service offered. Analogically to the differentiation strategy, this one allows the adoption of multiple modalities, [Porter, 2000].

It can be observed in the Paranaense Rainforest region in Argentina, that the most generalized approach is the global cost leadership, being the concentration strategy used by relatively few organizations within the region [Keller, 2002]. The immediate consequences of the predominant application of the cost leader approach is translated in an erosion of the capacity of generating other competitive advantages, due to the fact, that the cost leadership focus excessively emphasizes in the reduction of labor and raw material costs, and this rebounds in a negative way in the whole influence area. In those cases where the concentration approach is applied, generally the main problem dwells on the fact that little consideration is given to the determinant characteristics of sustainability of competitive advantages. Indeed, these characteristics include the question of value, scarcity, difficult imitation and the support given by the distinctively way of the enterprises' organization. [Barney, 1995].

The characteristics of the immediate context of the enterprise influences its integration to the society and determinates multiple factors that affect competitiveness particularly at the meso level [Esser, K., 1992]. In regions like the Paranaense Rainforest region in Argentina, where social fragmentation is very high, the sources of competitiveness conspire very often, at this level against efficiency – and even effectiveness – of the implementation of business strategies, mostly from the point of view of the administration of the soft skills, bond to the persons, their capacities, skills and abilities. Even if there exist well disseminated specific skills referred to timber, Mate tea (*Ilex paraguayensis*) industrialization, and the production and industrialization of other perennial crops (*Citrus* spp. ,*Tea sinensis*), some annual and biannual (for example, tobacco and *Manihoc esculenta* respectively), the learning capacity and possibilities of mutual understanding, coordination are highly constrained by situations caused by the cultural differences between entrepreneurs, mostly on behalf of the laborer and those who work at intermediate level.

Finally, at the macro or country level is the macroeconomic context, but also legal and operating norms and habits at the broader level. The changes at the level of economical

policies, fiscal measures, of the retention percentage put on exports and other measures, affect strongly the organizations which, even located at the regional level pretend to compete at national or export level [Esser, K. *et al*, 1994].

When the external has such an incidence, the enterprises very often choose – consciously or not - a predominantly external strategic focus, based on market structures and conditions. The consequences of this focus is that in response to the context instability the major part of the decisions are made for the very short term, with a clear prioritization of cost minimizing. When these approaches persist in the long term it is not possible to develop sustainable competitive advantages, since the latter require a more solid and long term oriented strategic basis, based on the development of internal organizational values.[Mueller – Stewens G. 2004; Promberger K. *et al*, 2003; Hinterhuber H, 2003]. Further there has been found a close positive relationship among development of internal organizational values and the sustainable growth of profit in longer terms [Friedrich, 2003; Pfeffer, J, 1998; Asin & Lucier, 1996; Barney, 1999].

Inevitably there arises then the question of which, is the most adequate strategic basis to build sustainable competitive advantages in the present organizational context in Argentina, and particularly, in the Paranaense Rainforest region – where perhaps the national highest cultural heterogeneity is concentrated?

In the present article, the organizational strategy dimensions to be included in a systemic approach within the region will be considered. Further, through this focus, the necessary elements to the competitiveness determinant processes will be analyzed at the three levels (micro, meso and macro). By doing this, it will become clearer what type/s of generic competitive strategy/ies is/are more appropriated to identify the most effective competitive advantages sources for the short, medium and long term.

IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING THE DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Under sustainable development is understood that, one which allows the satisfaction of the needs of present generations, without compromising the needs of the future ones. Because of this, it is often also understood as an ethical contract between humanity and nature, [Calderón Kúsulas P., 1995]. Nevertheless, it could be affirmed that actually, it is an ethical contract with humanity itself. Indeed, without ethics, there is no possible sustainable development [Kliksberg, B., 2004], since the results' accumulation coming from actions based on purely pragmatic criteria – ignoring any respect to human dignity at all [John XXIII, 1963; John Paul II, 1979; John Paul II, 1981] conspire against general welfare and even against whom executes them - that this becomes reality is only a matter of time. Further there is a very close and positive relationship among ethics, education level, citizenship participation, life quality, governability and sustainable development [Kliksberg, B., 2004]. At the organizational level, numerous papers in favor of business ethics have been written, since the tremendous negative impacts generated by ignoring basic ethical values have been observed, not only on the same responsible enterprises, but on the context as well, mainly at the medium and long term [Sternberg, E.; 1995; Pfeffer J.; 1998; Fromm, E., 1994; Goebel, E., 1992].

The classic concept includes three basic dimensions: the economic growth, the environmental sustainability (to ensure an fit environment to daily life to society and the provision of raw materials to industry, among others, for future generations) and the social dimension (through the respect of equity and participation of society).

Since the sustainability concept was born due to the will to stop and revert the sensible damages caused by very short term sighted natural resources exploitation, in which the maximization of financial benefits for the very short term alone gain overhand on future supply of raw materials, it is especially adequate for an analysis carried out in Argentina, characterized by its richness of natural resources. As it is well known, the promotion of the national industry,

among other activities, have been financed by the taxes put on agricultural and cattle exploitation, and at the present time by taxes on the exportation of these very same products.

At the organizational level, even in more developed countries, it has been verified that the strategic approaches which priorities financial benefits alone, damage not only environmental sustainability, but the development of the sustainable competitive advantages as well. Additionally it can be said that when this restricted focus to maximizing short term financial benefits alone (which sometimes comes from the fact that the year usually is the accounting balance analysis period, after which in many cases adjustment decisions are taken) is adopted by an increasing number of organizations within a region, an unstable environment is created which damages also the development of those well established enterprises [Mueller - Stewens G., 2004]. Indeed, this restricted focus has very negative multiplier effects at a broader scale, even beyond national boundaries.

As a consequence, an organizational strategy will be sustainable if it allows finding positive effects on development through the equilibrium among the three basic pillars: financial – economical, the socio political and the environmental.

LEVELS OF SYSTEMIC COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS

The systemic theory [Luhmann, N., 1984] identifies the coming up of a system when operations – different to those which happen outside of same, in the external organizational context - are defined and detected. Therefore a system can not be build without relation to its environment – and vice versa, no environment exists without a system.

In spite the fact that organizations are included within the social systems, these administrate non social resources as well, which utilizations - in the aim of respecting human dignity – should be subordinated to the basic and inalienable rights of human beings. The particular characteristics and own dynamics of the used resources and their interaction with the social system should be taken into account in every particular strategic organizational analysis.

The systemic approach has the advantage that it allows an integral comprehension of the competitiveness factors since it contemplates the complexity and context dynamics characteristics through the “system/context” and “elements/relations” analysis. This way the diverse analysis levels that play a dynamic role at multiple orders (such as the cultural, social, philosophical, economical, technical, productive and environmental) which are linked with the pertinent dimensions to be considered for sustainability. The levels of the relation system/context will be analyzed below, and these can be grouped basically into two: the immediate, at the meson level and the macro level, on which the policies and broader decisions at the national level are implemented.

Macro Competitiveness Level: The National Context

At this level arise the relation system/context and national context/global context. In Argentina this relation has been specially important since the Convertibility Plan of 1991- excellent example to illustrate the effectiveness of the systemic approach analysis of the competitive strategies - since it fixed the national currency, being a foreign currency the official reference parameter, and the access to credits has been considerably limited [Esser et al, 1996]. Even if the main objective has been to stop the inflationary tendencies that obstacles inversions in the private sector, and through this, their competitiveness, the effects of this policy went further, generating a deep alteration in the relative costs and the relation of cost/product, which consequences still persist long after abandoning the Plan. [Esser et al., 1991].

Since the needed fiscal and budget reform at national level has not been undertaken, the root problems remain unsolved up to the present time, putting in danger the very same fundamentals for national economy. [Haggard, S. & Kaufmann, R., 1992].

Furthermore it has to be said that the social groups have been affected differentially by the structural change measures, and this has rebounded generating the hard present political conflicts, that affect indirectly the administration of human resources at the organizational level.

This example shows on one hand, that particularly those enterprises whose activities had been based exclusively on cost leadership strategies, did not have – at the moment of applying the Convertibility Law – any chance to survive, since their costs were multiplied from one day to another, taking most of them to bankruptcy. On the other hand, it is shown how the national context can determine the competitive factors' range within which it is reasonable and possible to identify own competitive advantages to reach the sustainable organizational success.

Micro Competitiveness Level:

The organizations are actually confronted to increasingly higher requirements that emerge from the existing tendencies [Best, 1990, Meyer –Stamer, 1994, OCDE, 1992; Wade, R., 2004]: the globalization of the competence in more markets of the same product; the competitors proliferation due to the successful late industrialization processes (for example, in Eastern Asia), and in a lower degree, to the good result to structural adjustment and export orientation (for example, the USA); the differentiation of demand; the shortening of the production cycles; the implantation of radical innovations from technology and the new organizational concepts that include interdisciplinary work (for example, mechanics and electronics to develop agriculture and forestry industry machinery, etc., and applied to MDF panels production, etc.)

In order to subsist and grow in a sustainable way in this new context, the organizations need in many cases, to refocus y reformulate as to their strategies, and reorganize coherently the latter, at the internal level and at the inter-phase organization/context as well. The needed starting processes will be analyzed as follows:

- ***Refocus of the Competitive Strategy towards sustainability***

Since the general strategy of an organization – the underlying logic that guides the decisions and actions – includes the competitive strategy, both have to be coherent and consistent to ensure their effective implementation. It has to bare in mind that the successful

organization exists for the stakeholders (not only for the shareholders) and not the other way round [Hinterhuber, H., 2003]. In spite of this, the system administration has to have the following characteristics:

Be open towards the environment, because the social systems are from the operative point of view closed. Therefore those values which allow, beyond personal interests, a reasonable living together to contribute overcoming social fragmentation - which has a negative multiplier effect at all levels and which affect directly and indirectly organizational competitiveness - should be included.

Consider complexity positively, to allow the analysis of the existent reality and its tendencies, with the aim of making more assertive decisions having in mind the mid and long term as well;

To have a strategic frame in order to absorb the questions coming from the external context and which could produce instability [Luhmann, 2000]. For this purpose flexibility conditions with regard to response capacity generating outputs, is required. Human resource, well trained and with capacity building, allows to absorb these questions with the advantage of gaining effectiveness by the process of accumulating experience in a propitious organizational culture. No other resource with such advantages can be found.

- ***Reformulation of the Strategy***

The strategic focus based on the internal organizational values, in their material and not material resources, allows the development of sustainable competitive advantages, since very specific, difficult to imitate or replace, and not submitted to slow waste, can be built starting from the first ones. Nevertheless, this requires a broader strategic frame (which permits several possible sub variations), such as those provided by the differentiation - and/or concentration strategy focus. In the northern region of Misiones, maybe the most culturally diverse of the country, these strategic focus would have an enormous development potential, if there would exist a more disseminated vision of same for its application. As a matter of fact, the organizations which put them into practice are the most outstanding in the province, by the

quality of their processes and products, as by the generation of sustained profitability in longer terms.

On the contrary, even if the exclusive focus of cost leadership is more simple to execute and can profit from increasing scale income, it is much more rigid and therefore, much more difficult to copy and generally submitted to slow waste – because they become obsolete and have to be periodically replaced, or because they suffer a physical, intellectual and are morally worn out as a consequence of the organizational characteristics (costs mainly) restructuring mechanisms. The measures usually to be taken for the corporate restructuring have, as a main adjustment variable precisely the organizational human resource, with the argument of gaining competitiveness reducing costs. Through this generic strategy application, identical competitive paths are followed, which go through productive cycles - and personnel shortening among others, with which a considerable pressure is put on the human resources and progressive erosion of mutual confidence, team spirit and creativity – all soft skills which would allow high flexibility and adaptation in a competitive context.

- ***Needed Reorganization***

To face with sustainable success these tendencies – also in the medium and long term, the organizations need to reorganize themselves at the internal and their close environmental level as well, though system/context relations [Luhmann, 2000]. To achieve efficiency, flexibility, quality and reaction speed, deep changes which operate at the three different levels and *complementary* levels are required [Esser K., *et al*, 1994]:

1. The organization of production, to reduce the productive cycles, as for example the introduction of artificial drying systems that accelerate the process in timber and “mate tea” industrialization, allow to diminish financial costs of the capital immobilization. Nevertheless this type of measures can not build sustainable competitive advantages on their own because they are very easy to copy.

2. The organization of the product development, through the parallel and integrated organization of development, production and commercialization that contribute to shorten the product’s development time; produce higher efficiency and commercialize more easily. Here

the parallel development of soft skills, more difficult to imitate and more flexible, should be stressed.

3. Supply - organization and relations, which play an important role at the system/environment level. To be able to profit from the just in time concept, an environment with suppliers who share the responsibility is needed, in order to contribute and not obstruct the productive process. When this is not possible (because the cultural diversity may induce the absence of a general accepted way to fulfill previously established obligations, terms, quality and contracts, complicating the effective efforts' coordination), the organization should consider, through the systemic approach, to create formal cooperation bonds at the inter phase with the context, or develop their own supply relationships to solve these logistic issues.

Since a strategy is the complex decision that requires an adequate reading and exploration of the internal capacities, analyzed in the pertinent organizational' environment [Etkin, J., 2005], the development of skills, abilities and resources in the context of a system may sign a *different* way towards human capital construction, which characterizes the particular organizational history. Indeed, this process requires making several "small decisions", frequently underestimated by administrators (and even researchers) which, as they become polished, are very difficult to imitate. On the other hand, the learning that outcomes of the needed creativity at each situation solving accumulates and allows to develop internally socially more complex resources and mechanisms, which are difficult to copy easily and fast, as well.

It should be added that in this difficult system/ context relations it is particularly important that the organizational strategy does not stay "jammed at half track". This means that the organization "does not have market participation, does not invest capital, and prefers low costs..." (..) "And is condemned to have low rentability" [Porter, 2000]. This situation is observed in many enterprises in the Paranaense Rainforest region in Argentina, where the efforts dispersion, added to the difficult relations system/environment, require a different competitive approach.

Therefore the needed reorganization is based on the deep strategic refocusing towards sustainability, through the search of flexibility in the dynamic equilibrium among the three

dimensions: the financial – economic, social and political and their impact on the external context and the environment and the natural resources.

Competitiveness at the Meso Level

The organizational context – the institutions and socio cultural and political patterns at the meso level (capable of improving, complement and multiply the individual organizational efforts) is growing in relevance due to the technological innovations and the accumulative effects of the learning process. This happens in the different branches of the industrial production (and even in the agro – and forestry – industrial), building “clusters”.

At this meso level, the importance of the role of the government, in putting effective rules to the socio economical functioning, the role of the intermediate organizations, which defend the genuine rights of different sectors, and the cooperation network are often underestimated. The three of them can contribute significantly to:

1. The international competitiveness of the organizations, linked to the timely and selective development of the physical infrastructure;
2. The influence on two key aspects of international competitiveness: the development of human capital (knowledge, abilities’ development, skills’ training, etc.) and more appropriated technology;
3. The access to the timely quality information, to support better decisions.

Starting from the organization’s level, competitive advantages can be built towards their close external context, through cooperation, alliances and intermediate organizations. Again, here soft skills play a key role, since their development can allow to establish dialog levels to generate, propose and implement solutions for mutual benefit – with the governmental organizations – and great socio economical impact. Here the sustainability concept allows understanding why the organizational growth, the cultural and economical development, and the regional sustainable development at the meso level go hand in hand when they are anchored on ethically solid strategies.

CONCLUSIONS

The best starting off point for the organizational strategy formulation in Argentina is, on one hand, the one which tends towards sustainable development. On the other hand, the most adequate strategy focus for those organizations which do not follow a cost leadership strategy is based on the organizational soft skills. For this reason, in regions such as the Paranaense Rainforest, the sustainable organizational strategy for competitive systemic success should prefer - after the analysis of the different levels affecting the development of competitive strategies – the differentiation and concentration focus, without neglecting costs. Since social fragmentation is very high in this region, the competitiveness sources at the meso level very often conspire against efficiency – and even effectiveness – of the human resources administration. Nevertheless, by using the systemic approach for the organizational strategy implementation process, strengths and competitive advantages can be developed within the organizational frame and at the inter phase of the organization/ context, based on the characteristics that allow the development and organization of the soft skills. These competitive advantages, being more difficult to imitate than those coming from the exclusive application of technologically sophisticated machinery, for example, allow (without excluding the last ones) a more sustained organizational success.

With regard to the problems which affect competitiveness at the meso level, these could be progressively solved from the dissemination of strategies beyond the exclusive cost leadership strategy. If concentration and differentiation strategies would guide more organizations, more emphasis would be done on the development of capacities and abilities of the persons, creating a true human capital, capable of generating tangible benefits, far beyond the financial ones. Logically, this focus would profit enormously by a better populations' education level in a broad sense, including the incorporation of ethical values in daily activities and particularly, in the decision making. If this could be accomplished, cooperation relationships would be significantly improved, and the potential of created alliances, and other relations

among organizations, intermediate organizations and even governmental entities which could highly contribute to improve significantly, the systemic competitiveness conditions.

Finally, at the macro level is the macro economical context, to achieve an effective resources assignation, a plural - dimensional management approach towards cooperation at the national level, and inter institutional- and inter sectorial dialog as well, is required. These participation mechanisms can be learned at the micro level, within the organizations or other institutions and be strengthening at the meso level – with the interaction of enterprises and intermediate organizations – in order to be projected afterwards from there to the macro level. If this could be promoted and cultivated, by governments and by physical and juridical persons as well, the sustainable competitive success would be not only in the northern Misiones organizations, but in the whole province, and by multiplier effects to other provinces, of the whole country.

Every human action has – intentionally or not – an effect on the context and comes back as the thrown boomerang. In the same way, every organizational decision and activity has its effects, not only on its own destiny, but also on the environment. To collect organizational sustainable success it is necessary to seed and cultivate those conditions that allow and promote it, starting off from an ethical basis which our human dignity deserves.

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