

Full Length Research Paper

New innovation and sustainability in a developing country: The case of Cameroon

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Accepted 10 April, 2015

Innovation activates the system of an economy to a new level. Innovation follows a process. The first step in innovation is the idea-generation process. There is widespread appreciation that people go to great lengths, incur expenses: energy and materials to generate innovative ideas. People get inspired, create, and connect. The inspiration also enables the building of a culture of innovation. Data collection was done through a face-to-face interview with the producer of the first Cameroon beer that came out in the early 1960, a rice producing company, a cement producing company, and 100 women following a type of dressing commonly worn by Cameroon women (wrappa). There were a total number of one hundred and three interviewees. The implication of this study is for everybody. It throws light on the factors that are likely to sustain an innovation. Conclusion of this study emphasises continuous research to keep giving the innovation a face lift.

Key words: Entrepreneurship, ideas, innovation, sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The role of innovation in economic development cannot be overemphasised. Innovation tends to activate an economic system to a new level. The idea generation element of innovation is very elusive, and to uncover hidden needs requires a combination of techniques. A major input to innovation is the setting aside of funds specifically for developing creative ideas that could be sustainable. Most often, innovative ideas are hard to express, formalise and are highly personal, often individualistic. Innovative idea often generates business opportunities that lead to economic development or improve managerial performance throughout the world. From the perspective of business opportunity, identification and creation, innovation motivates entrepreneurs, attracts their attention and draws their action. From a Darwinian perspective, innovation is a source of diversity analogous to genetic variation. Innovation can take the form of Schumpeter's (1934) idea of 'creative destruction' or change in form of slight modifications. However, be it in which form, it brings about change. How this change is accepted by the people determines its sustainability. Making change general to be accepted by everyone, and country constitutes problem, it can be unsettling for others

because it will require participants to relinquish the familiarity of the status quo and to learn new skills. Innovative ideas are easy to conceive, but difficult to sustain in a world full of different cultures and different mind sets. Rajesh (2007) suggests that innovative ideas should be in terms of concepts and ideas that the audience you are targeting already accepts. Hence, an idea should be more than just innovative and creative; it should make bottom-line sense because the shadow of failure is never far away from any innovation. Jun and Deschonlmeester (2003) assert that an entrepreneur's innovativeness should be demonstrated by their willingness and ability to create a paradigm shift in science and technology and market structure in a macro perspective. From this perspective, one can think of innovation sustainability. Take 'Ice Cream' for example, people from all parts of the world have something cold to quench their thirst when the weather is too hot. Thus, ice cream is acceptable in all parts of the world. The acceptance ensures its sustainability. Many elements play in to determine the sustainability of an innovation, for example, the degree of competence of the firm or country, the culture of the people, and the financial capability of the innovators. Taking into consideration that

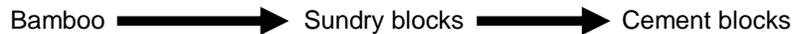


Figure 1. The process of housing innovation in Cameroon.

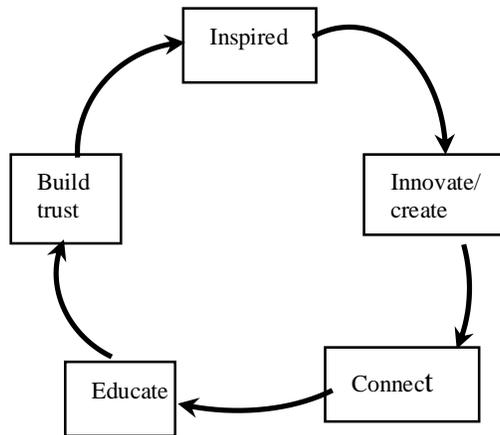


Figure 2. The process of innovation for sustainability.

the nature of innovation regulates competence of the firm and affects the market shares through its influence on cost, quality and price, sustainability also depends on the competitors in the area.

Investigation suggests that to obtain the protection of the law, an inventor must make knowledge of the invention public (Parkin, 2000). Patents’ rights protect the idea for a limited number of years from people benefiting freely from the new invention. The cost incurred during the idea generation phase of innovation must be recovered plus a premium. Recovering such cost plus a premium can be difficult especially if the innovation is intangible and difficult to understand. Knowledge capability of users also counts. Price setting for inventions that are tangible is facilitated by the fact that it is visible. Innovative ideas that are intangible are in most cases hard to express, formalise and remain highly personal, often individualistic, and its usefulness cannot be readily measured.

Take the case of fertiliser in Cameroon for example, lack of knowledge on how to efficiently use fertiliser without distorting the food crop, and the urge to have quick harvest and in large quantity have led to people using too much of it and the result is destruction of the soil. The realisation of such negative effect has led to people boycotting all fertilised products and the use of it. People have moved away from using fertiliser to burning of grass. Although the grass burning chemical is in high demand now in Cameroon market, people have started complaining about the product. This lives the sustainability of the product questionable. Education is

important to build trust and make users and buyers make sensible decision.

Innovation is said to be a latent good and incorporates generic technological knowledge whose usefulness’ may not be immediately known due to cultural differences. Therefore, for an innovation to be sustainable, it should meet the need of many countries and much publicity and education given potential users.

The problem in Cameroon is that people are quick to respond positively to new innovations without fully understanding it, and as such also quick to drop the innovated product. The questions therefore, are:

1. Can an innovation be sustained?
2. What can be done to sustain an innovation?
3. Can an innovation be sustainable forever?

Concerning sustainability, building on what people already know and appreciate promises sustainability. Such a situation is observed in a village, “Bali Nyonga” in Cameroon, where there has been continuous innovation in building. The villagers appreciated the series of incremental innovations without any protest. The people moved from building with bamboos to sundry blocks to cement blocks. Figure 1 illustrates the change.

People saw the incremental comfort the innovation brought, and all materials associated with the incremental innovation continued to be highly demanded. So, Figure 1 illustrates the process of innovation. As in Figure 2, peoples’ inspiration also enables the building of a culture of innovation in a society.

Objective

The aim of this study is to examine and identify key elements that when effectively managed can sustain an innovation. New innovations influences the sustainability of business, economic development as well as the lives of ordinary people, hence it is important to know how it can be sustained.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Innovation is defined as a new or significantly improved product (good or service) (PINTEC, 2006). Innovation is based on the results of new technological developments, new combinations of existing technologies or utilisation of knowledge acquired by an enterprise. The work of Riedel in 1839 recognised that new products have a significant impact on the economy.

Innovation is identified as a key driver to economic development through new products and processes (Constantine and Patrick, 2013). Its sustainability therefore depends on its nature. In the case of real innovation such as the jet engine, information technology for example, its sustainability would be due to incremental innovations. Such innovations will be heartily welcomed by the market or market chasing an idea. According to Casson (2003), the Darwinian view gives Schumpeter's (1934) work on 'creative destruction' a popular appeal which is lacking in most other theories (Casson, 2003; Schumpeter, 1934). The cost reduction advantage of innovation has been discussed in great length (Wickham, 2001; Keith and Rick, 2005). Griffin (1987) claims that a major aid to innovation should be to set aside funds earmarked specifically for use in developing creative ideas and people who come up with creative ideas should be rewarded. The idea generation element of innovation is very elusive and to uncover hidden needs requires a combination of techniques, and these techniques are costly (Wickham, 2001; Keith and Rick, 2005). Costs incurred need to be recovered plus a premium as an act of motivation, and this can only be achieved by selling the innovative idea and innovation. Economists have used various measures of innovation such as research and development (R&D) expenditure, the number of major innovations generated in an industry and patent counts as price setting bases.

The work of Riedel in 1839 recognised that new products have a significant impact on the economy. According to Elliott et al. (1997), the roots of business continuity lay in creativity, innovation, good collaboration between the entrepreneur and the market. Analytical studies in entrepreneurship derive their inspirations from Schumpeter's view of 'creative destruction', where an entrepreneur's key tasks is to constantly identify business and market opportunities which exist all the time. A business opportunity is a gap in a market where the potential exists to do something better and create value

(Wickham, 2004), thereby constantly bringing innovation to the market place which ensures the sustainability of the market and business. Schumpeter's view of an entrepreneur as an innovator has wide spread appeal. Entrepreneurs being innovators, profit must be made for sustainability to be possible. Keith and Rick (2005) identify four impacts of innovation, namely: innovation and business cycles, product innovation and growth, innovation and employment, and the diffusion of innovation through markets. Entrepreneurial venture is inherently unpredictable, creating both present and future uncertainty, therefore requiring more sophisticated mechanism to handle technological advancement, and competition challenges firms to consistently innovate in order to survive. To survive, firms look for sources of innovation. It is observed that customers can be important source of innovation if they are educated to understand a product and its use. The European Union following a survey suggests that 80% of new venture ideas come from customers.

Harsh et al. (2005) assert that education is a powerful force in shaping assumptions that influence people's views. In Skene's (2002) views, the knowledge obtained is capable of enabling economic manifestations that are sustainable seedbeds. Business development comes through entrepreneurial creativity in the first phase, but requires effective leadership to sustain it. Sustainable business development becomes a melting pot, where action is put into play and provides opportunity for sustainability and improvement for further search (Burns, 2007). For example, a brand of beer in Cameroon 'Pelfort' died right at the growth stage due to lack of knowledge and information on the product. A well analysed piece of information relating the beer to the market could have eliminated uncertainty and reduced the risk of premature death as claimed by (Betty and Bett, 2006).

A major aid to innovation is setting aside funds earmarked specifically for use in developing creative ideas. Many creative ideas are never developed due to lack of funds. It is in this light that Cantwell's idea of firm's capabilities is important. Capabilities uncompress both finance and skills. Such funds would aid the development of new creative ideas to improve and sustain an innovation. For example, the Chinese now take Cameroonians to China to design Cameroon national dress of the people of the North-West Region of Cameroon. Without funds, transporting people to and from Cameroon cannot be possible. Idea generation and innovation are not cost free. Identifying a problem and aligning the innovative idea to a real market need is important as it would present less difficulty in sustaining the new idea. Idea chasing the market strategy is not likely to be quickly successful in sustaining an innovation, but can succeed given good strategy; this is not to say ideas should not be developed and searched in markets. The difference between the two types of innovation

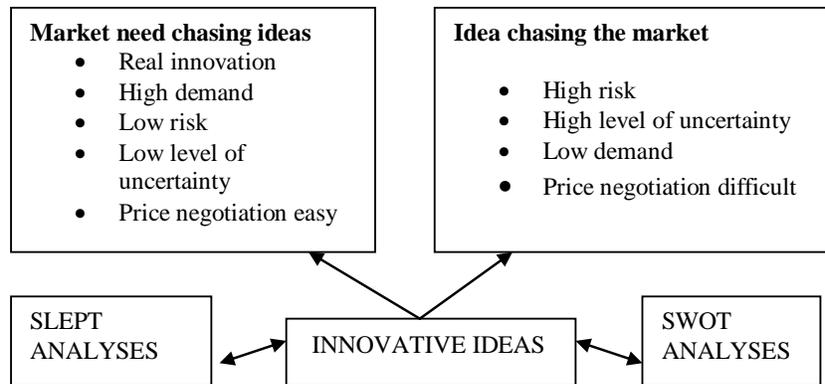


Figure 3. Evaluating innovative idea.

“innovation aimed at real market needs” and idea chasing the market innovation” is that culture or local deterrence are likely to make the idea chasing the market innovation short-lived.

Idea chasing the market is usually surrounded by uncertainty and therefore high risk. So, in valuing an innovative idea, the evaluator needs to have in mind a picture like that depicted in Figure 3. The analysis of both “SWOT” and “SLEPT” are necessary to assess the internal capability of the firm and the reaction of the external environment.

Ideas chasing the market are based on assumptions, imagination and carefulness, whereas, market needs chasing ideas are usually focused and based on the product lifecycle. It is an inductive cumulative learning process. Therefore, market needs chasing innovation is more likely to be sustained provided there is continuous research and creativity to constantly add new values to the innovation than ideas chasing the market innovation. Sustainability requires a long value chain. The culture of organisation also has strong influence on creativity. It can both encourage and discourage creative thinking. Tushman and O’Reilly (2002) see effective management of organisational culture as critical to mobilising organisational creativity and innovation. Some authors argue that companies that exhibit strong cultures tend to limit their creative and innovative potential through selection processes that promote uniformity. Flynn and Chatman (2004) argue that although the existence of behavioural norms requires members to conform to certain behavioural requirements, this does not necessarily translate into uniformity.

Constantine and Patrick (2013) made numerous gradations of small, medium and large-scale innovations, among which is “incremental” innovations, referring to small changes that are generally based on established knowledge and existing products such as improvements. Keith and Rick (2005) point out that once a technology is driven by competition by established companies in the market, it will sustain. Competition thus becomes an

element of innovation sustainability. Cantwell (1992) talks of capabilities and knowledge. Both culture of an organisation and culture of the users play their role in sustainability. Product innovation is closely linked to market share, and the objective of product innovation is to increase market share and improve product quality.

From the discussed literature, it can be assumed that market chasing ideas, continuous research, resource availability and incremental innovations can sustain an innovation. Hence, Figure 3 constitutes the theoretical frame of this research.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection was done through a face-to-face interview with the producers of the first Cameroon beer that came out in the early 1960, a rice producing company, a cement producing company, and 100 women following a type of dressing commonly worn by Cameroon women (wrappa). There were a total number of one hundred and three interviewees. All samples took place in Cameroon. Questionnaires were based on market chasing innovation and idea chasing the market innovation types as shown in Table 1. Data are analysed descriptively.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

From the findings of this study, it was observed that Figure 4 shows the possible factors that can sustain an innovation identified.

Market need chasing ideas

Figure 5 illustrates how the eight factors identified contribute to the sustainability of an innovation in their own little way. These factors appear in Table 1. The factors are: technological capabilities, continuous research organisational culture, competition, users’ culture, incremental improvement, knowledge capabilities, and resource availability. The support given

Table 1. Identified factors that can possibly sustain an innovation.

S/N	Factors/Innovation types	Scores			Total
		Market chasing innovation	Idea chasing the market	Reject	
1	Technological capabilities	85	18	00	103
2	Continuous research	92	11	00	103
3	Organisational culture	42	56	5	103
4	Competition	103	00	00	103
5	Users' culture	103	00	00	103
6	Incremental improvement	103	00	00	103
7	Knowledge capabilities	75	20	8	103
8	Resource availability	103	00	00	103

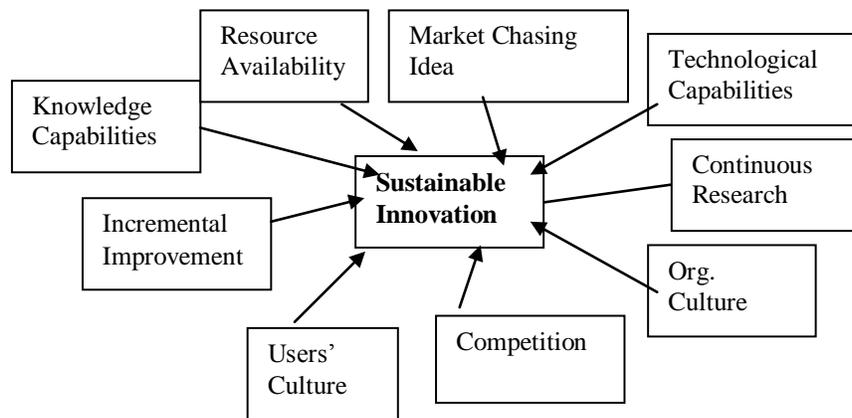


Figure 4. Possible factors that can sustain an innovation identified.

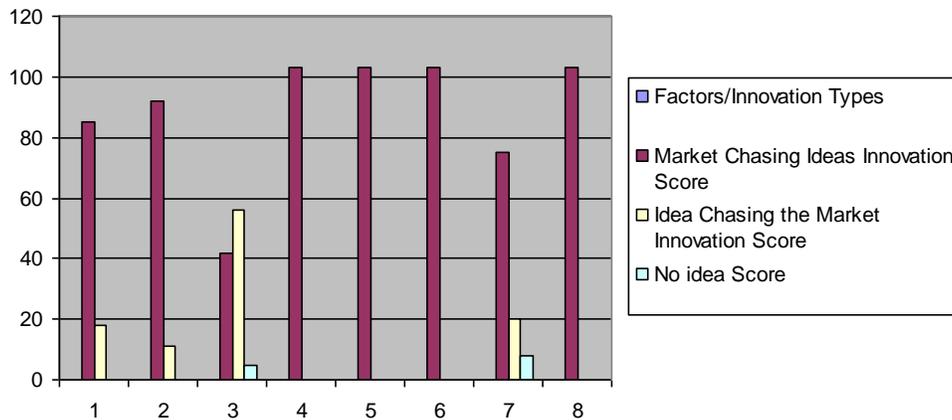


Figure 5. Scores of opinions.

to the two types of innovation varied between the two innovation types, “Market need chasing ideas” and “Idea chasing the market”. Different views were given in support of why the differences exist.

Technological capabilities suggest that if the market is

already in need for a particular product, then any slight modification for the better would arouse interest and as such promote demand for the product. This is the Schumpeterian view. For firms to do this, they must have the technological capabilities, knowledge capabilities, and

carry out continuous research to enable incremental improvement. There must also be resource availability. The examples given in support of these factors was the first Cameroon beer, "Beaufort" that came out in the early 1960s and it is still capturing the Cameroon market; though peoples' demand increase on daily basis. The brewery company keeps adding minor changes that improve the taste all the time. Such incremental value change has sustained the particular beer for 54 years in Cameroon.

The second example was a type of cloth commonly used by the Cameroon women and other African women. The cloth is produced in many African countries, and produced in Cameroon by the CICAM Company. The Chinese copied the design and entered the market and drastically reduced the price, making it possible for almost every woman to afford. Although there is much complain about the quality, groups still buy for occasions like death ceremonies. The price factor and users' culture have sustained the Chinese innovation. The sales of motorcycle are another area where the Chinese have captured the market and it has sustainability potentials. With continuous research, the product can survive many years because it takes people to where vehicles cannot go. By cars, motorcycles were first introduced in Cameroon by Europeans. There was laxity in the promotion. Now the Chinese have taken over the market.

Some arguments that came up were that, once a product is market need chasing ideas, any innovative idea that adds values to the existing product is likely to be accepted by the market. Including competition suggests that research should not only be concentrated on existing customer's need, but to follow the needs of the emerging markets. In competing for increase share of the market, competitors will put in all their capabilities and by so doing prolong the life cycle of a product.

The identification of users and the timing are important. Persuasive information strategy could be applied to sensitize people and firms to continually have the innovation in mind. Communication skills and energizing, creative sensitisation messages and carrying descriptions that attract attention are also important. Negotiations could also take place. Knowing the market and targeting them are strategies that can influence the sustainability of an innovation. New ideas in support of the innovation should constantly be increased.

Implications

The implication of this study is for existing companies and potential ones. It throws light on the factors that are likely to sustain an innovation.

Conclusion

This study has identified factors that can possibly sustain an innovation. An innovation once accepted by the

market is widely spread. Therefore, its sustainability can be achieved if constant research is done to improve its quality and also add more values to it. The study does not in any way suggest that "ideas chasing the market" innovation cannot be accepted by the market. It can, but the risk of non acceptance is always there. Continuous research is encouraged for both types of innovation.

The question, can an innovation be sustained, and forever, cannot be fully answered. Substantial evidence support the idea that an innovation can be sustained and for a long time. However, for this to be possible, incremental improvements have to be made. This is achieved through continuous research and resource availability.

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