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A Review of Strategic Management in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract:
The potential growth of the sub-Saharan Africa Economy in the coming years has made it imperative to reassess the role of strategic management in helping to harness the opportunities in the region. The sub-Saharan Africa business environment is dynamic and complex, hence businesses in the region needed to have an appropriate strategic direction to be able to cope with the peculiarities of the business environment. This paper presents a global view of the form strategic management is taking in the region, it also gives a perspective of what to expect from the region and how to successfully use strategic management to manage the expectations. Cases that look into the recent strategic management efforts Dangote Cement, Bidvest Group and MTN are also presented to help understand how the successful ones are conducting business. The general observation is that when it comes to strategic management in Africa, persistence, proper implementation, extra effort, and diversification are all very important factors.

1. Introduction

Developing and fixating on a particular business model is such a complex and diverse endeavour, that needs proper evaluation and analysis before it can be successfully done. Creating a strategic direction for a business is important to enabling a business survives in its external environment that is always very dynamic and complex in regions like sub-Saharan Africa. Strategic planning and execution is very important in helping to understand the business environment and how the business can operate competitively within that environmentVan der Waldt and Knipe, (1998). Kurato and Audretsch, (2009) affirmed this point when they referred to strategy has the tool that helps a business utilize the opportunities available to it in the immediate business environment and neutralize threats facing it by making use of its key strengths and overcoming its weaknesses using its strengths optimally. Doing business in an unstable environment like that of Africa is affected by quite a number of macro-economic conditions that have disguised opportunities that must be explored and threats that must be neutralized using strategy.

There are good things in the sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region, but this good things are not usually obvious investment opportunities, the reason for this is that there is an above normal regulatory, legal, political environment that lead to macro-economic challenges that could make it difficult for the investment opportunities available to be explored (Rosenberg, 2015). The world is however, beginning to recognise that Africa is moving forward, according to a 2015 World Bank Report on the ease of doing business in SSA region the region was reported to have averaged a ranking of 143. Countries like Mauritius and Rwanda are even leaving others behind by ranking highest, mainly because they have been implementing some economic reforms that have positive effect on their business environment. Some countries like Nigeria are on economic and political transition face; hence the effect of some of their new economical and diversification policies may not be felt yet (World Bank, 2015).

The main locus of strategic management is to harness the opportunities in the region country by country and avoid taking a general strategic approach to doing business in all the countries. It is necessary to find a way to use strategic management to get around the challenges and get to the good things the land has to offer. In terms of strategizing for businesses in the region more needs to be done and immediate success should never be expected (Alejandro, 2014). It is vital to recognise the fact that the region has room for growth and will grow only if the investment both foreign and domestic are channelled to the deficiency sector that provide basic infrastructure like transport, health, energy and financial services. Also it should be understood that the challenges of the African business environment have embedded opportunities that can only material by going the extra mile and always taking a long run perspective for all goals and objectives, therefore it only takes a special persistent attitude to be successful in Africa, but only few are willing to take that risk, and the few are the ones enjoying it all alone (Alejandro, 2014).

This paper is a review of what strategy really entails globally and the form its taking now, the peculiarities of the SSA business environment and how that can be handled. The strategies that should be employed in Africa and the strategies that most successful entities like MTN and Dangote Cement are using to survive. The contribution of this study is a means to an end in the study of African businesses; it helps to contribute to the basic and broad understanding of how to do business successfully in the SSA region using the power of strategic management.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1. Strategic Management

The definition given by Van der Waldt and Knipe, (1998) indicated that strategy basically entails creation and implementation of policies, procedures using resources available to the organization's disposal in order to reach the primary objectives of the organisation. They were of the opinion that the strategy formulation process of an organisation has to involve the process of deciding on the mission and broad aim of the organization, using available resources to achieve the mission, aligning the strategies and operational planning with the aims and objectives and creating a feedback system that ensure adequate control of the consequence from the execution of the strategy. Smith (1994) went further to place emphasis on the importance of action, which is considered even more important than the planning process nowadays. It is often said that a strategy can only deemed to be useful when it creates a framework for a winning formula, hence, it entails creating an appropriate rationale for competing, the consequence of competing and the tool for competing in the business environment (Craig and Grand, 1995).

Strategy is defined by Pearce and Robinson, (2008) as the choices and courses of actions evaluated and chosen by management and owners of businesses to plan, execute and control the mechanism through which the goals, objectives, mission and vision of an organization can be met. Strategy is the target and destination but implementation is said to be the path and driver to the destination which is the strategic objectives. Formulating strategy that would be easy to implement and determining that if they are successfully implemented efficiently and effective the organization would definitely reach its goals and objectives used to be the most important thing in strategic management research, but the work of recent studies have indicated that organizations have to place the same level of importance that is placed on formulating strategies on the ability and likelihood of successfully implementing the strategy, because formulation is deemed as the planning and thinking process management go through, but the implementation is deemed as the process that would help put the thinking process into action, hence, decision is now deemed as important as the process of executing the decision, because a decision is not worth taking if it cannot be implemented(Kaplan and Norton, 2000). In fact recent studies are pointing to the fact that formulating strategies is no longer as important as been able to implement the strategies, hence, thinking without action is deemed as not thinking at all(Flood et al. 2000).

2.2. General Understanding of the Global Business Environment

In an analysis by Dess, Lumpkin and Eisner, (2012) they acknowledged the fact that information about the business environment is very important in determining the strategic environment of a firm, especially in a highly dynamic business terrain. They recognised environmental scanning, environment monitoring, competitive intelligence and environmental forecasting as the ways through which the business environment of a firm can be linked with its strategic Management. They also recognised the fact that there is the general environment and the competitive environment.

A very important thing that every manager must understand is the fact that they must always be aware of all the opportunities available for them to explore in the business environment and channel and adapt a reasonable amount of their internal strength towards utilizing the opportunities to achieve their long and short term business objectives. Hence it is beyond exploring opportunities, it is more about ensuring that the opportunity is utilized better than the competitors. A proactive awareness of opportunities in a business environment would give every business manager an edge in the sense that the manager would be the first to explore that opportunity amongst the competitors.

Environment scanning, involves getting information on the trends, events and changes in the environment, this simply entails been aware of what is happening in the business environment. Environmental monitoring makes the manager aware of how the observed changes, trends and events are manifesting or transforming continuously, it entails studying how the result of the environmental scanning are changing into other thing, it is a proactive monitoring of the business environment. Competitive intelligence helps managers to get information on what the competitors are up to, in terms of getting information on what they are doing together with your business and what they are doing better than you. Competitive intelligence entails getting information that would help you know your competitors current and possible future moves so as to use that to your advantage and be ahead at all times.

Competitive intelligence involves using information available to the general public through journals, newspapers, magazines and bulletins to understand the activities in the industry and that of players in the industry, so as to avoid taking a passive approach towards your strategic management.

Information gotten from the business environment must enable managers predict what is yet to happen. The main objective is to predict changes so as to adapt your current objectives and the implementation to the changes; this is what environment forecasting entails. The fear of uncertainty and unpredictability that is unavoidable in the business environment should not deter a manager from predicting what would happen in the environment, hence, a manager should never underestimate the future.

2.3. The sub-Saharan Africa Business Environment

2.3.1. World Bank Ranking of the sub-Saharan Business Environment (World Bank Report, 2015)

In a bid to give factual information on the strength, weakness, opportunity and threat abound in conducting business in the sub-Saharan Africa region the a 2015 world bank report ranked the business environment in the region as follows:

1. Economies in Sub-Saharan Africa had an average ranking of 143 in terms of ease of doing business.
2. Mauritius had the region's highest ranking, at 32. Rwanda had the second highest (62), followed by Botswana (72) and South Africa (73).

3. Other large economies in the region and their rankings were Kenya (108), Nigeria (169), and Uganda (122).
4. Those with the region's lowest rankings were Eritrea (189), South Sudan (187), and the Central African Republic (185).
5. Rwanda ranked among the best in the world in providing credit (2) and Registering Property (12).
6. Average rankings for Sub-Saharan Africa showed enormous room for improvement in Getting Electricity (149), Trading across Borders (136), and Paying Taxes (131). The region ranked last in these areas. In cross-border trade, for example, completing border compliance procedures takes an exporter in the region 108 hours and $542 on average, compared with a global average of 64 hours and $389.

2.3.2. Economic and Regulatory Reforms

1. Thirty-five of 47 economies in Sub-Saharan Africa (74 percent) implemented at least one reform making it easier to do business in the past year, 69 in total—up slightly from the annual average of 67 reforms over the past 5 years.
2. Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 14 of the 32 reforms globally in Getting Credit. Of the 14 reforms, 12 focused on improving the availability of credit information—more than in any other region.
3. The region accounts for 5 of the 10 top improvers this year. These 5 are Uganda, Kenya, Mauritania, Senegal, and Benin.
4. Rwanda implemented the most reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa in the past year, with 6. Kenya, Madagascar, and Senegal followed with 4 reforms each. Some details of the reforms:
    - Rwanda implemented a credit scoring service in May 2015, supporting the ability of banks and other financial institutions to assess the creditworthiness of potential borrowers. And it made starting a business easier by eliminating the need for new companies to open a bank account in order to register for value added tax.
    - Kenya launched government service centers offering company preregistration services in major towns, reducing the time required to start a business by 4 days. Ten years ago, starting a business in Kenya took 54 days. Now it takes just 26 days—less than the regional average.
    - Madagascar strengthened minority investor protections by requiring that directors with a conflict of interest fully disclose the nature of their interest to the board of directors.
    - In Senegal the electricity utility improved the regulation of the connection process and lowered the cost by reducing the security deposit.

2.4. Business in sub-Saharan Africa

In an analysis by Rosenberg, (2015), she identified some peculiar features of the African Business environment. It was indicated in her work that business activities are highly dynamic and that the Asians take a forefront in exploiting the development opportunities in each of the sectors, hence, there is continuous growth of competition for the opportunities domestically and internationally. There is high dependence on energy by most of the governments, but still it only constitutes about 10% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of countries like Nigeria, there are more consumers now, purchasing power is growing and there is higher demand for variety of products, especially in the areas where government has been found wanting like the healthcare and construction sector. Africa has enormous and a certain potential for growth, but it would take some decades more in the region for the region to reach its economic destination, the implication of this is that there are opportunities in areas where fundamental tools needed to foster the long term growth like infrastructural development would be made available. Immediate returns should not be expected when investing in Africa, because some of the benefits would not materialize till the next one or two decades due to the needed level of growth in factors of production (Rosenberg, 2015).

The sub-Saharan Africa has a lot of business potential but it is not free from risk, but the opportunities exceed the threat, hence businesses should not lose sight of the money making opportunities in the region. Executives are urged to make careful assessment of the risk, because some of their fears might not have the expected level of negative effect on their businesses. Lack of market data is an issue, as it is difficult to get necessary information to assess a particular market in the region. Time should be taken to make use of available data and some assumption to assess the intended market target, but it must be understood that there is market in the region; it just has to be discovered using available data. Closeness to the market makes it easier to gather knowledge about the market, liaising with government and optimizing available distribution channel. South Africa was the preferred head-quarter location due to its high level of globalization, but the country's human resource is inadequate and expensive, for this reason some companies in the region are beginning to realise that they could actually conduct their business from countries like Kenya and Rwanda where positive economic reforms are taking place at a high pace (Rosenberg, 2015).

In Africa generally there are endless unexplored opportunities, because the business atmosphere is dominated by small and medium scale enterprises that lack asses to finance and financial strength that would give them the ability to innovate and create strategic avenue to explore the available opportunities. Finance is mostly in micro form which can only help businesses grow to a certain level. Africa has so much potential, in the simple sense that when it comes to Africa things can only get better, but when it comes to conducting business in Africa successfully focusing on the negatives like political instability and lack of infrastructure could blind every entrepreneur from the beauty of the land.

In the article on doing business in Africa, Africa.com examined some things that are not obvious about the world about Africa. We examine some of the points raised here:

1. The African business attitude is more relationship driven than transaction driven, in the sense that connection and appeal to consumer is very important in achieving business success in Africa.
2. There is purchasing power in Africa, an average African spends less on food than on commodities like airtime.

3. It is important to take a regional specialization approach to doing business in Africa.
4. There is high level of loyalty to particular brands in Africa.
5. Curbing corruption is highly emphasised, because it costs entrepreneurs allot of money.
6. African and Chinese do business like peers that are equally undeveloped or underdeveloped, hence, the Chinese have been doing allot of business in Africa.
7. Using local human resource and consultant is highly recommended.

2.5. Empirical Review

In a study by Schute and Meyer, (2004) where they made managers of South African police service go through a rigorous strategic management process, using Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threat (SWOT) analysis, act of defining problems and solving them immediately and the evaluation of factors that make it difficult for an organisation to reach its desired goals. The study indicated that there was a need to call for improvement by the top level manager in the area of planning how implementation will be carried out. The area of integrating the information process from the top most level to the area commands, down to the stations and units also deemed to be a challenge, the reason for this is said to be the lack of coordination of the strategic development process from the corporate level to the operational level, which makes it difficult for the operational managers to understand what they actually need to do and why they need to do what is asked of them at a particular point in time. The key observation here is that public sector organization in Africa have multitudes of command structure, that create unnecessary bureaucracy and hence make it difficult for the entire organisation to move in the same direction, for this reason authority lines should be evaluated for their need, so as to avoid the problem of inadequate managerial coordination of action and decision making. In the South African Police it was even discovered that from the top to the lowest level, they were variations in the perception of overall direction of the organisation by the various authority lines, every manager was just doing what they think is right not what is actually right, they prioritise the wrong thing and hence make it unrealistic for the organization to successfully implement any strategy.

In the study of Jooste and Fourie, (2009) they discovered that implementation feasibility of a strategy is more important than the process of implementing it in South African firms, due to the fact that it is perceived by the directors of the most successful organisations in South Africa as more difficult than formulation, because the respondent to their carefully drafted questionnaire saw the formulation process as an easier process than the implementation process. Despite this fact most respondent still had the perception that their management is very effective at implementing strategy, but only about 12.9% of the respondents were fully convinced about the notion. The deduction that can be reasonably made from this is that no director in South Africa is fully convinced about their ability to implement strategies, but they had no doubt in their ability to formulate the strategies.

In examining the possible barriers to successful implementation of strategies the study of Jooste and Fourie, (2009), again discovered that the lack of awareness and full comprehension of the strategies by the workforce could play a part in making implementation difficult. The respondents also do not see the adequacy or inadequacy of leadership qualities necessary to successfully implement strategy, as possible factors that mar implementation of strategy in South Africa. But when the drivers of strategy implementation was examined it was discovered that lack of proper strategic leadership ranks high amongst factors that are likely to make implementation difficult, because it was discovered that it contributes positively and significantly to implementation of strategies.

3.1. Business Survival in Africa

In an article by Alejandro, (2014) on doing business in Africa successfully gave a useful insight on how to neutralize the threats in the sub-Saharan Africa business environment. According to him the following are the improved macro-economic features of sub-Saharan economies:

1. A more democratic, stable and improved political and legal environment.
2. More than average Gross Domestic Product growth rate.
3. Growing opportunities in underdeveloped areas of the economy.

The article gave a precise list of general strategies that could be applied by multi-nationals and domestic firms to cope with the African business environment and reach the height they reached in other regions. The following are the strategies:

<u>3.1.1. Approaching each Geographical Location Differently</u>

The idea here is to take it one country at a time as a result of the peculiarities of each country or region. Though some countries are similar, the best way is to avoid taking a stereotype or assumption based general approach to conducting business in sub-Saharan Africa. The first step is to use adequate research and assessment to determine which country or group of countries is best suited to your business approach, or to determine the country or region that readily fits into your business model and strategy. While some countries like Angola and Nigeria have abundant natural resources that easily attracts energy and construction businesses, some like Kenya have growing human resource quality. The peculiar demographic characteristics should also be carefully considered, because it could open up opportunities and threat that can be explored and neutralized using the strong areas of the business.

<u>3.1.2. Long term Perspective should be taken for all Goals and Objectives</u>

Doing business in the region does not lead to success as early as it does in other regions. Any form of objective set by the business is not likely to materialize as soon as is usually expected, for this reason persistence and patience is very important for African Business leaders. The reason this is usually the case is that it takes a longer than normal duration or period to get your operations and general functional activities adequately organized and coordinated for the legal, political and socio-cultural business external environment.

Developing a pool of locally developed human resource that is ready to do what it takes to be successful in Africa is not likely to be achieved on time also. The best thing is to allow for some margin of safety when it comes to the expected payback period of African investments.

3.1.3. That Local Context is Vital

Find a way to give your African business that local image, that is, that image that fits into the socio-economic and socio-cultural characteristics of the region. Business managers need to device a means to create an entity that has the resource and capacity needed for successful operation in the region. This could be achieved through the acquisition of established indigenous firms or capitalizing on existing historical ties.

3.1.4. Extra Effort is Required

Expect to expend more resources and effort in the region, mainly due to the lack of basic physical and intangible infrastructure that serve as basic requirements for ease of conducting business. Some basic business services meant to be provided by specialized service firms are also not up to potential, the obvious opportunity in this is the fact that it reduces the level of competition in the region due to barrier to entry, hence, there is a competitive advantage for a firm that is ready to go that extra mile to adapt to the infrastructural difficulties posed by the sub-Saharan Africa business environment. The lack of infrastructure is also a market, which is largely explored by certain companies like the Chinese Construction Company and General Electric that are the trusted firms by most of the countries in the region for infrastructural development.

3.1.5. Train, Develop and Make use of Local Talent

In the region there is human resource, but there is inadequate readily employable human resource with the requisite experience, educational back ground and practical knowledge. The available human resource lacks training and there exists some level of illiteracy, which can easily be reverses through committed and continuous training and development. The area with highest shortage is top level management where there exists few numbers of personnel that has what is necessary to carry out the responsibilities of top level management, therefore, there is competition for the ones available which makes them expensive to attract and retain. It is also not advisable to import expat, mainly due to the fact that the cost of living in Africa is not comparable with that of the country they are used to, hence, this would make them more expensive to bring in. The best option is to collaborate with the educational system, fund them and create such a partnership that will satisfy your human resource objective and that of the educational institution in the short and long run.

3.1.6. Corruption

Corruption should be handled in a sensitive manner that would ensure the general public and not the political class understands your stand on unethical issue. The way to do this is by handling corruption publicly, so that the corrupt civil servants and politician will think twice before seeking for unethical favors that may be made public by unexpected means. The other mechanism is to carry out projects that would contribute to the development of the economic wellbeing of the community the political class represent so as to make the company immune to the corruption ideas of any member of the political class. The idea here is to ensure that the power of the community is harnessed by multi-national companies that want to operate in Africa so that the community would see the company as the entity that has is truly concerned about their economic development due to the importance of the projects executed by the company in their community and other important corporate social responsibility efforts the company contributes.

3.2. Cases

3.2.1. MTN – South Africa

MTN has been facing some challenges in its business environment which has made it imperative for the group to embark on some strategic review to cope with the increasingly complex and dynamic business environment. The group is currently facing market share pressure on some of its revenue streams like voice revenue, customer need for high quality and affordable data and a more complex and competitive market environment. The strategic review that they have recently made priority would help put the firm in the position to grow in the coming year given the peculiarities of the business environment. MTN has been faced with regulatory and legal challenges of recent; this has led to a loss in market share growth in the shape of subscribers. The recent strategic review led to the following decisions:

1. Improving operating efficiency and customer service through the focus on particular service channels and creation of new service channels through mobile money.
2. Exploring opportunities to continuously create value by capitalizing on its infrastructural strength.
3. Improving operational efficiency by achieving better co-ordination across different business functions.
4. Create new revenue streams like digital service which would help increase market share through product development that would explore opportunities presented in the business environment.

MTN is a leading market operator in the sub-Saharan telecommunication service sector, connecting subscribers in 22 countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The company has refused to stop growing given the challenges in its operating environment especially Nigeria as evidenced in the strategies laid down above. The strategies entail regaining lost market share using product development, product improvement and innovation that explores the endless opportunities in every clime they operate in.

3.2.2. Dangote Cement

Dangote Cement Plc. has managed to place itself among the most successful businesses in sub-Saharan Africa, according to FORBES richest man in the world list it is the most valuable in the empire of the richest man in Africa, Mr.AlikoDangote. The firm has been faced with quite a number of macro-economic challenges beyond its control and operational challenges. Nevertheless, the company has managed to grow its production capacity in a growing market, hence, helping it achieve its long term objective of becoming a Global player in the cement industry by becoming a Pan-African manufacturer and distributor of cement.

Africa is growing annually; the latest World Bank estimate showed that sub-Saharan Africa will grow by 4.6% in the nearest future. Growth in infrastructure that requires endless consumption of cement is inevitable in ensuring the expected growth happens, Dangote Cement has however, positioned itself competitively to be the pan-African Cement manufacturer that optimizes the obvious infrastructural growth potential in the region. The operational and strategic initiative involves been a cost leader with top quality, expanding capacity in a growing market and improving its corporate governance initiatives over the coming years.

The macro economic challenges facing the cement industry include, falling oil price which has reduced consumption and production level in the economy it has also reduced the level of capital expenditure in the countries of the region, there is also devaluation of functional currency (naira) which has made importation of inputs more expensive. Gross Domestic Product growth has slowed due to this macro-economic challenges but through the use of strategic management Dangote Cement has been able sustain its position as a major player. There is also the issue of inadequate and expensive sources of energy which they neutralized using alternative energy sources like coal and manufacturing location strategies.

The main strategy observed in the research on Dangote Cement is the attitude towards increasing production rate and capacity and increasing quality while maintaining or reducing cost through innovation and research. The entity makes use of cost reduction ways like the full utilization of tax exemptions, efficient inventory management, energy cost management and any other strategy that would maintain or increase their shareholders wealth despite the threats in the business environment.

They have achieved some sort of operational advantages by utilizing its strength in capacity management, using modern and high quality equipment, strong logistical capabilities, buying equipments in bulk. It justified its recent surge in price for the first time in five years using product differentiation and increase in exchange rate which has made energy more expensive. It has tried to manage the energy cost by making use of coal rather than low-pour fuel oil (LPFP) in some manufacturing facilities. Dangote Cement also reduced supply and production from facilities that lead to high production cost like the GBOKO centre in Kogi state to reduce overall production cost and excess supply.

Dangote Cement has managed to use its decision making ability to cope with its business environment that is increasingly complex and dynamic in order to achieve it long term objectives. The company has managed to focus on the positive aspect of the business environment in order to neutralize threats that exist and also prepare itself from the threats yet to occur.

3.3.3. Bidvest Group Limited (South Africa).

Bidvest group is a much diversified entity that has been facing some challenges in its external environment but has still found a way to grow financially and expand its operations organically. There was a slow in growth in South Africa and other emerging economies, there was downturn in the demand level in some sectors like the mining sector, there was growth in unemployment rate of youth which has created some social problem in the business environment and generally the trading environment has become more difficult and challenging to cope with.

Nevertheless, Bidvest group has been improving its financial performance and has continuously improved the wealth of its shareholders. The company has been able to achieve this by using its internal financial and human resource strength to penetrate more market by investing more in venture that are already successful, for instance operations in the United Kingdom and Europe were recently expanded been through the use of horizontal acquisitions. Decentralized business model is used by the group and it helps the organization to maintain a level of flexibility that makes them readily capable to explore opportunities that present themselves. There is also a continuous bid to empower and train staffs, and it helps to motivate them, and win their loyalty, which is good for the sustainable growth of the company. The company also utilizes synergies and organic growth; because they help to fully capitalize on the core strength of the organization, the organization structure is always reviewed in order to ensure the platform is continuously suitable for pursuing growth opportunities and adapting to the business environment.

The general observation in the strategic review of Bidvest group is their emphasis on continuously capitalizing on their core strength area, which includes high level of diversification, financial strength and human resource capability, this is evident in the fact that all the major changes are aimed at creating a synergy in their operation that benefit customers, creating a more effective and efficient operation and ensuring adequate succession planning across the organization.

4. Conclusion

The study is a review of the peculiarities of strategic management in SSA. It gives a broad insight into the factors that should be considered in conducting business in SSA region. The emphasis however, is that businesses in the region don't face has much competition has the global counterparts, due to the lack of growth in some fundamental sectors. The reason could be that only few foreign and domestic investors are willing and ready to make that extra effort to do things that are necessary to cope with business risk in the SSA region. It is therefore, recommended that existing and prospective investors in the region should do adequate research of the business environment in terms of the risk involved and the opportunities available.

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