DEVELOPING RESEARCH STREAM

Nation Branding: The Application of Project Management Approaches

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Abstract: The spreading globalization and technological progression in the area of telecommunication are contributing to the integration of markets which in turn is adding to the growth of competition among countries. This situation is contributing to the growing importance of the role of differentiation and country branding. In this highly competitive era, challenges are high for developing countries and higher for African countries who often become victim to the perception of considering the whole continent as one brand. Simon Anholt, author of the book 'Brand New Justice', stressed that the image of African continent is the biggest obstacle in the growth of its countries. He also indicated that if country branding exercise fails or remains ineffective in these countries, it may put a lot of pressure on the economy which is already suffering from issues of development. Therefore, in the given context, ensuring efficiency and effectiveness of country branding project seems important. Main challenges in this area are related to stakeholders management, coordination, coherence and management of political nature of country branding. Findings on common mistakes in European country branding stand as fundamental lessons for national branding initiatives in Africa and strengthens the importance of applying project management principles in order to avoid those mistakes.

It is surprising that project management is often associated with technical or production projects. Hence, application of project management in softer areas of management like branding is still a less explored area. This paper will explore the avenues for application of project management approaches to make country branding more effective and efficient.

Keywords: Nation branding, application of project management

Introduction

The country or nation branding is not a new concept. Porter (1990) indicated that nations contest to gain competitive advantage and stressed on the creation of national prosperity. Countries compete for markets for their exports, to attract foreign direct investment, tourism and talent (Kottler, 2002, p. 253). The critical goal of country branding is *"welfare of its citizen"* (Florek, 2005). Szondi (p. 9, 2006) highlighted that the country branding *"promote economic, commercial and political interests at home and abroad"*. Issues related to nation and national identity (Thompson, 2001) have always been part of disciplines like sociology, economics, international business, international law, political geography, political science, political philosophy, cultural anthropology, social psychology and history (p.112, Dinnie, 2008).

Though the concept of country branding shares some similarities with other types of branding, it is more complex in nature (Olins, 2001). Country branding has multiple and diverse stakeholders such as its present and future residents, diasporas, investors, visitors (who visits country physically and/or virtually), buyers of exports, students from other countries, opinion forums and interested citizens of other countries (Gilmore, 2002, p. 288). In influencing decisions of these stakeholders, the nation's image plays important role (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000). Interestingly country's image is a function of its political, historical, geographical, economical, socio-cultural aspects and most of these aspects are inherent to a country and are built over years (Kottler, 2002). These dimensions contribute to the challenging and less controllable nature of country branding. Therefore, it requires more than a onetime marketing strategy and should not be limited to short term promotional campaigns (Kavaratzis, 2005). In other words, it requires more holistic, consistent and creative approach.

The advent of globalization and technological progression in the area of telecommunication has contributed to the integration of markets and to the escalation of competition among countries (Mihailovich, 2006). In order to improve competitiveness in the international markets many countries exercise branding at the national level. This has contributed to the surge in demand of country branding. However, there are growing concerns about the effectiveness and the efficiency of such campaigns (Anholt, 2005; Dinnie, 2008).

While discussing synergies between marketing and project management, Mckee, Cox, Housden and Parkinson (2009) motivated on the use of project management techniques in marketing. While discussing nation branding for Estonia, Dinnie (2008) touched upon defining nation branding as project (p. 231-232). These two readings became motivation for authors to explore the possibilities for applicability of project management principles in the area of country brand management. This paper has no intention to suggest any theory either in the area of country branding or in the area of project management. This paper is a preliminary attempt of theoretical exploration to identify possibilities of applicability of project management approaches in the area of country branding.

This paper starts with the introduction of country branding. The next section will explores context w.r.t. challenges in front of African countries. This section will be followed by learning from country branding in other countries and will eventually lead to the problem

identification. The next part of paper will explore possible areas for project management application and concludes with the direction for future research.

Context:

Africa is an interestingly diverse continent. It is probably the richest continent in natural resources, but is the poorest and the most underdeveloped continent (Todaro, 2000). A continent known as cradle of humankind but a poor performer on the social indexes (Pitt, Opoku, Hultman, Abratt and Spyropopulou, 2007). It is an irony that Africa is frequently associated with the images of political instability, wars, aid dependence, natural disasters, poverty and low rankings on various other socio-economic indexes (Wanjiru, 2005). Anholt (2005), author of the book 'Brand New Justice', stressed that the image of African continent is the biggest obstacle in the growth of its countries.

For African countries, globalisation and technological progression are bringing challenges in the form of expanding markets and dynamic business environment (Mahajan, 2008). African countries are gradually becoming aware of this situation and they are trying to overcome the impediments in economic and image development (Wanjiru, 2005). In order to become competitive, some of these countries are exercising country branding. Country branding is an example of image improvement efforts at country level. Some such examples are Uganda's positioning as "Africa's friendliest country", Ethiopia's positioning as "Thirteen months of sunshine" (Pitt et al., 2007) and Nigeria's repositioning in 2009 as 'Good people, great nation' which has changed from its earlier positioning "Heart of Africa" (Nworah, 2006). Egypt's branding revolves around "Nothing Compares to Egypt" under the campaign "The gift of the Sun". South Africa has positioned itself as "South Africa: Alive with Possibilities" (Johnston in Dinnie, 2008) and in 2010 conducted FIFA world cup to promote its country branding.

From the foregoing, it is very clear that national branding initiatives will continue to take centre stage across the African continent, especially when most of the African countries are continuing to identify themselves with the NEPAD agenda and positioning themselves towards an economic path which embraces sustainable development (UNCTAD, 2001).

Country branding: Issues and Challenges

Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002, p. 294) indicated that "inadequate understanding of meaning of country branding" influence direction and success of country branding. Gilmore (2001, p293) highlighted that if branding a country is not supported by a *"competent government, sound policies and value producing development projects"*, it remains ineffective. Lack of corporate approach to the branding and lack of unity at the top were identified as important factors in determining fate of country branding (Lodge, 2002). He also identified importance of clear and unified objectives, support of nationals and dedicated budget for country branding. Florek (2005, p. 205) highlighted *"coordination between organizations responsible for and influencing country branding, collaboration between private and public sectors as well as between particular territorial units, financial backing*

and fulfillment of the Poland brand by the people of the country" as major issues to be addressed to ensure success of country branding in Poland.
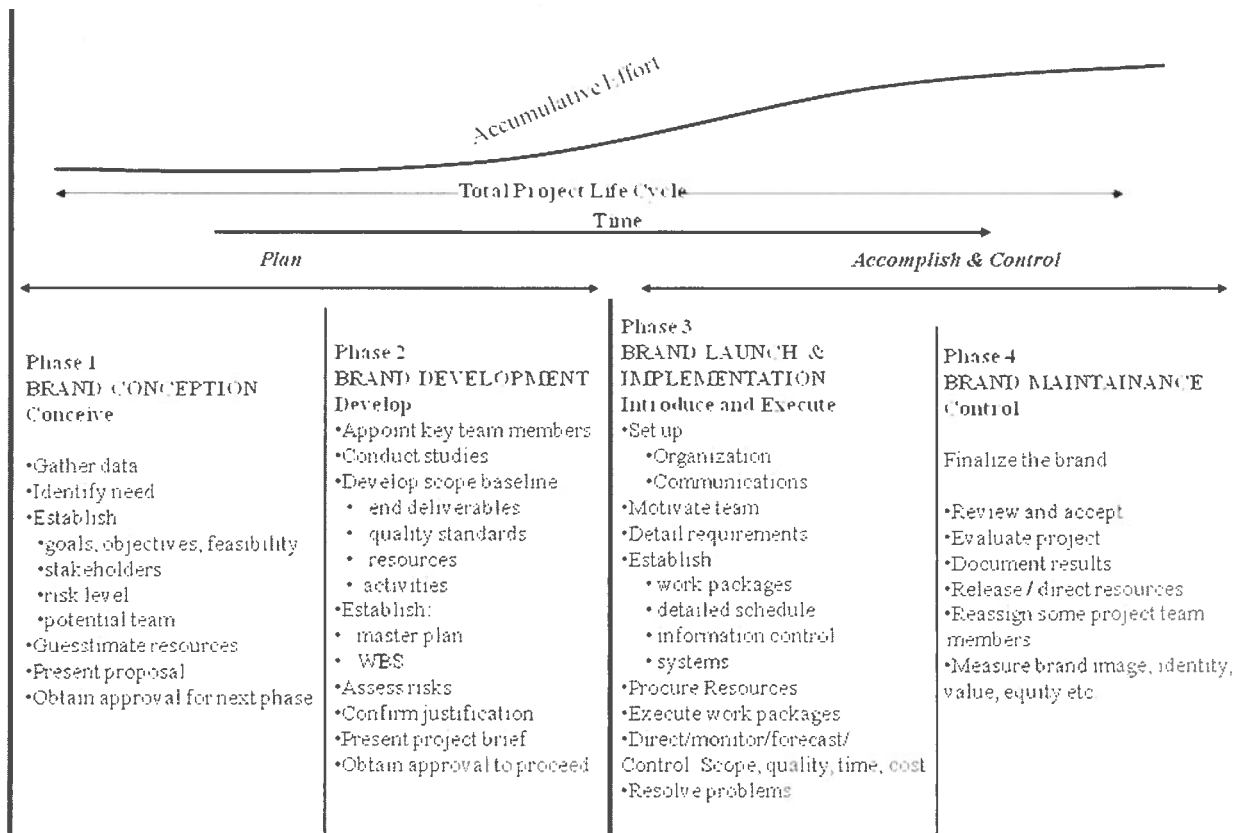
Discussing most common mistakes in country branding in central and eastern European countries, Szondi (2006, p.17) identified following challenges in the success of country branding: 1. Reactive and generalist approach without clear distinction, 2. Lack of coordination among various agencies, 3. Involvement and participation of citizens, 4. Lack of flexibility, 5. Unrealistic expectations, 6. Lack of association between reality and image, 7. Lack of transparency and lack of evaluation, 8. Short term approach and 10. Challenges due to close association between country branding and politics which contributes to the confusion between country vs. government promotion, challenge of continuity of funds and other support with change in political leadership, consistency in brand image and approach.

Widler (2007) in an interesting analysis identified narrow perspective, absence of socialistic definition of nation, non-involvement of its citizens and vaguely defined scope of nation branding as major challenges. In a study of 10 African countries, Pitt et al. (2007) identified absence of active participation of government, lack of coordination among government, business, art, education and media agencies, gaps between internal and external images and lack of originality in country branding as major drawbacks.

Dinnie (2008) identified (a) the need of legitimacy of nation brand management, (b) its sustainability (c) inclusiveness of all stakeholders and (d) the need of adequate coordination considering the scope and scale as some major challenges for country branding.

On the basis of above discussions and in the light of understanding of various project phases as shown in figure 1 [Conception phase (CP), Development phase (DP), Launch and Implementation phase (L&IP), Maintenance phase(MP)] these challenges can be categorized as follows (Refer table 1):

Figure 1: Branding project life cycle

Accumulative Effort

Total Project Life Cycle

Time

Plan **Accomplish & Control**

Phase 1 BRAND CONCEPTION Conceive	Phase 2 BRAND DEVELOPMENT Develop	Phase 3 BRAND LAUNCH & IMPLEMENTATION Introduce and Execute	Phase 4 BRAND MAINTAINANCE Control
•Gather data •Identify need •Establish •goals, objectives, feasibility •stakeholders •risk level •potential team •Guesstimate resources •Present proposal •Obtain approval for next phase	•Appoint key team members •Conduct studies •Develop scope baseline • end deliverables • quality standards • resources • activities •Establish: • master plan • WBS •Assess risks •Confirm justification •Present project brief •Obtain approval to proceed	•Set up •Organization •Communications •Motivate team •Detail requirements •Establish • work packages • detailed schedule • information control • systems •Procure Resources •Execute work packages •Direct/monitor/forecast/ Control Scope, quality, time, cost •Resolve problems	Finalize the brand •Review and accept •Evaluate project •Document results •Release / direct resources •Reassign some project team members •Measure brand image, identity, value, equity etc

Project Life-Cycle [Brand Management]

Source: (Developed from the PMBoK series (PMI 2004), Rwelamila (2005); Wideman and Fellow (1991) p 111-112)

Table 1: Summarization of issues and challenges identified w.r.t. project phases

Issues/challenges	Identified by author/s	Related phase/s
Inadequate understanding of country branding	Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002)	Conception (CP)
Lack of government support through sound policies and projects	Gilmore (2001)	All phases of project [CP,DP,L &IP,MP]
• Lack of corporate approach Lack of unity at the top • Absence of clear and unified objectives • Lack of support of nationals and dedicated budget	Lodge (2002)	CP,DP, L & IP
• Coordination and collaboration • Financial backing • Approval of nationals	Florek (2005)	CP,DP, L & IP
• Reactive and generalist approach • Unrealistic expectations • Lack of association between reality and image • Short term approach • Involvement and participation of citizens • Confusion between country vs. govt. promotion • Challenge of continuity of funds and other support • Consistency in brand image and approach	Szondi (2006),	CP,DP, L & IP
• Lack of coordination • Lack of flexibility • Lack of transparency • Lack of evaluation	Szondi (2006),	All phases of project [CP,DP,L&IP,MP]
• Narrow perspective • Absence of broad definition • Vague scope • Non involvement of citizen	Widler (2007)	CP,DP, L & IP
• Absence of active participation of government • Lack of coordination • Gap in internal and external image • Lack of originality	Pitt et al (2007)	CP,DP, L& IP
• Legitimacy of national brand • Sustainability • Comprehensiveness • Lack of adequate coordination	Dinnie (2008)	All phases of project [CP,DP,L&IP, MP]

Problem Identification:

Anholt (2005) indicated that country branding is critical for developing countries and is a longer duration project for a country starting with a negative image base. It is contemporary to mention that most of the African economies are developing or underdeveloped. Many countries in Africa are suffering from negative country image (Mahajan, 2008). In this highly competitive era, challenges are high for developing countries and higher for African countries who often become victim to the perception of considering the whole continent as one brand[1] (Wanjiru, 2005).

Anholt (2005) also indicated that if country branding exercise fails or remains ineffective, it put a lot of pressure on the economy of the country. He also highlighted that most of the developing and underdeveloped countries are not able to take advantage of country branding because of unwisely spending of money on such an important and critical exercise. He further stated that not realizing building reputation of a country is an inward-out exercise and it requires sufficient time to build a country brand.

From the above discussions it is clear that in the given context, ensuring efficiency and effectiveness of country branding seems important. Project management is a branch of management which stress on importance of top management involvement, managing projects in the light of its objective and stakeholders, it ensures integration among various agencies related to project, cost and time efficiencies and promises sustainability and quality of the outcomes (Mckee et al, 2009).

Possible areas for project management applications:

The above mentioned discussions and stories about branding countries indicate that in some countries, branding was not managed properly. If we look at country branding as a mega project where many small projects are integrated, we'll be able to see that application of project management principles will bring efficiency and effectiveness to it. According to Stewart (1982), project management is about controlling the demands of the project and making choices, within constraints. The parameters under which any project functions are cost, schedule, quality and utility. It is surprising that project management is often associated with technical or production projects. Hence, application of project management in softer areas of management like branding is still a less explored area. **This indicates a need for studies to explore possibilities of application of principles of project management to make country branding more effective and efficient.**

Szondi's (2006) findings on common mistakes in European country branding stand as fundamental lessons for national branding initiatives in Africa and strengthens the importance

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[1] The 'continent brand defect'

of applying project management principles in order to avoid those mistakes. A critical eye on project management theory and practice points to the importance of planning as an important phase in national branding development – the need to establish a set of directions in sufficient detail to tell the national branding team exactly what must be done, when it must be done, and what resources to use in order to produce a sustainable national brand. Using Meredith and Mantel's (2010) constructs it could be strongly argued therefore, that the national brand as a deliverable (the product of a scope, or specifications or objectives) is more than a mere description of a slogan or statements promised to stakeholders at a quality level that will meet their expectations. It also include the time and cost required to complete the process of branding formation to stakeholders (both internal and external) satisfaction. Because the plan is only an estimate of what must be done, it is always carried out in an environment of uncertainty. Therefore, then need for the plan to include allowances for risk and features that allow it to be *adaptive*, i.e., to be responsive to things that might disrupt it while it is being carried out (Rwelamila & Hall 1995). Finally, according to Meredith and Mantel (2010) the plan must also contain methods to ensure its integrity, which is to say it must include means of controlling the work it prescribes. The issues raised here seem to strongly suggest that the planning phases of the national branding process could benefit from PM planning fundamentals. Possible areas for exploration related to planning phases includes understanding about what *primary activities constitute the planning phase in national branding process? What are the salient stages in the planning phase of a national branding process? What are the key deliverables in the national branding planning process?*

The details of planning as briefly described above expose the elements of national brand development process to be monitored and controlled. Monitoring is collecting, recording, and reporting information concerning any and all aspects of brand development process. Meredith and Mantel (2010) advocates keeping monitoring distinct from control (which uses the data supplied by monitoring to bring actual performance into approximate congruence with planned performance). Areas related to implementation can be understanding of *what constitute a monitoring system for national branding process and how does it work?*

Control, which falls under brand launch and maintenance is considered to be the last element in the implementation cycle of any project – *planning-monitoring-controlling.* Information is collected about what has been developed (the national brand), compared with the desired (or planned) level, and action taken if actual and desired results differ from planned level. *What type of control process is appropriate in national branding process? How do you design a control system?*

It can be said that possible area for application of principles of project management can cover critical success factor of project. Another possible area can be exploration of how factors essential for success of a project affects performance of country branding. It can also be applied to the four phases of a project i.e. conception, development, Launch and implementation and maintenance phase.

The preliminary exploration of available literature indicates presence of some market research studies. However, Number of academic studies where project management principles were applied in making country branding projects effective and efficient are almost negligible. This realization encourages us to take interest in the study of factors responsible for project success in country branding exercises. It would be of academic interest to study how application of project management principles will affect the performance of country branding projects.

There are some strong indications which suggest that the application of project management principles in national brand formulation process will enhance traditional national branding approaches by viewing the process as a conversion or transformation process (Maylor, 2003). It is by viewing the national branding process as a conversion or transformation of some form of input into output, under a set of constraints, that it will be possible to utilise a set of project management mechanisms to make the project happen or a sustainable national brand to be realised (Maylor 2003 & Rwelamila & Hall 1995).

In project management the critical success factors for any project are classified into two major categories (a) Factors which are in the control of project team and (b) which are 'beyond the control of the project team' (Gardiner, 2005). Pinto and Slevin (1988b), brought forth a list of critical success factors (controllable) which have been confirmed by various studies (for example Rwelamila, 2007) and remain universally accepted across the world. Their study produced a list of ten critical success factors:

(i)   *Project mission* – initial clarity of goals and general directions.
(ii)   *Top management support* – willingness of top management to provide the necessary resources and authority for project success.
(iii)   *Project schedule and plans* – a detailed specification of the individual action steps required for project implementation.
(iv)   *Client consultation* – communication, consultation, and active listening to all impacted parties.
(v)   *Personnel* – recruitment, selection and training of the necessary personnel for the project team.
(vi)   *Technical tasks* – availability of the required technology and expertise to accomplish the specific technical action steps.
(vii)   *Client acceptance* – the act of 'selling' the final project to its ultimate intended users or beneficiaries.
(viii)   *Monitoring and feedback* – timely provision of comprehensive control information at each phase in the implementation process.
(ix)   *Communication* – the provision of an appropriate network and necessary data to all key factors in the project implementation.
(x)   *Troubleshooting* – the ability to handle unexpected crises and deviations from the plan.

These critical success factors will provide a sounding board in appraising current approaches in national branding. Reflecting on Figure 1 (Refer figure 1), it could be argued that the process of branding project value creation which take place within a project-life cycle, need to adhere to project management good practice. It is through these good practices that it will be possible to apply the project success critical factors above.

The branding mega project life cycle defines phases that connect the beginning of a branding project to its end. For example, when a decision is taken to develop a National brand, the first undertaking by the project sponsor is to appoint the person who will be responsible to coordinate all project activities – *the project manager.* This person should become *'a single point of responsibility'* for the project. Furthermore, information on national branding fundamentals (theory and practice) should be gathered and clear goals and objectives established in order to be clear on what is to be developed. The process of establishing branding feasibility should take place within this phase (*concept phase*) to decide if it is an opportune time to undertake a project of this size and importance. After agreeing on national

branding feasibility, it will be important to start identifying key stakeholders or their representatives. Potential risks levels which could frustrate the process should be identified, their possible magnitude established and possible mitigations in case they take place. It will be important also to start thinking about potential members of the national branding project. A steering team would be constituted during this phase as an overseer of the branding project team deliverables. Care need to be taken to appoint key stakeholders or their representatives to make sure that there is no complaints about representativity. At the end of the conception process, the project manager will present all the deliverable to the steering team for approval and thus the opening of the next phase '*gate*'.

During the brand *development phase* the brand project manager (PM) will continue to manage the process of improving on what has been accomplished during the concept phase. Depending on available expertise for various aspects of the National brand, more key project team members may be appointed to boost the expertise pool. It is during this phase that the scope of project will be determined based on the objectives and feasibility results established during the concept phase. In this phase, interconnectedness of various parts of projects and subprojects will also be determined. The project scope statement comprises: justification for the brand projects; project deliverables and their key performance indicators (KPIs); project sponsor or sponsors; key project stakeholders; the project manager and brief on his or her experience; and project exclusions. After the establishment of the project scope, the project manager will manage the process of establishing a work breakdown structure (WBS). The WBS will provide details of deliverables identified during the scoping stage in the form of work packages. It is through work packages that it will possible to start costing each work package and thus a more budget of the project. Through the process of unfolding the WBS, project activities will be identified in the form of an *inventory of activities*. Based on these activities the project budget developed at WBS stage will be improved through costing each activity and identifying resources required. A project schedule will be prepared through determining the logic of activities and their inter-relationship. At the end of this phase all the necessary project plan components would have been established: *clear project scope; project budget; deliverables; project time table and the critical path (master plan); risks, their possible impact and mitigation plan; and a full project team.* Again the PM will present the planning phases components to the steering committee for approval and decision to proceed to brand implementation will be sought.

During brand *launch and implementation phase* (the beginning of accomplish and control phases), the actual work of the branding project is performed. It is during this phase that the bulk of project team labour is performed – *implementing what has been planned during the early two phases* (concept and development phases). It is during this phase when the control process intensified – all the time making sure that what was planned is accomplished. According to Maylor (2003), the fundamental question to be asked during this phase is: *How should the project be managed on a day-to-day basis?*

The last phase of the project is brand *maintenance*. The key issues here are: *to assess the project process and its outcomes; evaluation; and change for the future.* Maylor (2003) argues that the fundamental question here is to ask the stakeholders: H*ow can the project process continually be improved?* This is what Rwelamila and Savile (1994) refer to as the sustainability question. Measuring of brand value and equity takes place during this phase.

It is important to note that there is no '*most important phase*' (Maylor 2003) – they represent a chain of activities. Like a chain, ongoing project performance will only be as good as the

weakest part of the process. The last phase has a significant input to the soundness of subsequent national branding projects, in addition to elements of it determining the soundness of the current national brand project (Rwelamila 1999 and Maylor 2003).

One of the most important lessons for a successful national brand project manager suggested by Pinto (2007) is to *'start with the end in mind.'* He strongly suggest that clear goals at the beginning of a project make clear what the project's completion will require.

From the above discussions it may be interpreted that there are possibilities regarding the applicability of project management in addressing various issues and challenges faced by managers handling country branding. However, at this stage it is difficult to comment on the extent and success of applicability of project management approaches in the area of country branding. This indicate the need of further research in this area. Research focusing on various phases of country brand project may bring insights about the extent of applicability of project management in this area. Moreover, conduction of these research in different countries may create opportunity to understand how country environment affect applicability of project management approaches.

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