Competitive Challenges of the Democratic Republic of Congo Companies in the face of African Continental Free Trade Area Agreements

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Abstract

The trade opening constitutes, at the meantime, great opportunities and enormous challenges for home enterprises. When enterprises of countries concerned are not sufficiently prepared, local populations are more attracted by products from foreign enterprises that easily supply the local market with goods and services in quantity and sometimes in quality and in affordable prices an environment that can easily asphyxiate local enterprises. The enterprises of the North-Kivu province, in D.R.C., seem to run this risk due to the effectiveness of agreements of the African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA). This province comprises enterprises, of which more than 79 percent are commercial, a fact which is not economically good since these are brokers of foreign enterprises which do not directly afford to reach the Congolese market. In fact, Congolese enterprises are protected by an environmental discomfort that prevents the foreign enterprises to reach, with serenity, the Congolese market. This constitutes an ephemeral advantage because the effectiveness of these agreements should provide all enterprises with the same privileges. In such a situation, the Congolese business, to update its competitiveness in free trade, must sharpen its competitive strategies. Henceforth, the government must establish responsible and coercive measures and mechanisms that can promote production and innovation enterprises, or R.D.C. risks to serve as a market for other countries, members of the agreement, and have its national business asphyxiated.

Keywords: ACFTA, Competitiveness, Environmental discomfort, Internationalization, Mixed strategy and Strategy.

Introduction

Nowadays, internationalization and globalization are revealed as an unquestionable practice in the quasi-totality of human life domains. All economic agents make use of it in a way or another. On the other hand, they directly or indirectly undergo the consequences of it. In whole, widening the active economic sphere beyond national boundaries imposes itself as a strategic answer for the performance competitiveness improvement and of enterprises in their present ultra-competitive environment [1]. Henceforward, the detailed strategies, ways and means, and all meanders to achieve it require thorough studies. It is normal that several studies are led for the mastery of strategic choices and their manipulation because the success at this level determines the future of the enterprise.

Despite the strategic progressions and their requirements of establishment; the question of the internationalization did not remain solely the appendage of enterprises in developed countries. The enterprises of developing countries are also appealed to apply it as their emergent and developed country pairs. Therefore, even African countries start their batteries for the internationalization of their enterprises. In this perspective, Africa counted,

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in 2010, more than 10 free trade Areas as reported in the report of the United Nations of 2009 [2] and beyond which others were organized across time. In like manner, to settle individual internationalizations, in the present era, a big and unique African economic Area is being created.

Indeed, since 2018, African countries launched a common economic Area named African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA) [3]. In the agreements governing this space, a trade opening for countries members that are nearly African is recommended. This economic opening dedicates the legal regulation including free circulations of goods, services, funds and people, all over the continent. These agreements constitute a declaration of good intentions and much softened restrictions to boost the continent economy and then improve its economic competitiveness with the rest of the world.

Even though the effectiveness of these agreements is not yet materialized and challenges are still enormous, these agreements will enable enterprises accede to domestic markets of all countries members currently valued to 1.2 billion of people with 2 500 billion of USD of accumulated GDP. Thus, all enterprises will be free to import and export thanks to these agreements [4]. A part from the heterogeneity of African countries, economic opening is revealed to be not only advantageous granting enormous opportunities to enterprises [5] but also creating challenges to some countries' domestic enterprises [6]. In case of economic opening, the tenacity and the resilience of local enterprises depend on their current ability to produce or to put on the markets competitive products and/or services in terms of price, quality and quantity. The economic unbalance, the advantages and the delays accumulated by some countries deeply impact on their competitiveness in case of free trade.

It is well known that Africa is constituted of an incoherent diversity of countries in terms of productive, commercial, technical, technological, legislative or even political ability [7]. Most African countries are more importing whereas others can themselves produce some goods and services. On the other hand, although some countries can manage to export the surpluses of their productions, the major part of their export is constituted of raw materials and products of the primary sector [8] a situation that does not grant them to much benefit in international exchanges as one can well grasp it in the report on the statistics of international trade [9]. The added value that African enterprises make themselves on the raw materials is broadly insignificant as compared to that their developed pairs, which are technologically well equipped, make.

The international market heavily relies on the law of comparative advantages that suppose the specialization [10], fruit of innovation. Enterprises must do their best to produce and offer products and services of quality and in sufficient quantity. The enterprises of the Democratic Republic of Congo must, like their pairs of the continent, conform to the rhythm of this principle. However, a major question arises: considering the present situation that the D.R.C. goes through together with its local enterprises, is it possible that these last get ready, in terms of reliable strategies, to strive with foreign competitors, supposed to be advanced? Are the strategies currently in vogue in D.R.C. enterprises sufficiently convincing to guarantee an economic survival at the time of the economic opening effectiveness that agreements of the ACFTA extol? More specifically, the enterprises evolving in the oriental part of the country are the most exposed to this economic disruption.

In general, the East of D.R.C. is perpetually the most threatened region by insecurity and war for about three decades [11]. It is always the starting point of rebellions and the great bastion of several armed groups [12] that loot the country and its structures. Accordingly, commonly speaking, enterprises that evolve in

this area are submitted to a very hostile, uncertain and unsettled environment for the economic business emergence. Indeed, basic infrastructures are in state of great cleavage and/or nearly non-existent in some regions of the area as a result multiform insecurity. The foreign enterprises hardly reach the region and those that dare to reach there must make it either via the national enterprises, either to get on well with this hostility or to deliberately contravene the law.

While considering this long period of multidimensional instability and economic discomfort that enterprises go through in the East of D.R.C., it is nearly certain that the economic opening accompanied by the return to the socioeconomic order constitutes some challenges to these enterprises mainly because of the lack of preparation. In fact, the situation that the region is undergoing impacts in a way or another the choice of competitive strategies applied by domestic enterprises in D.R.C. Thereafter, these enterprises must catch up before it gets late and therefore hope to escape next risks of economic asphyxia [13] that can occur with the effectiveness of the agreements of the ACFTA. This is the main motive of this research.

From these concerns, this paper aims at presenting the state of the competitive strategies currently applied by D.R.C. enterprises at the eve of the effectiveness of the agreements of the ACFTA and thus recommending a strategic diagram to prepare D.R.C. domestic enterprises to the issue. In free trade, the key of the competitive success remains the capacity of innovation so that organizations can manage to provide specific products of quality and quantity worthy of hyper-competitiveness [14]. The competitiveness of enterprises lies in the expertise to develop new knowledge that promotes innovation [15].

In the East of the D.R.C., many enterprises do not stand for five years of existence [16] because of the bad business environment. Asphyxiated by their environment, these enterprises abandon the economic sector; leave their activities and then leading their workers to unemployment. Most of them lose control because of the lack of deliberate or specific strategies for their activities. A multiplicity of strategies is used at the meantime [13] therefore striking a specific, deliberate and suitable strategy in such an environment. The lack of a specific strategy leads to the appreciation difficulty of the contributions of these different strategies applied within these enterprises. It would denote the indifference or the problem of the ignorance in this most fundamental matter. In this respect, we should present a strategic diagram to apply in the next economic opening period for a strategic resilience of the local enterprise in the East of the D.R.C.

In sum, this paper aims at:

- a) Clarifying the factors that influence the strategic choices in an enterprise;
- b) Sorting out the relation that would exist between these factors and the competitiveness of these enterprises;
- c) Discovering the opinion of enterprises in relation to the economic discomfort that the East of the DR. Congo goes through.

Review of the Literature

Some internal and external factors are more susceptible to directly influence the strategic choice and the competitiveness of enterprises. In modern literature, there are many factors among which we are going to consider only the following: Factors belonging to the enterprise or factors that the enterprise can control are commonly called internal environment (strengths and the weaknesses). These include the size of the enterprise and the domain of activity in which the enterprise operates [17, 18, 19]. together with the profile of the enterprise manager, i.e., his level of survey as a determinant of business competitiveness, among many other factors [20].

The domain of activity or the area is a great determinant in the quest of the enterprise competitiveness as it is revealed in Benoit studies achieved in the field of chemistry [21]. In the works of Levratto and his colleague, the legal shape of the enterprise plays a major role in the enterprise competitiveness [22]. For these authors, the fact that an enterprise is individual or a partnership plays a paramount role in decision making and then on the enterprise strategies. Accordingly, our first hypothesis (H1) stipulates that the enterprise internal factors (size, type, domain of activity and the manager instruction level) directly influence the competitiveness of enterprises in the East of the D.R.C.

Variables that are manageable by the enterprise are not the only ones to impact on its competitiveness. Many others, that are external, exist and significantly influence its strategies and its competitiveness as reflected in the PEST analyses and PESTELS [23, 24]. In fact, the political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal factors meaningfully impact on the daily life of enterprises. It is in this perspective that some states protect their local enterprises against the outside competition while making use of tariff and nontariff constraints by protectionism [25, 26].

Protectionism is always applied until today despite the existence of several agreements going towards restriction. A long time ago, the protectionism border was the object of the various struggles as it is the case for agreements of the free trade Area between the United States, Canada and Mexico (NAFTA) [27], the current United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA). Other countries make use of the voluntary deterioration of the change course to

try to create an advantageous degree and then promote their local enterprises [28]. Sometimes, to encourage dumping, subventions are granted in quantity to national enterprises to facilitate their penetration strategy [29]. The area culture and customs also influence the actions of the enterprises.

From the above literature, one easily understands that procedures can willingly be conceived outside of the enterprise to impact its competitiveness to a certain extent that it cannot control. Thus, the environment encompasses factors that impose themselves and that have direct consequences on the life of enterprises as the social responsibility [30] and/or even security factors. Let's qualify this factor as "economic discomfort" because we suppose it unfit to the economic development or the persistent "insecurity". This factor influences in fair means and foul enterprises and their competitive resilience. Being part of environmental factor, external the environmental discomfort constitutes protectionist constraint to promote the national business but differently perceived despite features that this one can include (H2). The perception of the managers of enterprises would be subject to features that encompass the enterprise.

Consequently, to hold position on their market, enterprises adopt specific strategies according to their distinct features (H3). The enterprises of small sizes would adopt different strategies in relation to others to keep their competitiveness. Figure 1 below represents the alleged interactions between the different variables under study in this paper.

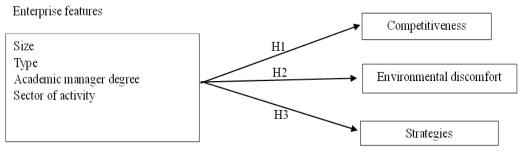


Figure 1. Ripple Effect Between Factors in Companies

Materials and Methods

This paper focuses on the strategies in application in the domestic enterprises of the North - Kivu province to the East-center of D.R.C. Thus, in its descriptive approach, it is an investigation led by 155 enterprises that accepted to participate in the investigation. In practice, there would be 400 enterprises regularly registered in the report of the GDI [31] (General Office of Taxes) in 2021 that we wanted to participate in the investigation. Nonetheless, because of the political and security context in the region, only 155 answered our questions. Accordingly, in this exploratory, descriptive and correlational

research, the analyses are based on data directly collected from managers of enterprises during the second semester of the year 2022 and the first semester of 2023. These managers answered a printed questionnaire composed of closed questions based on the scale of Likert in five levels.

The data analysis has been facilitated by the software SPSS (Statistical Package heart the Social Sciences) V.21 and Microsoft Excel V.2013. After the nominal data have been converted into numeric ones, the T-Student test has facilitated the comparison of the averages and the relation between different variables. The table 1 represents the main variables that we had to manipulate.

Table 1. Main Variables

Aggregate	Indicators	Constituent Elements	Hypothesis
Feature of the	Size	Small and middle	
enterprise		enterprises Big	
Explanatory		enterprise	
variable	Type	Individual, Familial	
		association, Non	
		familial association	
	Manager	Less than State	
	instruction level	diploma State Diploma	
		Academic	
	Sector of activity	General trade of goods	
		and services	
		Agricultural and	
		mining exploitation	
		Industrial and artisanal	
		production	
Competitiveness	Beneficiary	Appreciation	H1
Explained	margin		
Variable	Part of the market	Appreciation	
	Turnover	Appreciation	
Environmental	Appreciation of	Quality threat	H2
discomfort	the effects (+ or -)	Quantity threat	
Explained		Price threat	
Variable			
Strategies	Applications	Strategies based on	Н3
Explained		price	
Variable		Structural strategies	

Source: Our Investigation

Result

From the result below, the table 2 shows that the majority of enterprises of the North-Kivu province is constituted of enterprises of very small sizes around 66.45 percent of all enterprises contacted. On the other hand, one realizes that 59.35 percent are individual whereas all these enterprises are generally

commercial (general trade of goods and services, import and export), 79.35 percent. Only some, 10.32 percent, are in the industrial and artisanal production, altogether. As to the manager level of instruction of these enterprises, it is noted that more than 65 percent of these have an academic level and would understand the importance of this research better

Table 2. Enterprises Classification According to Their Features

Variables	Details	Number	Percentage
Company size	Less than 10 employees	103	66.45
	10 to 49 employees	41	26.45
	50 to 499 employees	11	7.10
Compony type	Individual	92	59.35
	Familial association	32	20.65
	Non familial association	31	20.00
Sector of main	General Commerce	123	79.35
activity	Industrial & Artisanal Production	16	10.32
	Agricultural, Forest and/or Mining Exploitation	16	10.32
Manager level	Less than State diploma	10	6.45
of instruction	struction State diploma		27.74
	Academic	102	65.81

Source: The Total of Each Group is 155 Companies

These four parameters directly or indirectly influence the opinion of managers of enterprises. However, it has been revealed that enterprises, searching competitiveness, use strategies in a disordered way. On average, all enterprises agree to use all strategies under survey whatever is the nature of the strategy (structural or based on the price).

The table 3 shows that a meaningful influence relation exists between the size of the

enterprise and the strategies adopted and its competitiveness appreciation whereas this size does not influence to anything the appreciation of the environmental discomfort. One particularly notes that the type of enterprise does not present any statistically meaningful correlation with its competitiveness, its adopted strategies and the appreciation made for the discomfort.

Table 3. Bilateral Correlation Among Variables

		Company size	Company type	Activity Sector	Manager level of instruction	Adopted strategies	Competitiveness appreciation	Discomfort appreciation
Company size	Pearson correlation	1	.402**	.042	284**	161*	251**	.053
	Bilateral sig.		.000	.605	.000	.045	.002	.510

Commonweather	D	.402**	1	076	000	055	012	055
Company type	Pearson	.402	1	.076	090	055	013	.055
	correlation							
	Bilateral sig.	.000		.347	.264	.497	.870	.500
Main activity	Pearson	.042	.076	1	069	.206*	.090	.051
sector	correlation							
	Bilateral sig.	.605	.347		.395	.010	.263	.532
Instruction level	Pearson	284**	090	069	1	.140	.129	.031
Manager	correlation							
	Bilateral sig.	.000	.264	.395		.083	.109	.700
Adopted	Pearson	161*	055	.206*	.140	1	.234**	022
Strategies	correlation							
	Bilateral sig.	.045	.497	.010	.083		.003	.789
Competitiveness	Pearson	251**	013	.090	.129	.234**	1	.075
Appreciation	correlation							
	Bilateral sig.	.002	.870	.263	.109	.003		.351
Discomfort	Pearson	.053	.055	.051	.031	022	.075	1
appreciation	correlation							
	Bilateral sig.	.510	.500	.532	.700	.789	.351	
	N	155	155	155	155	155	155	155

^{**}The correlation is meaningful to the level 0.01 (bilateral)

Although enterprises relate a positive opinion showing that the economic discomfort constitutes an advantage to them through indication "Agreement", it is noticed that this decision does not have any statistically meaningful relation with the size of the enterprise, the main activity sector, the manager level of instruction and the type of enterprise.

The appreciation of the environmental discomfort as presented in the table 4 shows that the investigated enterprises get a certain advantage from the unhealthy socioeconomic situation that stops foreign enterprises from flooding the local market with big quantities of products at low prices, and of superior qualities in relation to the local products.

Table 4. Appreciation of the environmental discomfort

	Average	Verbal
Specific Item	Score	Interpretation
We sell as strangers do not threaten us with their less expensive products.	2.90	Agreement
We sell as strangers do not threaten us with their products of good quality.	2.88	Agreement
It decreases competition while eliminating some local enterprises.	2.90	Agreement
Our businesses evolve too quickly in relation to the period of peace.	3.24	Neutral
Global average score	2.82	Agreement

Discussion

The above result presents a certain number of similarities and divergences with studies already achieved before. As to applied strategies in the targeted enterprises, a relation exists between the size of the enterprise and

adopted strategies. This is in harmony with the work of Ben Mlouka [19] that proves that the size is determinant in the performance of enterprises. The fact that Congolese enterprises do not adopt a certain number of specific strategies rhyme with the findings of of

^{*}The correlation is meaningful to the level 0.05 (bilateral)

Balemba [13] achieved in Goma in the same province that prove that enterprises use a plurality of strategies in the searching for their competitiveness. On the other hand, these enterprises are not the only ones to practice the hybrid strategies making use of structural strategies and those based on the price. The enterprise Venus Sapico makes use of it as demonstrated by Moustafa [32].

It seems that the strategy of innovation is mingled with other strategies and is not adopted with any specificity. And yet, this should be the basis of the competitiveness of these enterprises. These enterprises will go through some difficulties if one considers the work of TOUFIK [15] that relates that the present economic ultra-competition must be defeated by the specialization that is the fruit of a very thoughtful innovation.

The fact that the majority of the enterprises is commercial is also revealed in the report of the African Union [9] in which it is noted that enterprises and African countries are more purchasers. The few enterprises that would be said producers are, to a great extent, producers of products of the primary sector. On the other hand, contrary to the idea of KUTU [20] that found that the level of instruction of the manager had meaningful correlation with the competitiveness of the enterprises, here the level of instruction does not have some. The level of instruction only correlates meaningfully with the size of the enterprise. It does not have any correlation neither with competitiveness and strategies nor with the manager's opinions on the environmental discomfort.

Conclusion

The economic opening is a great opportunity for enterprises that possess what to exchange to a big challenge for enterprises that are not able to take advantage on an open market. The region in survey, that is the North-Kivu Province, presents some indications that do not prove that the economic opening will explicitly be an opportunity to its advancement.

Currently, the local enterprise is thrashing about the hybrid strategy adoption to guarantee its survival and its competitiveness. However, at the time of the economic opening and the resumption of the order capable to guarantee a good climate of business, this strategy may not be sufficient to counter the foreign suppliers who will be able to flood the local market.

Indeed, the fact that the environmental discomfort situation constitutes restriction against foreign enterprises and encourages national enterprises to progress despite all foreign threats is a weakness. Although the appreciation of this environmental discomfort is not bound to features enterprises under investigation, the domain of activity influences adopted strategies. On this side, the government must orient the domains of activities so that enterprises become more producers than commercial.

Local enterprises are more commercial than industrial. More than 79 percent among them brokers of foreign products and this supposes that the local production is minimal. This situation will also have some repercussions on the competitiveness of the nation. Thus, if it happens that this situation is the average of the nation, the D.R.C. runs the risk of becoming the purchaser or the consumer at the time of the effectiveness of the continental African free trade.

The great degree of innovation that nowadays economic world does not require would, indeed, not be achieved in the sale and resale of products manufactured by others whereas these producers will have the same right to reach the same market like resellers. On the other hand, as the domains of activity of the enterprise influence its strategies and that strategies determine the degree of competitiveness, there is a breach that politicians can exploit for the sake of the local enterprise instead relying on illegal protectionism.

Suggestion et Recommendation

May the public power involve itself to reorient the economic action particularly in North-Kivu province, and in general, everywhere in the country and define mechanisms to promote producer enterprises that there may be sufficient of what to supply on the market at the time of the economic opening. It would be too difficult to take proportional advantages if one does not produce in quantity and in quality.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that there is no conflict-of-interest issue related to this research work.

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