

Constraints to Participation in Strategy-Making: Evidence from a State-Owned Enterprise in Ethiopia

Gemechis Terfa Eticha¹, Olof Brunninge², Workneh Kassa Tessema³

Abstract

Strategy making has been considered the purview of top management. Hence, participation in strategy making is often considered a non-issue and not much research has been done on this topic. Even extant research on this subject is predominantly in the context of the developed countries. This paper explores the nature of participation in strategy making in a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in the context of a developing country, Ethiopia. Following a qualitative approach, involving in-depth interviews with managers and employees, the paper explores the dynamics of participation in the strategy making process. Our findings reveal that strategy making was a mere formality in the past. However, the recent liberalization of the sector and the entry of a competitor into the industry have forced the company to take strategy making seriously. Currently, there are attempts to engage the lower-level managers and employees in strategy making processes, at least in the input gathering stages. Our findings also show that participation is constrained by both organizational and socio-cultural factors. A hierarchical structure and decision-making processes limit the participation of a broader range of employees in strategy making processes. Socio-cultural factors further exacerbate these constraints, as high-power distance systematically discourages the participation of those in the lower ranks of the hierarchy.

Keywords: Strategy, strategy making, participation, state-owned enterprises, Ethiopia

¹ Department of Management, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, Email: gemechisterfa@gmail.com

² Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping, Sweden, Email: olof.brunninge@ju.se

³ Department of Management, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, Email: worknehtessema@gmail.com

Introduction

Conventional strategy research has treated strategy making as an activity of the top-level managers (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Nag et al., 2007; Pettigrew, 1992). The conventional view of strategy, hence, considers participation as a non-issue (Laine & Vaara, 2015). This view is challenged by strategy process research in which participation is treated as a natural part of strategy, both formal and emergent strategy processes (Laine & Vaara, 2015).

Participation is a key issue in strategy research in general (Laine & Vaara, 2015; Luedicke et al., 2017; Mack & Szulanski, 2017, Mantere & Vaara, 2008) and a central issue in strategy as practice research that deals with the activities of multiple actors and the practices they draw on in strategizing in particular (Laine & Vaara, 2015). Participation in strategy can increase the diversity of strategic ideas (Aten & Thomas, 2016; Stieger et al., 2012), increase commitment (Barton & Ambrosini, 2013; Mantere & Vaara, 2008), and improve the implementation the strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Hutter et al., 2017; Mantere & Vaara, 2008). In contrast, lack of participation can result in poorly developed strategies (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000), ineffective implementation (Mintzberg 1994; Sterling, 2003) and dissatisfaction among excluded actors (Westley, 1990).

Mantere & Vaara (2008) argue that the issue of participation is related to the basic assumptions about the nature of strategy work. This could be the reason why the focus of strategy research so far has mainly been on top managers and to some extent middle managers. Relatively few studies have focused on other stakeholders as strategic actors (for example, Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Nordqvist & Melin, 2008). Moreover, very few studies have specifically addressed what promotes or impedes the participation of lower-level managers and employees in strategy making. For example, Mantere & Vaara (2008) studied strategy processes and identified strategy discourses that promoted and constrained participation in strategy making.

We still know little about what promotes or constrains the participation of lower-level managers and employees in strategy making. In addition, in the western context, existing participation in strategy studies is predominantly of the business organizations. The African contexts have been under researched in the management literature (Barnard, 2020; Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2018;

Zoogah & Nkomo, 2013; Zoogah et al., 2015) and in strategy literature in particular. According to Darbi and Coffie (2021), even extant strategic management research in Africa is highly skewed towards the traditional strategy content research with a focus on formal strategy and micro-economic analyses.

It is with this background that Laine & Vaara (2015) suggest the need for studies that focus on analyzing institutional and cultural differences in participation and its role in enabling or constraining participation. The authors emphasize that the existing conceptions of strategy work are mostly dominated by western origin and hence it is important to research the practices of participation in different cultural contexts. Vaara et al. (2019) also raise a similar concern about the need to understand the nature of strategy making and the role that participation plays in it in different cultural contexts. This study, hence, complements the research in this area by studying strategy making and the role of participation in it in a State-owned Enterprise (SOE) taking different institutional and cultural context.

Empirically, this study focuses on how strategy is made in a SOE in Ethiopia and the role that participation plays in it. The case and the context allow us to understand relevant contextual factors that affect strategy making and participation's role in it. Research on the subject in SOEs also addresses a research gap because this study is in a different cultural and organizational context. It sheds light on the complexities in participation in strategy making in SOEs in an African context. To our knowledge, there are no studies that address how the socio-cultural context in a country where a company is based may influence (non) participation of employees in strategy making. In addition, strategy research conducted in an African context is dominated by quantitative and micro-level economic concerns (Eticha et al., 2024). This paper contributes to addressing these gaps. Despite its focus on Ethiopia, this research can have broader implications beyond the country and beyond Africa. We identify four constraints to participation (mythification of the strategist, fear of consequences, secrecy of strategy and lack of trust and limited experience of meaningful participation) that can be relevant in other geographic areas too, albeit with somewhat different expressions, depending on the respective context.

This paper makes two main contributions: by exploring strategy making in a different organizational and national context, it shows how context influences even the expectation for

participation by those outside the top management circle. Our study contributes to participation in strategy-making research (Laine & Vaara, 2015; Friesl et al., 2023; Vaara & Rantakari, 2024) by providing insights on constraints to participation in a non-western and different institutional context.

Participation in strategy studies

In this paper, participation is defined as “a conscious and intended effort by individuals at higher level in an organization to provide visible extra-role or role-expanding opportunities for individuals or groups at a lower level in the organization to have a greater voice in one or more areas of organizational performance” (Glew et al., 1995; p.402).

An academic discussion on employee participation in decision making in organizations has a long history. For instance, Argyris (1955) presented participation as a dilemma for both the employees and the management. He argued that it would be difficult for managers to observe the management principles without creating difficulties for the employees. Similarly, it would be difficult for employees to achieve an ‘ideal personality expression’ without affecting the implementation of the management principles. Dachler & Wilper (1978) also discuss a broad conceptual framework for participation in organizations in terms of three characteristics: formal-informal, direct-indirect, and the extent of influence that employees have in decision-making. However, despite its long history, the issue of participation in strategy making has received insufficient attention.

Traditional strategy literature assumes that top managers are the central decision makers in strategy formulation while others are considered implementers. Participation of others is, hence, considered a nonissue (Laine & Vaara, 2015; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Vaara et al., 2019). Pietila et al. (2024) presents a paradoxical situation in which the legacy of a hierarchical strategy tradition was integrated into the strategy discourse, yet people were still expected to participate in the strategy process, resulting in "cosmetic" participation. Limited experience of traditional strategists and other actors with participatory practices may constrain participation in strategy-making (Langenmayr et al., 2024).

The strategy process research positions the middle managers as important strategic actors. The strategy process research stream argues that the middle managers have more influence on organizational performance than the top managers (Currie & Proctor, 2005). Though strategy process research has not focused explicitly on participation, a lot of the early contributors provided important insights about participation (for example, Burgelman 1991, 1994; Mintzberg, 1978; Pettigrew 1992). One of the early important changes in focus is the work of Mintzberg (1978) and Mintzberg & Waters (1985). Though their work is not on participation per se, it is implied in the emergent nature of strategies realized outside the intentions of the top managers and strategy as an outcome of multiple actions. Burgelman (1983) also discusses the strategic process at firms' level and the process of strategic behavior at the middle level and acknowledges that autonomous strategic initiatives at the operational and middle levels of an organization precede corporate level changes. Bower's (1974) study presents strategy making as a process spread over the management hierarchy that involves both a bottom up and a top-down multilayered process. Strategy process research, though not focusing on participation per se, pushed the focus away from the top managers to the processes through which strategies are formulated (Vaara et al., 2019). As a result, the role of middle managers as strategic actors has been recognized in strategy process research (for example, Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992, 1996; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990).

Participation of other organizational actors has been linked with the integration of diverse ideas and superior strategy formulation (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990); improved implementation of strategies due to increased commitment (Guth & Macmillan, 1986); motivation for middle managers (Westley, 1990); reduction in integration problems (Ketokivi & Castaner, 2004); a positive economic performance (Andersen, 2004); collective sense making (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and increased innovativeness and legitimacy (Pregmark & Berggren, 2021). For instance, Ketokivi & Castaner (2004), show that employees' participation in strategic planning and communicating the results will reduce employees' pursuit of sub-unit goals. The authors argue that this will likely lead to better integration and increased commitment to organizational goals.

Strategy as practice (SAP) studies have also focused on the role of middle managers and strategic actors (Tavella, 2021; Vaara et al., 2019). SAP focuses on strategy practices (routinized behavior which includes norms, traditions, or procedures for thinking and acting), strategy

practitioners (the people who are involved in the doing of strategy), and strategy praxis (the actual activity that people do in practice) (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington 2006).

Strategy as practice studies, just like strategy process research, informed us about participation without necessarily explicitly focusing on participation (for example, Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Balogun et al., 2015; Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). For instance, in their study of how strategic planning brings about integration, Jarzabkowski & Balogun (2009), show how middle managers resist centralized strategy thereby changing the strategy process and be part of the strategy making process. The authors show that integration results from active negotiations and compromises between different actors in different units with varying interests. Paroutis & Pettigrew (2007) also describe the active collaboration between the central and peripheral strategy teams during the strategy making process. The authors show how frequent collaborations and interactions between those at the center and those at the periphery enable the teams at the periphery to play an increasingly active role in the strategic planning process. In addition, Balogun & Johnson (2004) show that middle managers engage in the interpretation of actions, rumors, and gossip to develop a collective understanding of strategic change.

Some SAP scholars have addressed the issue of participation by focusing on discursive practices (Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Tavella, 2021; Thomas et al., 2011). For instance, Thomas et al. (2011) show how senior managers use discursive practices such as dismissing, reiterating, and invoking authority for opposing middle managers' meanings and in essence challenge their attempt at participation in implementing change. In addition, Laine & Vaara (2007) show how top managers use specific discursive practices to gain control and restrict the role of others and how middle managers use discourses such as 'pioneering' or 'more progressive' as an alternative to the hegemonic discourses of the corporate management, thereby resisting the official strategy discourses. On the other hand, Tavella (2021) shows how middle managers take the initiative to participate in strategizing and use discursive practices (such as moralizing and emotionalizing) to convince top managers and facilitate the inclusion of operating employees. While these studies have informed us about (non) participation, they are limited to the discursive aspects.

SAP scholars have also explored the involvement of non-managerial and other external actors in strategizing. For instance, Nordqvist & Melin (2008) discuss the involvement of consultants in strategy making as strategic planning champions playing the role of social craft persons, artful interpreters and known strangers. Rouleau (2005) explores how middle managers interact with customers and influence strategy making. In addition, Balogun et al. (2015) explore how front-line workers (tour guides) engage the audience as participants and contribute to the organization's realized strategy.

Another research stream that has recently explicitly focused on participation is open strategy. Open strategy is often conceptualized in terms of dimensions of inclusion and transparency (Seidl et al., 2019; Whittington et al., 2011). Inclusion refers to the involvement of actors outside the top management circle in the strategy making process while transparency refers to sharing strategy documents or information with others outside the top management team (Whittington et al., 2011). However, in open strategy, inclusion is distinguished from participation. Though there is some overlap with participation, the concept of inclusion is broad in the sense that it extends beyond the boundaries of the firm to incorporate outside actors such as customers, suppliers, and consultants (Hansen et al, 2022; Whittington et al., 2011). In addition, relative to participation research, open strategy focuses on wider and more inclusive practices. Moreover, though there is an overlap between open strategy and participation in strategy studies, participation mainly focuses on internal inclusion in strategy making (Laine & Vaara, 2015).

Overall, despite advances in research on the issue, there are still limited studies that focus explicitly on participation, particularly on what promotes or impedes participation in strategy making in general and the role of lower-level managers and employees in particular (Vaara & Laine, 2015; Vaara et al., 2019). In addition, most of the scholarly research (both the strategy process and SAP research) addressing participation in strategy outside the top management team has focused on the middle management (Garlick, 2021). Moreover, our knowledge of the issue in other culturally and institutionally different contexts such as Africa is limited.

Methods of the Study

This paper explores how strategy is made in a SOE in Ethiopia and the role that participation plays in it.

Research Design

We followed a case study approach to collect data from multiple sources (Yin, 2003). A case study (see Appendix A for the case study protocol) approach is preferred because it enables us to study the issue in great detail within its important context (Stake, 1995). The research setting is an East African country, Ethiopia. Ethiopia is a suitable context for this research because there has been a call for participation in strategy research in an institutional and cultural context that is different from the west from where most of the research so far has originated (Vaara et al., 2019). In addition, two of the authors of this paper are from Ethiopia and they understand the nuances of the socio-cultural context well. The company selected for the case is Ethio-telecom (ET), a telecom operator in Ethiopia. This company was selected because of accessibility due to the first author's personal connections in the company. In addition, the changing telecom business environment in the country and the resulting focus on strategy making is suitable for our study. The expectation of competition motivated the company to engage in developing a three-year corporate strategy called BRIDGE for the period 2019-22 and a LEAD growth strategy for 2023-25.

Data Collection

The main data source is semi-structured interviews with middle level managers, lower-level managers and employees. Semi structured interviews are used because they provide a focused structure for discussions during interviews while allowing for participants' individual expressions (Kallio et al., 2016). A total of 23 interviews were conducted and 20 of them were recorded. Three respondents did not want the interviews to be recorded so we took extensive notes instead. We decided to conduct no further interviews after realizing that the last three interviews repeated concepts from earlier ones, indicating that we had reached a saturation point (Saunders et al., 2018; Given, 2016). The interviews lasted between 39 minutes to 88 minutes.

Interviews were conducted between August 2020 and April 2023, allowing us to capture some processual development over time.

We used a semi-structured interview guide that focused on the respondents' general view of strategy, strategist, strategy tools, participation, and their experience of strategy making in the company and related events or activities. Interviewees were asked to recall recent experiences with strategy making episodes such as strategy meetings conducted to gather inputs at division or departmental levels, or strategy validation meetings conducted with the aim of seeking feedback on the draft strategy document. Respondents were also asked to reflect on and compare how strategy was made in the past and how it is currently being made. In addition, the nature of employees and managers' participation in the process was also addressed in the interviews. We also asked specific questions about what enabled and impeded participation in the recently prepared corporate strategy. We also used notes from informal conversations with managers and employees at various levels in the organization's management hierarchy. Further, we also referred to various documents such as company profile and transcripts of the media briefings about strategy.

Data Analysis

All but three interviews were recorded. The recorded interviews were all transcribed. Extensive notes were taken during the three interviews that were not recorded. Preliminary analysis began immediately after each interview in the form of taking notes and personal reflections on the informal conversation before and after the interviews.

Following Braun & Clarke (2006), we analyzed the data thematically. Braun and Clarke (2006) offer a flexible yet rigorous framework for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data. In addition, thematic analysis provides flexibility of including both semantic and latent, and inductive and deductive elements (Braun et al., 2016). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and we read and re-read for familiarization. Initial codes were generated with attention to recurring ideas related to enablers and constraints to participation in the strategy processes. Coding was conducted manually, and early codes were compiled into a working codebook to enable consistency and transparency.

In the next stage, the initial codes were examined for patterns and grouped into broader themes that captured the *strategy making context, participation in strategy making and constraints to*

participation. Themes were iteratively reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure they were distinct, coherent, and linked to the research question (Braun et al., 2016). Given the relatively limited research on participation in strategy-making within this type of institutional and socio-cultural setting, the analysis remained open to context-specific meanings. Development of the themes was informed by thorough discussion and peer debriefing to enhance credibility and minimize researcher bias. The final themes were illustrated using representative quotes to ensure depth and authenticity.

Ethical considerations

The data for this study have been collected in Ethiopia, following common practice and ethical regulations applicable in the country. A formal ethical approval was secured from Addis Ababa University. In addition, we have followed the Helsinki Declaration, notably regarding the informed verbal consent of all interviewees and their anonymization.

Major Findings

This section of the article summarizes our findings from the ET case. We start by presenting the strategizing context, that is, the reasons why ET changed its approach to strategy making and how strategy making is supposed to be done in the company today. After that, we identify and discuss four main constraints to participation in strategy making: mythification of the strategist, fear of consequences, secrecy and lack of trust, and limited experience of meaningful participation.

Strategy Making Context

2010 was an important milestone in the history of the company. Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (ETC) was changed to Ethio-telecom (ET). France Télécom (FT) was brought in as a management contractor, in order to modernize the organization and to prepare it for a possible liberalization of the market later. For two and a half years, managers from FT acted as advisors to ET's management and played a central role in decisions regarding a new business model, the restructuring of the company, developing a new strategy, and introducing new business practices. Many interviewees in our study saw the involvement of FT as the beginning of taking strategy

making seriously at ET. The French managers emphasized a broader involvement of staff in the strategy making process and encouraged employees to speak up their minds to their managers during meetings. ET's organization changed from being a bureaucratic public agency to acting more like a business organization.

The lack of business orientation in previous years at ET was not surprising given the period socialist rule Ethiopia went through from 1974-1991. Inefficient SOEs dominated businesses including banking, manufacturing, big farms, telecom and energy (Amha, 2017). Even the EPRDF party that was in power from 1991-2018, had Marxist roots. Hence, economic reforms progressed slowly and top-down policy making continued to dominate the country including its SOEs (Hagmann & Abbink, 2011). The Prosperity Party, which came to power in 2018 speeded up economic liberalization, including opening up of the telecom sector to foreign competitors. ET, with roots dating back to 1894, was characterized by a monopolistic legacy. The monopoly in the telecom sector was not broken till 2022 when Kenyan operator Safaricom entered Ethiopian telecom market. Since 2018, ET had been prepared for the upcoming competition with its BRIDGE growth strategy, including the launching of the mobile payment system Telebirr. A follow-up strategy called LEAD was launched in 2022. The company now has a separate division with a chief strategy officer directly reporting to the CEO. The division is responsible for overseeing the company's strategy making process. It has representatives in all the divisions who report to it.

The following table (table 1) highlights the progress the company has made over the last five years using selected performance indicators.

Selected indicators as of June 30, 2024	As of June 30, 2024	Percentage change compared to June 30, 2023 (1 year)	Percentage change compared to June 30, 2020 (5 years)
Number of employees	16,742		
Total number of customers	82,000,000		
Total Revenue	ETB 91,371,290,000	Increase in 27.75%	Increase in 91.8%
NET profit	ETB 18,882,966,000	Increase in 5.5%	Increase in 99.8%
Total assets	ETB 214,191,635,000	Increase in 7.28%	Increase in 171.5%

Table 1: Selected performance indicators for ET summarized from (Audit Services Corporation, 2024)

Participation in strategy making

Since the involvement of FT as management contractor, there has been an increased involvement of lower-level managers and employees, at least in the early phases of strategy making.

One of the practices that is enabling participation of employees is the use of strategy tools. The lower-level managers and employees use the strategy tools (for example, 7S model, BSC, SWOT, and PESTLE) that have been formally introduced to the company as analysis and input gathering tools. The strategy tools facilitate discussions among the participants by framing their ideas thereby enabling a collective understanding of the issues under discussion.

“...the strategy tools help us frame our ideas. When we use the tools, our ideas will be framed. If we take the 7S model, for instance, it frames our discussion and it's very helpful. It also makes putting our ideas on paper easier.....let me take the 7S model as an example again. There is a theoretical description of each of the S's but we do not stick to that definition. We use our own contexts and we use the model to frame our discussion” CMI

The tools and templates in use made the language of strategy relatively accessible to the employees who may not have been able to be part of the conversation earlier.

“Nowadays, strategic themes are used in any presentation to increase their visibility to employees. Next to the title page, strategic themes come in any presentation. Our company has 6 strategic themes, and they are always displayed in presentations labeled as ‘bridges’. This encourages people to know our strategies, to engage with them and to participate in strategy making.” CMI

The routinized use of PowerPoint presentations to discuss strategy in meetings was introduced recently at the company. Anyone who presides over formal meetings is expected to display the strategic themes and briefly discuss them before proceeding to the main agenda of the meeting. This practice also encourages informal discussions on strategy that have become more common since the introduction of the BRIDGE strategy in 2018. A request for providing inputs

goes down the management hierarchy in the form of filling templates or forms individually or gathering inputs using predetermined strategy tools (7S framework, SWOT) in a group setting. Employees are also asked to provide feedback on the draft strategy in meetings. The meetings are often organized at the division level. The participants, however, consider such general strategy validation workshops a mere formality because of lack of time to think through it and provide feedback. They have access to only the live PowerPoint presentation as access to the strategy document is limited to a selected few people in the top management circle.

Though there is an increased call for participation in the early stages of strategy making including the lower levels of management, strategy formulation and access to strategy documents and other documents deemed strategically important is confined to the top managers. The idea generation phase is open for all though there are practices that constrain the extent to which it has materialized. The strategy formulation phase is often open only for a select few who make up a strategy committee which is formally established with the blessings of the top managers.

Constraints to participation

Numerous interviewees at ET reported that they did not perceive a genuine participation in the strategy process. Participation was often symbolic without an opportunity to influence strategy and there was limited willingness by employees to engage in the strategy making process. In the following sections we present the four main constraints to participation.

Mythification of the strategist

We use the label ‘mythification’ because of how strategists and their jobs are given qualities that are far from reality. Participants tend to elevate the strategists to a legendary status thereby distancing themselves from the role. One director, referring to strategists, remarked: “... their vision should be broad; they should be able to scan the environment, identify new trends, and do complex analyses based on the information gathered” (Director 2)

There was a clear tendency to associate the work of strategy mostly with the top management team. Strategy is considered by the participants as an exclusive activity of top managers and only a selected group of few other organizational members. For example, a chief officer said:

“..when you say a strategist, I think of the top leader. I think of the CEO level. At the lower level, the employees’ concern should be whether they are carrying out their assignments or not. They should not worry about whether the company should be sold or not, whether it should expand or shrink, these are strategic issues beyond their immediate influence.” CO1

In addition, the managers tend to doubt the knowledge and capability of those in the lower ranks to contribute strategic ideas and hence exclude them from participating in strategic discussions. This could be one of the reasons why even input gathering efforts do not practically reach the lower levels. A manager or supervisor who believes that he/she can write down issues or ideas perceived to be strategically important in his/her department can do so without involving subordinates. The company did not have any mechanism for ensuring that the participation goes all the way down to the lower ranks.

“People who are responsible for daily administrative issues are not strategists for me. Lower level managers and employees know what is expected of them. There are targets to meet for them and I think there is not much strategic about it. If I take my division as an example, directors working under me are less involved in daily routines. I think they are expected to be strategic in that sense. Our strategy is made up there. However, the directors are also expected to strategically implement it.” CO1

The participants’ view of a strategist reflected the traditional top-down view of strategy and the top managers’ power over ‘final say’ was considered natural. It was common to associate top managers with strategy, ‘broad vision’, ‘the whole picture’, ‘superior knowledge’ and an image of a person sitting in a higher place and looking down with a better view of the organization, industry and the general environment. These labels show how top managers are given a mythic status in the organization, thereby creating a sense that other actors don’t have the capacity to play that role.

A chief officer confirmed this elitist view that the employees should focus on their daily activities and leave the big things for the CEO to worry about. This practice of mythification of a strategist may actually reinforce non-participatory practices in the organizations.

This view is, however, not limited to the top managers. There seemed to be acceptance of a top-down strategy making at the case company. One respondent said:

“I don't have any problem if the inception and the formulation is done at the top taking lower-level management and employees' opinions into consideration. Through strategy orientation, other employees can be introduced to and acquainted with it.” Manager 3

The mythification of the strategist may relate to the high-power distance nature of the national context. There is a tendency and expectation to accept hierarchical order without question and respect for the authority of elders and those in power is the norm. This seems to be practically reflected in participation in strategy making in the case company because lower-level managers and employees seemed to accept the top-down approach with little or no challenge. The terms ‘cascading’ and ‘orientation’ were often used for describing participation of others in strategy making.

Propositions

P1: Mythification of the strategist leads to limited participation of employees in strategy making

Fear of Consequences

The wider political environment in the country affects organizational practices. It is particularly true in SOEs where most of the higher managerial positions are held by people affiliated with the ruling party. Employees do not like challenging ideas or initiatives out of fear that it may be misinterpreted as their opinions being politically motivated. Participants claimed that fear of being labeled as troublemakers was now reducing due to the change in regime in 2018. The political tension in the country has been used as an instrument to silence anyone with an opinion that challenges the ideas of those in power in the organization in the past. One participant said:

“This is a public enterprise, and the government is the main stakeholder. It is very difficult to separate politics from what we do. For example, in annual meetings many people are afraid to give comments for fear of being misinterpreted. There is a tendency for people to fear that their ideas may be politicized” Director1

While fear of consequences, resulting from political instability and the country's legacy of authoritarian regimes, reduces participation in strategy making, we argue that this effect is moderated by the ownership form of the firm as well as the formalization of the strategy making context. The blurred boundaries between SOEs and the state itself are reinforced by the top managers being appointed by the government. Therefore, it is not difficult for employees to associate the top managers, correctly or incorrectly, with the ruling party in Ethiopia. This further reduces the willingness to participate in strategy making.

The fear can also relate to how the context of strategy making is organized. The strategy validation workshops were highly formal events according to the participants. There were limited discussions and interactions among participants and the workshops are not often carried out in a relaxed environment. Formal PowerPoint presentations were the norm. This formalization influenced participation and employee voice negatively, as it was perceived as risky to air concerns in a formalized setting:

“There is an annual meeting to cascade the strategy, to review the previous year's performances and announce the coming year's strategies and plans. This is a yearly platform. A lot of employees participate in these meetings. The majority of the people just go to these meetings and leave without saying a word. Most people do not feel comfortable speaking in large gatherings. Some people do give comments based on the presentations, but I don't personally think it is that much useful.” Expert 1

Propositions

P2: Fear of consequences limits the level of employee participation in strategy making

P3: Fear of consequences has a stronger negative effect on employee participation in strategy making, when strategy making happens through formal meetings.

P4: Fear of consequences has a stronger negative effect on participation in strategy making when the organization is a state owned enterprise.

Secrecy of strategy and lack of trust

The level of participation is different at different stages of the strategy making process. In the early input gathering stages, there seemed to be opportunities for participation including of

lower-level managers and employees. The latter stages, however, were characterized by top-down information sharing and provision of orientation in the form of PPT presentations. The principal reason for the increasing exclusivity and reduced transparency in the later stages of the process is motivated by the perceived need for secrecy. In addition, there seemed to be a paternalistic attitude on the part of senior managers. They did not trust their subordinates and claimed that the lower-level managers and employees needed only a processed and interpreted version of the strategies in the form of manuals, processes and standard operating procedures.

Interestingly, the lower-level managers tended to accept the exclusive practice in strategy making in the company. One respondent said:

"I believe that I only need to know about what my team's role is in relation to objectives and goals set in the strategic plan. I can't go through all elements of the strategic plan because there are parts that don't concern me and my division. This will help me and my team focus more on our tasks that fall under our division. Besides, all of us are aware of the company's strategic plans through training, discussions and other platforms. For example, I have made my section aware of the objectives and goals set for us in the strategic plan at individual level."

Supervisor1

The very notion of strategy seemed to be tied to secrecy in the context of our study and the case company. One of the participants equated the absence of secrecy with no strategy:

"Since we exist in a competitive environment, confidentiality is key to the success of the company. If you share your strategy with all, then it means you have no strategy to make you stand out from other competitors - giving you a competitive advantage" Director5

In ET's case the opening of the market to new entrants increased secrecy. The preoccupation with fear of competition and the ensuing perceived need for confidentiality has led to a fragmented look at the corporate strategy. Employees were often presented with functional strategies and were only shown how the respective functional strategies are aligned with the corporate strategy. The following reply from a respondent shows how employees got access to only their division's strategy.

“...The issue of confidentiality is also handled by giving only functional strategies to the concerned functional units. For example, directors under our division can access to customer service as part of the corporate strategy. We also familiarize employees in our division about the functional strategies.” CO1

Propositions

P5: Secrecy limits employees' participation in strategy making

P6: Secrecy has a stronger negative effect on participation in strategy making when competitive pressure is perceived as high.

Limited experience of meaningful participation

Some employees considered participation in strategy making as an extra burden on their assignment and hence they were not willing to commit their effort and time to it. They rather withdraw from the strategy process and provide just the minimum necessary to comply with the requirements of their managers. One respondent remarked:

“In my opinion, people think that there is a responsible unit that focuses on strategy and my input does not really make any difference. Due to this, employees may tend to think that the inputs they provide might not have an impact on the strategic plan.” Supervisor1

This lack of willingness or passive agreement to participate was often common in the early stages of the strategy making process where they perceived that there wasn't much in it for them.

The participants claimed that some employees did not actively participate even when given the opportunity to do so. Some of the reasons for lack of active participation are: they didn't think it really made any difference; they think that strategy formulation was not their responsibility or they think that the top management is responsible for strategic issues; and they think that the additional responsibility does not bring any additional incentive. A participant said:

“...it is not common to get responses without nagging them. What I am talking about is not only about employees (non-managerial), I am telling you about the section supervisors....even when

they respond, they do it carelessly and without taking time to discuss the issues with their team”
Manager1

In addition, a feeling of withdrawal surfaced among the participants we conversed with about participation in strategy making in the company. There seemed to be a passive agreement with how strategy making was practiced despite the fact that there was limited opportunity for employees outside the top leadership circle to even participate in a detailed discussion on the contents of the cascaded strategy.

Employees lacked the willingness to actively participate in strategy at our case company due to different reasons. One of the important reasons is due to the company’s long history of exclusive top-down decision making in which those in the lower ranks had no or little input. The other reason was that they felt that their input did not have a real impact on the strategy, or they were not made to feel that their contribution really mattered. In addition, there seemed to be a lack of expectations on the part of the employees and lower-level managers to be part of the strategy making process.

Moreover, the experience of top-down decision making at the company seemed to discourage employees from contributing to strategy making even in the input gathering stages because they felt that their ideas would not be accepted by the higher echelon. One respondent remarked that:

“The typical approach is top down and it's very unlikely for employees to believe that their ideas would be accepted by the top management. Employees believe that the chance for their ideas to be accepted is almost zero. Top down is the usual business here.” Expert 1

Proposition

P7: Limited experience of meaningful participation in the past has a negative effect on participation in strategy making.

Discussion

The importance of bringing together a wide range of participants in strategy making is highlighted in literature (Hautz, 2017; Isaacs, 1999; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996). Pregmark & Berggren (2021) argue that strategy workshops perceived as most successful were the ones

where larger sets of organizational members were allowed to participate in. However, the nature of strategy work limits the range of participants in strategy making (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Recent writings on open strategy (for example, Birkinshaw, 2017; Tavakoli et al., 2017; Whittington et al., 2011) claim that companies are becoming more inclusive and transparent in strategy making. This is, however, not consistent with our observation. The claim may have assumed similarity of contexts or neglected the role that context plays in the dynamics of participation in strategy making. Despite some changes, the traditional elitist view of strategy making still persisted in the context of our case study. In organizations where management's role as the sole strategist has been taken for granted, organizational efforts to increase input into strategy-making may not result in genuine participation of other actors in the organization (Pietila et al., 2024). This could be due to limited diffusion of the opening of the strategy practice to other contexts such as our case study context.

This paper shows how external influence triggered taking strategy making seriously at ET. Our empirical material reveals that high-power distance of the national context, hierarchical management structure, and a monopolistic history of the company (strategy making context) resulted in employees constrained participation in strategy making at ET.

The literature on participation in strategy studies in the past has largely ignored the role of context, or at least not addressed it explicitly. Hence, researchers have called for participation in strategy studies focusing on new contexts (Laine & Vaara, 2015). Laine & Vaara (2015) suggest that research on participation in strategy studies, due to the focus on western contexts, so far may have assumed that the dynamics of participation would be similar across different institutional and cultural contexts. Given the predominance of western contexts in participation in strategy studies, the role of other contexts in participation in strategy studies is essentially less examined. We make the following contributions by examining the role that context plays in influencing the dynamics of participation in strategy making.

First, by exploring the strategy making context (organizational and national) in the dynamics of participation in strategy making, we reveal how a context influences even expectations for participation by those outside the top management circle. We argue that we would understand the dynamics of participation better by understanding the strategy making context an

organization is part of. In a high-power distance context, people accept a hierarchical order and hierarchy in an organization is normal, expected and accepted by subordinates (Hofstede, 2011). This is even more pronounced in our case due to the company's long history of bureaucratic experience in which centralized decision making has been a norm. Mantere & Vaara (2008) argue that the lack of participation in strategy making is due to the fundamental assumptions about the nature of strategy work. This argument is also consistent with the key insights about why managerial hegemony and exclusive practices prevail in a strategy making (Laine & Vaara, 2007; Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Knights & Morgan (1991) discuss how strategic discourses enable particular groups and individuals to legitimize stratification inequalities. In the same vein, Laine and Vaara (2007) show how corporate management mobilizes a specific type of discursive practice to gain control of the organization and reproduce managerial hegemony. The challenge of participating others in strategy making is observed in a traditional centralized organization. The challenge occurs due to the organization's lack of the necessary organizational system, policies and procedures to support the new practice (Adobor, 2020; Westley, 1990). Our finding of the mythification of a strategist as a constraint to participation in strategy making is consistent with this line of work, but we show how the social cultural context makes it even more pronounced in our case's context.

Second, extant literature has identified enablers and constraints to participation in strategy making (Mantere, 2005; Mantere & Vaara, 2008). This paper extends this line of work by showing how internal factors relate to external factors in influencing participation in strategy making. For instance, the fear of consequences we discuss in this paper has been discussed in the organizational silence literature (for example, Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton et al., 1997; Edmondson, 2003; Milliken et al., 2003). These studies have discussed undesirable outcomes of speaking up such as negative work evaluations, bad reputations, reduced opportunities for promotions and reduced self-esteem. However, these consequences mostly relate to a specific organization, and they do not necessarily go beyond the organization's boundary. The fear of consequences we found is rooted in the wider socio-political context of the country. Employees censor themselves because of fear of being misinterpreted and the perceived consequence may not be limited to the organization. This shows the significant role that context plays in influencing participation in strategy making. Our research, hence, extends the fear of

consequences in organizational silence literature by specifically associating it with participation in strategy making.

Third, the phenomenon of withdrawal, resulting from lack of experience of meaningful participation is not explicitly discussed in the strategy literature. However, employee engagement/disengagement has been studied in organizational studies (for example, Kahn, 1990; Kahn & Fellows, 2013; Keating & Heslin, 2015). For example, Kahn (1990) shows how psychological experiences of work and work contexts shape the process of people presenting and absenting themselves during task performances. Kahn (1990) discusses three conditions that influence employee engagement or disengagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. People vary their personal engagements according to their perceptions of the benefits or meaningfulness associated with role performance, their perception of safety of the situations and their perceptions of resources (availability) that they have for the role performance. Our finding extends this employee disengagement discussion into the participation in strategy making studies.

Finally, recent studies on participation in strategy making claim that organizations are beginning to move towards opening up the strategy work to a broader audience (Splitter et al., 2023; Splitter et al., 2019; Stadler et al., 2021; Whittington et al., 2011). This claim is not consistent with what we found out at the case company. This claim downplays the role context plays in organizational practices such as participation in strategy making. Though the issue of strategy making has received better attention in the last few years, it is still considered the sole domain of the top managers who are perceived to be in a better position and more knowledgeable to think strategically. Participation in strategy making at the case company is, hence, essentially still a non-issue. Participation of employees outside the top management circle is sought at the input gathering stages though it is constrained by certain organizational and social practices.

Participants still hold the view that strategy was formulated at the top and cascaded down to the implementers. Cascading was one of the most commonly used terms in the interviews with both managers and non-managerial employees. The top managers were viewed as strategists by almost all the participants while others were considered implementers.

The constrained participation itself was a centrally managed hierarchical participation in the input gathering stages where the central unit responsible for strategy making initiated the process and the instructions for providing input and feedback went down the hierarchy. A consequence of centrally managed strategy making through a hierarchical process was that it created a feeling of withdrawal among lower-level managers. By centrally controlling the process that was intended to involve a wider audience (at least in the early stages), top managers reduced the involvement of the lower-level managers in strategy conversations. The top managers' belief in the importance of involving a wider range of participants and years of experience with an elitist traditional strategy making and the perceived need for maintaining confidentiality in the handling of strategy documents and strategy making seemed to create a tension somewhat similar to what is discussed in Heracleous et al. (2018). The authors discuss a tension created in open strategizing due to conflict of logics in dialogic practices which demands a need for information exchange by equals in a joint exploration to build convergence in a creative process and traditional strategy making practice which is hierarchical and relies on a planning perspective that demands direction and focus.

Conclusion

The importance of participation in strategy making is widely recognized in literature (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; Laine & Vaara, 2015; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Westley, 1990). Participation is believed to increase the quality of strategic planning and implementation (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Floyd & Lane, 2000). We still, however, know little about the reasons for a lack of participation strategy making.

Our study identified four constraints to participation: (1) mythification of the strategist, (2) fear of consequences, (3) secrecy of strategy and lack of trust, and (4) limited experience of meaningful participation. The ET case highlights the significance of the socio-political context of the firm and calls for seeking constraints to participation beyond the boundaries of the organization. Our analysis reveals that the reasons for lack of participation were a result of both organizational practices and the interplay between the organizational and socio-political factors of the context the case company is part of. This means that constraints to participation can only

be overcome if the interplay between the organizational situation and its socio-political context is considered.

Obviously, the choice of studying a single case in a specific context constitutes a limit to generalizability. Yet, we believe that our highlighting of the socio-political context as such is of general importance, when western management ideas are implemented in contexts with hierarchical cultures and a legacy of authoritarian political systems. We encourage future research to study similar cases in different non-western contexts. We would also welcome it if our propositions were empirically tested on larger samples of firms.

The dominant conception of strategic management still considers participation as a non-issue thereby emphasizing the role of the top management in strategizing while the role of others is to implement strategies (Laine & Vaara, 2015; Mantere & Vara, 2008). These conceptions are reproduced and spread by business schools, strategy experts and the business press (Whittington, 2006), with important implications for practitioners. Organizations which want to activate non-senior managers and employees as strategic actors, need to overcome constraints to their participation in the strategy making process. In doing so, firms operating in contexts with high power distance and a legacy of authoritarian regimes, as well as consultants and partners supporting those firms, need to understand the constraints to participation. These originate not only in the organization itself, but also in its socio-political context. Managers wanting to promote participation in strategy making need to consciously work on creating an atmosphere of openness, where organizational members feel that participation is desired by their superiors, not hampered by secrecy, and not seen as a mythical task for a few chosen individuals. This will only be credible if members gain positive experiences of their participation, making a difference in the strategy process. Organizations can also design various incentive systems to promote participation in strategy-making. For instance, Plotnikova et al. (2020) provide an example of how an organization uses an immaterial incentive, awarding a title such as “thought leader” to highly engaged contributors, to enhance the confidence of non-strategists and legitimize the time they spend participating in strategy-making processes.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the first author, GTE, upon reasonable request.

Disclosure of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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Appendix A: Case concepts and protocol

Case study concept	Representative references	Key case study questions (in-depth interview questions)	Sources of evidence
Strategy making context			
Monopolistic legacy of the company	Ashmos, Duchon, & McDaniel (1998)	What has happened in recent years in this company that could have affected how strategy is made? What changes were introduced by the management contractor? How is strategy made in your company? Would you compare the past and the recent experiences?	Interview with managers and experts
National context	Adobor (2021)	What has happened in recent years in this company that could have affected how strategy is made? What changes were introduced by the management contractor? What are the institutionalized practices around participation in strategy making in your company? What practices enable or constrain participation?	Interview with managers and experts
Constrained participation			
Fear of consequences	Detert & Burris (2016)	What are the institutionalized practices around participation in strategy making in your company? What practices enable or constrain participation?	Interview with managers and experts
Mythification of the strategist	Carney (2004), Adobor (2020) Nag, Hambrick & Chen, (2007), Pettigrew (1992)	What are the institutionalized practices around participation in strategy making in your company? What practices enable or constrain participation?	Interview with managers and experts
Secrecy of strategy and lack of trust	Pregmark & Berggren (2020)	What are the institutionalized practices around participation in strategy making in your company? What practices enable or constrain participation?	Interview with managers and experts
Limited experience of meaningful participation	Jarzabkowski & Balogun (2009)	Who should be involved in strategy making in your opinion?	Interview with managers and experts