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Influence of Strategic Direction on Performance of Commercial Banks in Juba, South Sudan

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Abstract
Performance of organizations has been a focal point of research, particularly in understanding how effectively they implement strategic plans to achieve their mission and vision. Strategic planning practices play an important role in enhancing operational efficiency and achieving a competitive advantage. This study established the influence of strategic direction on the performance of commercial banks in Juba, South Sudan. The study adopted a cross-sectional research design. The unit of analysis comprised 31 licensed commercial banks, while the unit of observation included 186 managers. A stratified random sampling technique, in addition to the Taro Yamane formula, was used to select 128 participants. Data was collected using questionnaires with both open-ended and closed questions. The questionnaires were administered both physically and electronically. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, summarize the data, while a binary logistic regression model was applied for inferential analysis. The findings were presented in tables and narratives. Findings revealed that strategic direction setting, including well-documented vision, mission, and core values, significantly improved performance (p-value =0.001), with banks having structured direction setting showing a 12.784 times higher likelihood of achieving better performance than unstructured ones. The study recommends that managers of banks in Juba actively set strategic direction through the formulation of vision, mission, objectives, and core values statements.

Keywords*: Strategic Direction, Performance, Commercial Banks, Juba, South Sudan*

INTRODUCTION

Strategic direction is critical in a firm as it enables it to acquire and utilize its resources that are important for success. Strategic direction enables a firm to have a clear vision, mission, and objectives, which are critical for a firm's survival in the marketplace (Odero, 2023). Strategic direction also guides the firm's decision-making process, resource allocation, and improves the overall firm's operations, enabling an organization to post better financial performance and a stronger competitive position in the market. Ongongo and Mang'ana (2022) define strategic planning as the purpose and the path followed by a firm to achieve its goals and objectives. Strategic planning guides the activities and decisions in the firm that will enable it to achieve its desired vision in a way that is consistent with the mission. A firm's strategic direction is critical in offering focus, alignment, and the framework for achieving the desired goals.

Strategic direction in the banking sector is important in ensuring that they are able to achieve the desired goals in the market (Gitau & Mang'ana, 2021). The banking sector faces a very tight competitive landscape that necessitates them to align their internal resources with their strategic focus. Strategic direction in the banking sector enables these institutions to remain competitive in the dynamic landscape of the banking sector, which is characterized by globalization and rapid transformation. Strategic direction entails the creation of a clear vision, mission, values, and goals that act as the firm's guide. Strategic direction is thus important in guiding the bank's long-term goals and objectives and ensuring that the bank is able to adapt to market change (Challoumis, 2024). Strategic direction ensures that the banks will maintain a competitive landscape, navigate through the complex regulatory environment while at the same maintaining sustainable growth. Importantly, strategic direction ensures that the banks will optimize their resources, enhance their performance, and achieve their ultimate goal of maximizing the shareholders' value.

The banking sector plays a crucial role in any economy as it facilitates transactions, links borrowers and savers, thus contributing significantly to economic growth (Habib et al., 2021). Globally, the banking sector has played a crucial role in the provision of credit, managing risks, and ensuring that the financial systems are working appropriately. In the USA, for instance, the banking sector is a critical part of the US economy and the global economy. The US banks facilitate lending, investments, and payments across countries and institutions. In Germany, the banking sector operates under three pillar structures of private, public savings and cooperative banks (Marcu, 2021). The banking sector in Germany has been critical in financing long-term industrial projects, contributing significantly to the country's economy.

In Africa, the banking sector plays a crucial role in the economy as it facilitates transactions, income distribution, and a source of finance for both the public and private sectors. In Nigeria, the banking sector is crucial to the economy as it acts as a conduit for financial interactions and handles money from different sectors, thus facilitating growth (Hassan et al., 2024). The banking sector is tied closely to the country's economic growth, making it an important indicator of the state of the economy. In Kenya, the banking sector has been critical in the country's growth and development by offering finances for private and public consumption (Bernards, 2022). The Kenyan banking sector is well-developed in that it has a strong focus on the use of mobile banking, which ensures financial inclusion. The banking sector in Kenya plays a crucial role in economic growth, as y facilitates access to finance for SMEs, which are critical in the economy.

The banking sector in South Sudan has huge potential to lift the country's economy and contribute significantly to economic growth and development. South Sudan's banking sector can act as a source of lending for SMEs and huge investments in the country, which are critical for economic growth and development (Ahmed, 2024). However, the country's banking sector is small and underdeveloped compared to other countries in the region due to political instability and its infancy compared to other nations. While the banking sector in South Sudan has a huge opportunity for firms' growth, it faces the challenge of limited access to resources and the challenge of inclusion, especially in the rural areas (Anhiem et al., 2023). These challenges have exacerbated the economic challenges in the country, which have led to macroeconomic instability.

Statement of The Problem

Performance is vital for the success and sustainability of commercial banks, as it reflects their ability to generate profits, operate efficiently, and meet customer expectations. It is also central to fulfilling stakeholder needs, contributing to economic growth, and remaining competitive in a dynamic global market. Strategic planning practices such as goal-setting, resource allocation, and continuous performance monitoring are essential in enhancing banks' financial outcomes and service delivery, thereby shaping overall institutional performance.

However, commercial banks in Juba, South Sudan, face severe systemic challenges that hinder effective performance. As reported by the African Development Bank (2022), the financial sector contributes less than 5% to South Sudan's GDP, in stark contrast to Kenya's 30%, highlighting the limited penetration of banking services. Furthermore, only 8% of South Sudan's population has access to formal banking (World Bank, 2023), compared to a Sub-Saharan average of 43%. The situation is worsened by a low loan-to-deposit ratio of 40%, below the regional benchmark of 60% (IMF, 2023), indicating inefficient resource use. Additionally, Deloitte (2021) reported that 28% of loans are non-performing, significantly higher than the 10–15% seen in neighboring countries, signaling weak risk management.

These challenges undermine the sustainability of banks in Juba. Over half of them operate at a loss due to high NPL levels and operational inefficiencies (African Development Bank, 2022), restricting their ability to innovate or expand. The customer-to-bank ratio is alarmingly high at 1:20,000, compared to 1:5,000 in Uganda and Rwanda (World Bank, 2023), pointing to serious access barriers. These issues not only erode public trust but also stifle economic development and exacerbate poverty.

Despite the urgency of these problems, there is a lack of focused research on how strategic planning could address them in the South Sudanese context. Existing literature primarily examines more stable or better-developed economies like Kenya and Rwanda, overlooking South Sudan's unique challenges of institutional weakness and economic instability. Furthermore, few studies apply quantitative methods to examine how planning elements such as goal-setting or performance monitoring influence outcomes like profitability and efficiency. To address this gap, this study aimed to determine the influence of strategic direction on the performance of commercial banks in Juba.

Research objective: To establish the influence of strategic direction on the performance of commercial banks in Juba, South Sudan.

Hypothesis: Strategic direction does not have a significant influence on the performance of commercial banks in Juba, South Sudan.

THEORETICAL REVIEW AND EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

Balance Scorecard

The balanced score card (BSC) framework was proposed by Kaplan and Norton and helps firms to translate their vision and strategies into goals that can be acted upon. The BSC offers a holistic approach to enable a firm to translate its vision into strategic goals by going beyond the traditional financial measures to include other non-financial measures (Kumar et al., 2024). It considers other non-financial elements such as customer service, finances, internal business processes, and learning and growth. This framework incorporates the non-financial metrics in gauging the firm's performance to ensure that an organization's performance is not just one-sided (Stojkovski & Nenovski, 2021). The effective implementation of the BSC framework depends on the organization's management team. As such, the success of the BSC in any sector will depend on the executive support to ensure that the company's strategic goals are reflected in its culture and operations.

The balanced scorecard considers four perspectives, such as the financial perspective, which considers how a company is performing financially. The customer perspective in the firm seeks to ensure that a firm is able to meet the customer's needs in the market, while the internal process perspective considers whether the internal processes are running smoothly and efficiently (Abdalla et al., 2022). The learning and the growth perspective identify the organization's performance in coming up with new products and ideas. This model enables a firm to understand where it stands in regard to these perspectives and gauge its current performance against the vision and desired goals (Abueid et al., 2023). The BSC enables an organization to identify what needs to change to succeed in the marketplace. This model can be used in the banking sector to help them set goals that align with each of these perspectives.

The balanced scorecard can help the banking sector in South Sudan to set goals that will lead to the attainment of strategic goals and track the progress towards the achievement of these goals. Besides, firms can monitor their actions and ensure that these actions align with the desired objectives of the balanced scorecard (Ali & Anwar, 2021). The use of the BSC entails selecting key indicators that will showcase the success or the areas of improvement that a firm needs to invest in. In this study, the balanced scorecard is used because it will help the banking sector in Sudan to align its objectives with the initiatives. It will help the banks to translate their vision into clear, actionable goals and objectives. Importantly, the use of BSC will help the banks in Juba to measure progress and prioritize areas that enhance performance, improve decision making, and ensure sustainable growth of the banks in Juba, South Sudan.

Empirical Review

Several studies have examined the influence of strategic direction on the performance of commercial banks in different parts of the world. The findings have revealed that strategic direction has a significant impact on the commercial bank's performance. Sikolia and Miroga (2018) examined how strategic direction impacts the performance of commercial banks in Kenya. The study targeted 570 leaders in strategic positions in the banking sector in Kenya. The respondents consisted of the CEOs, directors, and managers in senior positions. The research employed 275 questionnaires to collect data from 177 respondents. The researchers used a descriptive research design in evaluating the relationship between the variables. Self-administered questionnaires were employed, after which the data collected were subjected to SPSS analysis. The study revealed that strategic direction has a positive and significant impact on the performance of commercial banks in Kenya. It was noted that a strategic direction helps a firm to have clear strategic goals that enable it to achieve its vision and mission. The main limitation of this study is that it was done in Kenya, which has a more advanced banking sector compared to Juba, implying the results cannot be generalized in the current study.

Scolastica and Mboya (2022) examined the influence of strategic direction on the financial performance of listed banks in Kenya. Specifically, the study concentrated on the influence of strategic formulation, strategic implementation, and strategic evaluation and control on performance. The study targeted the departmental heads, branch managers, and supervisors to collect the data for the research. A descriptive model was used to collect data from 132 respondents, whereby a census survey was employed. A questionnaire containing both descriptive and inferential statistics was employed in the study. The findings revealed that strategic formulation, strategic implementation, and strategic evaluation have a positive impact on performance if listed firms in Kenyan commercial banks. However, this study was conducted in Kenya, which has a different economic and social environment compared to South Sudan, implying that these results cannot be generalized in the context of Juba, South Sudan.

Nthoki, Omwenga, and Litunya (2021) explored the influence of strategic management capabilities on the performance of commercial banks in Nairobi. A descriptive research design was employed and was also anchored on RBV theory, the competitive advantage model, and the dynamic capabilities theory. The population consisted of 40 banks supervised by 900 line managers at different levels of management. SPSS was used to analyze the data, and presented using tables and Pearson's correlation and regression models. It was noted that managerial capabilities have a weak impact on the performance of commercial banks. It was also noted that the collaborative decision-making process impacts business performance and employees' innovation. It was also observed that banks have adopted different evaluation techniques to gauge their performance against the set targets. The main limitation of this study is that it focused on strategic management capabilities rather than on strategic direction, which poses a contextual gap. Therefore, the findings cannot be used to make a generalized assumption about the current research.

Oswago (2018) studied the role of strategic leadership in the implementation of leadership strategies in the Kenyan commercial banks. Importantly, the study focused on how strategic direction influences strategic implementation in these banks. The study used a quantitative methodology whereby the top management team was targeted. The data was collected and analyzed using SPSS and presented in tables, charts, and graphs. The results revealed that the constructs of strategic management, such as vision and intent, are critical for strategic implementation. It was further noted that strategic direction avoids the status quo in the organization and reduces the perceived risks in the organization. The main limitation of this study is that it focused on strategic leadership in general and used strategic direction as a construct of strategic leadership. As such, there is a contextual gap with the current study, which focuses specifically on strategic direction, implying that the findings in this study cannot be generalized to examine the impacts of strategic directions on the performance of commercial banks in Juba.

Naburuki et al. (2024) explored the influence of strategic direction on the performance of Fintech firms in Nairobi County. The study used strategic leadership theory and a predictive research design. A target population of 150 managers at the senior levels of management was targeted from 22 firms operating in Nairobi. The study targeted 110 respondents, whereby the data was collected using structured questionnaires. Descriptive statistics were used in the analysis, whereby SPSS software was employed in this analysis. It was found that strategic directions help a firm to take advantage of new opportunities in the environment. However, firms may face challenges in setting clear and measurable goals. It was noted that strategic direction has a positive impact on the firm's performance. The main limitation of this study is that it was done in the fintech industry, which has a different regulatory and competitive structure compared to the banking sector. Thus, the results cannot be generalized in the current study.

DATA AND METHODS

The study will apply a cross-sectional design. The target population was 31 licensed commercial banks in Juba as the unit of analysis, with 186 managers as the unit of observation, who included: branch managers, finance managers, operations managers, marketing managers, and customer service managers. Stratified sampling was used with a sample size of 128 and a sampling error of 5% arrived at calculated using the Taro Yamane formula.

Questionnaires were used in the collection of the primary data. The questionnaire had both open and closed questions. Both physical and online methods were used in data collection. Data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential analysis. Descriptive analysis included frequency, percentage, and the mean. On the other hand, the inferential analysis entailed the use of binary regression analysis. The formula for binary regression was as follows: $Log\ Y\ (Pi/1\text{-}Pi) = B_0 + B_1X_1$. Where Log Y represented the odds of a high performance against a low performance. Pi represented the probability of high performance, whereas 1-Pi represented the probability of low performance, whereas the B_1 represented the coefficient for the independent variable (strategic direction). X_1 represented the strategic direction. While B0 represented the constant in the model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Response rate for the study was at 90.6% response rate where 116 questionnaires were returned, and 9.37% never returned or were inadequately filled.

Descriptive statistics on Strategic Direction

The section sought descriptive statistics on strategic direction. Results in Table 1 showed that participants agree with the statement "Our bank's vision is communicated to all employees," scoring 3.58, showing that most employees agree. The statement on "Employees understand and identify with the mission" scored highest (3.80), indicating strong alignment and clarity on the mission. On the statement that "The bank's strategic objectives are realistic and achievable," scored 3.70, reflecting participants' agreement with confidence in the bank's planning. On the statement that "Objectives are regularly reviewed," scored lower with a mean of 3.54, which was average, showing that moderate views on the statement. Last statement that "Employees are aware of and adhere to the bank's core values in their daily activities with a score of (3.71), indicating a healthy values-based culture.

Table 1: Strategic Direction

Statement on Strategic Direction	Disagreed	Neutral	Agreed	Mean	Std Dev
Our bank's vision is communicated to all employees.	17 (14.6%)	38 (32.8%)	61 (52.6%)	3.58	1.097
The vision of our bank aligns with its long-term goals and priorities.	26 (22.4%)	28 (24.1%)	62 (53.5%)	3.52	1.176
Our bank's mission effectively guides daily operations and decision-making.	18 (15.5%)	37 (31.9%)	61 (52.6%)	3.54	1.083
Employees understand and identify with the mission of the bank.	13 (11.2%)	23 (19.8%)	80 (69.0%)	3.80	1.049
The bank's strategic objectives are realistic and achievable within the set timelines.	15 (13.0%)	32 (27.6%)	69 (59.5%)	3.70	.998
The objectives of the bank are regularly reviewed to address emerging challenges and opportunities.	21 (18.1%)	35 (30.2%)	60 (51.7%)	3.54	1.114
Employees are aware of and adhere to the bank's core values in their daily activities.	12 (10.3%)	33 (28.4%)	71 (61.2%)	3.71	1.039

Evidence from the open questions indicated that the bank's strategic direction plays a crucial role in shaping its overall performance. Respondents emphasized that aligning operations with long-term goals ensures sustainable growth and strengthens competitive advantage through clear objectives. A well-defined strategy enhances adaptability to regulatory and economic changes while fostering accountability and performance measurement. Additionally, strategic direction improves resource allocation, ensuring business priorities are met and innovation is encouraged. Investment in technology and a culture of continuous improvement were also highlighted as key drivers of financial success.

Descriptive Statistics on the Performance of Banks in Juba

Results in Table 2 showed that 69.0% of respondents agreed that revenue has increased in the past five years, which was confirmed by a mean score of 3.84. Additionally, 66.4% agreed that profits have increased over the same period, with a mean score of 3.82. Lastly, 59.5% agreed that customer deposits have increased, as shown by a mean score of 3.71. Lastly, participants agreed that they had increased the number of customers served in the past five years, as shown by a mean of 3.84 and 65.5% of the participants who agreed.

Table 2: Performance of Banks in Juba

Statement on the Performance of Banks In Juba	Disagreed	Neutral	Agreed	Mean	Std Dev
Our revenues have increased in the past five years.	7 (6.0%)	29 (25.0%)	80 (69.0%)	3.84	.913
Our profits have increased in the past five years.	12 (10.3%)	27 (23.3%)	77 (66.4%)	3.82	1.043
We have increased the number of customer deposits in the past five years.	13 (11.2%)	34 (29.3%)	69 (59.5%)	3.71	1.072
We have increased the number of customers we serve in the past five years.	5 (4.3%)	35 (30.2%)	76 (65.5%)	3.84	.941

Binary Logistic Analysis

The hypothesis tested whether having a well-documented vision, mission, and core values positively influences the performance of commercial banks in Juba.

Table 3: Model Summary

Step	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	81.620[a]	.172	.291

Regression Odds

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Strategic Direction						
Our bank has a well-documented vision, mission, and core values	2.548	.613	17.295	1	.000	12.784
RC- Our organization lacks a well-documented vision, mission, and core values	0	0	0	0	0	0
Constant	.383	.335	1.308	1	.253	1.467

The model summary showed that about 29.1% of the variations in the performance of the banks in Juba can be explained by the strategic direction. The odds ratio for strategic direction (Exp(B) = 12.784) indicates that banks with a well-documented vision, mission, and core values are 12.784 times more likely to achieve higher performance than those that do not have such a structured direction. This significant result aligns with the expectation that a clear strategic direction provides a roadmap for operational alignment and performance enhancement. These findings suggest that banks in Juba that clearly define their strategic goals and values are better equipped to align their operations and resources toward achieving their performance targets. Findings were in alignment with Kivuitu et al. (2022), who demonstrated that strategic direction determination significantly influences commercial banks' performance in Kenya. This finding is consistent with Tanui (2021), who found that strategic direction significantly enhances the performance of SACCOs in Kenya. The study highlighted that a well-defined strategic direction improves customer satisfaction, asset expansion, and deposit base growth.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that strategic direction significantly and positively influenced the performance of commercial banks in Juba. Having a well-documented vision, mission, and core values increased significantly the odds of better performance by a factor of 12.

The study recommends that managers of banks in Juba actively set strategic direction through the formulation of vision, mission, objectives, and core values statements. Additionally, managers should support both internal and external scanning of the environment to support decision making and enhance performance using AI-driven data analytics. The study also recommends a review of resource planning strategies. Lastly, the study recommends for implementation of feedback loops, continuous monitoring of strategies to boost the performance of banks in Juba.

Contribution to Knowledge

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the influence of strategic direction on performance. In particular, the study brings new knowledge within the context of commercial banks in Juba, an area that had not been covered by previous studies.

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