

International Entrepreneurship by African Firms: A Discussion on Constraints and Capabilities

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This is author accepted manuscript (AAM) version of the paper to be published in
“International Journal of Export Marketing” (InderScience)

Kindly, cite this paper as:

Alo, A., & Arslan, A. (2022). International Entrepreneurship by African Firms: A Discussion on Constraints and Capabilities, *International Journal of Export Marketing*, 4(4).

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Abstract

This paper offers a conceptual assessment of some constraints associated with development of dynamic capabilities, for achieving a competitive advantage by African firms in international context. The paper advances the extant international entrepreneurship and dynamic capabilities literature by specifically highlighting the role of financial, managerial, institutional, and spiritual factors in relation to the development of capabilities needed for success in international markets. Several strategies including human resource management and human capital development practices which can potentially strengthen the dynamic capabilities linked to international entrepreneurial competitiveness of African firms, are also suggested based on the conceptual discussion.

Keywords: Africa, Capabilities, Constraints and International Entrepreneurship.

1. Introduction

The capabilities of a firms (particularly dynamic capabilities) have been highlighted by the scholars as a key to successful international entrepreneurial activities (e.g., Jaferi-Sadeghi *et al.*, 2021; Weerawardena *et al.*, 2007; Zollo *et al.*, 2016). Dynamic capabilities are capabilities that help firms to “integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments” (Teece *et al.*, 1997, p. 156). Dynamic capabilities have been linked to organisational agility (Teece, 2009), change process management (McKague, 2011), and higher international performance of international new ventures (Pehrsson, *et al.*, 2015), and particularly of emerging markets firms (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021). Dynamic capabilities have further been associated to the ability to pick up and succeed as new start-up (e.g., Jie *et al.*, 2021; Teece, 2007; Zahra *et al.*, 2006, 2018), especially, of international new ventures (Pehrsson, *et al.*, 2015) including the ones from emerging markets (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021). Yet, research examining how international entrepreneurial firms from emerging markets develop dynamic capabilities to overcome resource constraints, is, at best, limited (e.g., Buccieri *et al.*, 2021).

It is further important to highlight that despite increasing significance of the emerging markets in the global business landscape (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016, 2018; Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2016), the mainstream international entrepreneurship literature primarily focuses on the developed markets (Felzensztein, 2016; Jie *et al.*, 2021). Yet, such research may not be generalisable to reflect the true experience of emerging market firms (Rahman *et al.*, 2017). For instance, unlike their counterparts in developed markets, international entrepreneurial firms from emerging markets face acute resource poverty, lack of advanced capabilities in technology (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021), and unfavourable societal attitudes (Mair *et al.*, 2012), and thus struggle to compete in international context (Van Tulder *et al.*, 2020). Given these constraints, there is a recurrent call for research that examines the factors that drive the competitiveness of international entrepreneurial firms from the emerging markets (Liñán *et al.*, 2019). Some scholars have stressed the important roles of organisational learning and knowledge management in fostering (Li and Liu, 2014; Jaferi-Sadeghi *et al.*, 2021), in strengthening the capabilities, by identifying and capitalising on opportunities before they are recognizable to competitors in international markets (Helfat *et al.*, 2007; Weerawardena *et al.*, 2015). Yet, there is still a lack of research examining why international entrepreneurial firms from emerging markets lack the capacity to develop and deploy such critical dynamic capabilities that drive international growth (Khan *et al.*, 2020; Khan and Lew, 2018), which is a significant omission in the literature (Paul and Rosado-Serrano, 2019).

It should further be noted that except a few notable exceptions (e.g., Ochonu, 2018), the failure rate of international entrepreneurial activities of African firms are quite high (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016, 2018; Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2016). Although the dynamic capabilities literature has developed considerably (Baia and Ferreira, 2019; Barreto, 2010; Jie *et al.*, 2021; Schilke *et al.*, 2018), there is still a lack of clarity (Wilden *et al.*, 2016) and

consensus (Baia and Ferreria, 2019), especially concerning the contribution of dynamic capabilities to firm's performance, particularly in emerging markets like Africa. While the impacts of absorptive capacity (e.g., Ayebale, 2021), organisational inertia (e.g., Gundelach and Hansen, 2020) and managers' individual values (e.g., Jean-Denis, 2018) on the internationalisation of African entrepreneurial firms have been examined, our understanding of the main constraints to international entrepreneurship in Africa is rather limited, especially from a dynamic capabilities (development) perspective. Our paper aims to fill this clear gap in the extant literature.

Despite the rich and growing international entrepreneurship research domain and the growing influence of the emerging markets in the global economy, research examining the dynamic capabilities of African international entrepreneurial firms is still lacking (e.g., Dana and Ratten, 2017). It has been argued that many African entrepreneurial firms struggle to adapt to foreign market needs (e.g., Julian and Ahmed, 2012) – and which also deters their (potential) foreign business partners (Dana and Ratten, 2017). Scholars have further found that African entrepreneurial firms capitalise international entrepreneurship to free from the dysfunctional home institutions (Li and Deng 2017; Adomako *et al.*, 2019; Wu and Deng, 2020). It has been mentioned earlier that the success rate of African entrepreneurial firms is not very high and keeping in view the importance of dynamic capabilities in international market success, it is important to further examine this issue.

Our paper conceptually strengthens both dynamic capabilities and international entrepreneurship literature streams by being one of the few studies to specifically highlight the sources of constraints that hinder the development of dynamic capabilities needed for success in the international market for the African firms. This discussion is unique in the sense that it also highlights the potential for these factors to also play a role in strengthening the capabilities as well. It further enhances the theoretical knowledge on the development of

these capabilities by referring to particular strategies including human resource management practices.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents theoretical review where along with reviewing African management research, different factors resulting in constraints to capabilities development in African entrepreneurial firms are discussed.

2. Theoretical Review

2.1 Africa Management Research

Despite a burgeoning body of African management research (Kamoche *et al.*, 2012; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2011), such studies focus largely on business ethics and leadership (Muchiri, 2011). Although recent studies (e.g., Amankwah-Amoah, 2016) are beginning to unpack how history, local culture, values, and environmental contexts influence management education, managerial thinking, strategic formulations, and organisational performance in African firms, we still lack an understanding of how to drive the competitiveness of international entrepreneurial firms from Africa (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016, 2018; Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2016). Yet, capabilities are key distinguishing factors between international entrepreneurial firms from developed markets and emerging markets (Demirkan *et al.*, 2019; Estrin *et al.*, 2019), as successful international entrepreneurial activity (Dimitratos *et al.*, 2012; Jie *et al.*, 2021) is built on strong international market orientation, international learning orientation and international entrepreneurship orientation (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021). Although through skill development and entrepreneurial management, international entrepreneurial capabilities are developed (Teece, 2012; Zahra *et al.*, 2006, 2018), there is still a paucity of research examining the links addressing these elements for the emerging economy firms.

It is important to stress that the role of customs, local culture, values and rules in shaping human behaviour, interactions, and organisational culture (e.g., Jones, 1988) in African context (Nzelibe, 1986) has been emphasised. Prior research has also examined the African indigenous institutions, traditions, and concepts (Ayittey, 1991; Ofori-Dankwa and Julian, 2013) and their impacts on managerial thinking and employees' behaviours in Africa (Adigun, 1995; Ahiauzu, 1986; Jackson *et al.*, 2008). What unique capabilities (e.g., advanced managerial capabilities) can balance off the capability differentials in under-resourced entrepreneurial firms has been examined (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021), and yet a lack of advanced managerial capabilities has been identified as a main constraint to successful international entrepreneurial activities in firms from emerging markets (Falahat *et al.*, 2018). Despite such advances in research linking dynamic capabilities and international entrepreneurship, the barriers and constraints to international entrepreneurship in Africa still lack the deserved attention in the mainstream international entrepreneurship literature (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016, 2018; Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2016). Although the impact of resource constraints on the development of management thinking, workers behaviour, and entrepreneurship growth in Africa (Adelowo *et al.*, 2015; Ahiauzu, 1986; Atiase *et al.*, 2018; Stewart, 2010) have been examined, there is still a lack of research that examines how international entrepreneurial firms from emerging markets can develop and deploy dynamic capabilities to overcome such resource constraints (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021). We argue that to develop these dynamic capabilities, it is important to understand that main sources which constrain their development in African firms. Hence, the next sections discuss the aspects of the African thought system, spirituality and religion, financial constraints, managerial capabilities, and institutional voids, in relation to capabilities and constraints of African firms.

2.2 The African Thought-System and Management Approaches

Some of the earlier studies highlight the specificities of workers' thought system, their workplace behaviour (e.g., Ahiazu, 1983, 1986) and their ability to create and deploy capabilities to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in the international entrepreneurial landscape. For instance, the dynamic capabilities literature emphasises the link between mindset, knowledge management, and the capacity to combine and utilise distinctive skill sets to create and deploy distinctive capabilities that facilitate a firm's international activities (e.g., Jaferi-Sadeghi *et al.*, 2021). Yet, the dynamic capabilities literature also links international entrepreneurial orientation and international entrepreneurial behaviour with risk-taking and innovative behaviour (McDougall and Oviatt, 2000; Jie *et al.*, 2021). Earlier studies also found the African thought-system, the lifestyle (Ahiazu, 1986), the logic and philosophy that inform the African way of life can potentially be constraints to developing and deploying dynamic capabilities to achieve a sustainable competitive edge in the international entrepreneurship environment. The organisational studies literature has also unpacked some key differences between the African workers' mindsets and their counterparts in other countries, in relation to dynamic capability development and utilisation. Indeed, everyone brings their thought-system to their workplaces, and Ahiazu (1986) has found Africans' perception of their workplace environments and how they respond to stimulus to be different from counterparts from other cultures (Ahiazu, 1986, p. 37). It has been argued in this context, that while industrial organisational culture gives more importance to technical intelligence (Kerr *et al.*, 1973), the African traditional society emphasizes social intelligence (Ahiazu, 1986). These differences in approaches can partially explain the issues associated with development of technical capabilities in African entrepreneurial firms especially in their international markets.

As earlier contended by Durkheim (1915), the thought-system is a product of the society, and thus has both historical and cultural origins. Such thought system is linked to

how an individual categorizes and forms their intuition around issues such as time and space. For example, in one of the earlier studies Hanson (1975, p. 22-23) argues that the ideas, beliefs, and actions of African entrepreneurs (and African industrial workers) must be understood when viewed from within the African culture and indigenous thought system. These phenomena make the African workers (to sometimes) see the workplace differently from their counterparts in other parts of the world (Barnard, 2020). Hence, based on their collectivist culture (e.g., Hofstede, 2001), the interpersonal relationships, oneness in the community, and family relationships, are strong features that must prevail at the workplace (Dana *et al.*, 2018). This can potentially result in keeping the inefficient workers in the organisation, as otherwise the manager or entrepreneur could face the wrath of the community or their extended family for not treating the subordinate kindly at the workplace (Ahiazu, 1986; Jackson, 2002). Such approaches to HRM can potentially weaken the capabilities development in African firms and influence their international competitiveness.

2.3 Spiritual/Religious Perceptions

Religious practices and spirituality are inseparable from the daily experience of the average African worker (e.g., Balcomb *et al.*, 2017), and this influences their perceptions about work and life, including their abilities to develop and exploit dynamic capabilities. For instance, Greeff and Loubser (2008) study of 51 families from South Africa showed that these families attribute their successes to *gifts from God, God's guidance, God's works, God's plan, prayer, and faith* (p. 288). Such overemphasis on religion and spirituality can sometimes result in relatively irrational approaches and outcomes. For instance, the perception of business success or failure being linked solely to religious and spiritual forces, can also limit the organisational focus on developing and utilising dynamic capabilities. Despite these limitations, religion and spirituality can still play important roles in developing the entrepreneurial mindsets of Africans. In some recent studies linking spirituality and

business practices in Africa have found Christianity, Islam, and the African traditional religion to influence the Africans' work ethic, their resources utilisation, and their understanding of the natural world (e.g., Swindell, 2019). Contrary to earlier claims that religion by itself is inimical to the social and economic development of the African state (e.g., Ahiauzu, 1986; Uchendu, 1965), recent studies have found religious organisations (particularly, churches and mosques) key sources of entrepreneurial resources in difficult times (Dana, 2021; Swindell, 2019), especially for the immigrant entrepreneurs with limited familial resources in Africa (Tong, 2019). Ojo's study also found that religious establishments in Africa increasingly tend to utilise the structure of their religion as an instrument for nurturing unique entrepreneurial ideals and for fostering creative attitudes among African entrepreneurs (Ojo, 2015). The prosperity-focused faith-based-teachings can potentially be a significant instrument for producing energetic, proactive, resourceful, and law-abiding entrepreneurs (Ojo, 2015). Hence, the interconnectedness between religion, spirituality, and entrepreneurship among Africans, is a critical aspect (Dana, 2021), which can potentially play a role in capabilities development as well. However, further specific research is needed on the role of different religious groups and associations in development of specific capabilities which can potentially play a role in their international entrepreneurship.

2.4 Financial Constraints

Strong and stable institutions (e.g., the government, financial, etc.) are critical for successful international entrepreneurship (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021), as they foster creativity and new idea development, which are key in international entrepreneurial activities (Dimitratos *et al.*, 2012). However, prior studies have shown that the institutional void, weak venture capital, and a lack of access to government aid for global expansion significantly influence emerging market firms (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021) including African firms. In a continent with a lack of access to effective microlending schemes, a lack of training on how to manage the

few available sustainable microlending projects and coupled with the highest level of poverty in the world (Dana *et al.*, 2018), it is not surprising that resource constraints have been the major constraint to successful international entrepreneurial activities of Africa firms (Biekpe, 2004). For instance, despite a resultant increase in production due to the adoption of new technologies, McElwee and Wood (2018) found that due to financial constraints, most Zambian farmers are restricted to the local market where their increased production holds down prices. Unfortunately, only a very small number of these farmers can take their produce to markets in major urban centres which is hundreds of kilometres away (p. 752). Yet, Adusei's (2016) study of the link between entrepreneurship and economic growth in 12 African countries also found that the differences in the level of engagement in entrepreneurship explains the variations in economic growth of the studied countries, and thus explains that entrepreneurship is instrumental to economic growth (p. 1). In this context, some scholars have found that the low success rate of the African entrepreneurship in the USA is due to the lack of access to start-up capital and lack of opportunities to acquire valuable pre-business work experience through working in family businesses by the African American entrepreneurs, unlike their Asian-Americans and Western countries counterparts (e.g., Fairlie and Robb, 2008). Hence, these financial and resource access constraints are important to remember while discussing capabilities development in African entrepreneurial firms.

2.5 Managerial Capabilities

International entrepreneurial capabilities are a set of dynamic characteristics that fosters strategic activities e.g., recognizing opportunities, exploiting resources and transforming the firm (e.g., Dimitratos *et al.*, 2016 Jie *et al.*, 2021). These capabilities are also the foundation for creating distinct competitive advantages and overcoming constraints (Zahra *et al.*, 2006; Jafari-Sadeghi *et al.*, 2021). Managerial capabilities are key to exploring

across markets, learning about customers, competitors and the wider market environment, and for evaluating, modifying and extending existing (and hidden) resources, while matching these capabilities against potential investments in response to changes in the shape of the competition (Teece, 2012). While these managerial capabilities typify an entrepreneurial aspect of management (Al-Aali and Teece, 2014), they are crucial for firms whose international market entry are limited by resource scarcity, legitimacy issues and institutional barriers (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021), which epitomises the emerging market business landscape. Yet, the dynamic capabilities literature has focused largely on the developed markets (Andersson and Evers, 2015; Pehrsson *et al.*, 2015; Weerawardena *et al.*, 2019), which these authors suggest is a significant omission in the theoretical development of the dynamic capabilities' literature.

Furthermore, as organisational learning's effectiveness is assessed in terms of the necessary behavioural changes in team members (Garavan *et al.*, 2002; Edmondson, 2002), the manager, as the learning facilitator and an important role model (Matsuo, 2017), is crucial in changing the team's frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997) through effective organisational learning process. Therefore, for a sustainable competitive advantage in the international entrepreneurial environment, firms must rely on their managerial capabilities (Tamayo-Torres *et al.*, 2016) to nurture the firm's dynamic capabilities through a facilitated learning process. Although managerial capabilities are key to nurturing dynamic capabilities through skill development and entrepreneurial management (Teece, 2012; Zahra *et al.*, 2006), a lack of advanced managerial capabilities has been identified as the main barrier to successful international entrepreneurial activities of firms from emerging markets (Falahat *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, Haddoud *et al.* (2018) study of 208 Algerian SMEs found five different clusters that exhibit different levels of resources and managerial capabilities, and with resultant variations in relation to their export propensity. Haddoud and colleagues found that despite an

overall superiority in their marketing and innovation capabilities, clusters with higher levels of export-oriented managerial capabilities showed greater export propensity, while clusters with lower levels of export-oriented managerial capabilities showed a smaller export propensity (2018, P. 769).

Despite these constraints highlighted above, there is still a great potential for African entrepreneurial firms to excel internationally, only if African entrepreneurs can learn from their predecessors from within and beyond Africa (Stewart, 2010), as learning is the foundation for dynamic capabilities and the most critical resource for resource-constrained enterprises (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, there has been a renewed call for entrepreneurs from emerging markets to develop an international orientation towards discovering and utilising opportunities to create competitive advantages that results in international success (Zhang *et al.*, 2014). Learning is also critical in emerging market firms, as many emerging markets lack a global mindset that fosters access to new potential customers (Buccieri *et al.*, 2020; Park and Xiao, 2020). This highlights the role of organisational learning in successful entrepreneurial activities of emerging market firms (Gerschewski *et al.*, 2018), as it fosters the capacity to learn about the new potential customers' needs (Buccieri *et al.*, 2020; Park and Xiao, 2020), as well as the competitors' strategies (Buccieri *et al.*, 2021). For instance, the international success of entrepreneurial firms from Pakistan (Khan and Lew, 2018), China (Jiao *et al.*, 2013; Li and Liu, 2014) and Sri Lanka (Mudalige *et al.*, 2019) have been linked to their ability to perform environmental sensing and adapt quickly and effectively in response to market needs. As specific research focusing on these aspects has not been done much in African context, so the specific role of sensing and adaptation in resource constraint environment of African entrepreneurs is an avenue which should be explored by the future researchers.

2.6 Institutional Voids

Although entrepreneurship is the beacon of hope for economic growth, job creation, and poverty eradication in Africa, the continent still needs to do more to anchor an entrepreneurial culture in the African economy (Edoho, 2015). Despite recent advances towards economic stimulation in many African countries, the continent still lacks an entrepreneurial culture and a policy framework for entrepreneurial development (Edoho and Kuada, 2015). For instance, Atiase *et al.* (2018) who examined the entrepreneurial ecosystem in 35 African countries found a weak financial institution, lack of access to electricity, corrupt and weak political system, and inability of the states to enforce contracts as the major constraints to entrepreneurial development in the countries studied (p. 644).

Furthermore, in their investigation of the capacity of incubation centres in Nigeria to help tenant firms develop technological and entrepreneurial capabilities, Adelowo *et al.* (2015) found poor technological learning capabilities as a major constraint to these tenant firms' product improvement, profit maximization and cost reduction. Their study links these institutional constraints to these firms' inability to compete effectively or to enter foreign markets post-graduation. Yet, a sustainable competitive advantage requires exploiting existing knowledge, combining knowledge acquired newly from sources outside the organisation, and disseminating all such knowledge among organisational members (Farzaneh *et al.*, 2021), as firms that can acquire knowledge from internal and external sources excel in dynamic and uncertain environments (Hsieh *et al.*, 2017). Through a facilitated knowledge sharing with external partners and an enhanced capability to learn about rivals' products, services and strategies, knowledge management also facilitates achieving a sustainable competitive advantage (Attia and Eldin, 2018). By exploring new knowledge while exploiting existing ones, such an amassed knowledge can help the firm understand the business environment, and thus knowing where and when essential

adjustments are required (Oh, 2019). Birasnav *et al.* (2019) also link effective knowledge management to cost reduction, improved product and service quality, and a greater awareness of the customers' needs. Pollok *et al.* (2019) also emphasise the role of organisational learning in developing organisational intelligence and in creating new dynamic capabilities, which are key to adapting to the changing environment. Continuous learning also links to an enhanced awareness of the changing shape of the competition (Farzaneh *et al.*, 2021), and a facilitated ability to constantly change the firm's routines while reconfiguring their resources continuously (Cabello-Medina *et al.*, 2011; Jimenez-Jimenez and Sanz-Valle, 2011; Ko and Liu, 2019), in response to the dynamics of the business environment. Adelowo and colleagues therefore stress the need to foster the dynamic capabilities of these tenant firms in Nigeria through adequate training to enhance their capacity to interact with knowledge institutions and to improve their technological learning capabilities to boost compliance with incubation regulations (Adelowo *et al.*, 2015, p. 72).

However, political instability is a renowned institutional constraint facing African economies since long (Harris, 1968), which also contributes to the high rate of business failure in the continent. For instance, Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah (2010) found political instability among the major causes of the failure of Ghana Airways. Their study found that successive management teams (in the Airways) never had ample time to develop and implement effective strategies to respond to a rapidly changing external environment. In another study, Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah, (2014, p. 538) found that due to the Africanisation policy, expatriates (mainly French) were forced to leave the continent and were replaced in most state-owned companies (including Air Afrique) by nationals whose appointments were mostly based on political connections instead of expertise and merit (Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah, 2014, p. 538). This resulted in the collapse of Air Afrique. There are many other studies as well which highlight the role played by institutional

instability and voids in deterring the capabilities development in African firms including international entrepreneurial ventures (e.g., Boso *et al.*, 2019). There is a need to look further into dynamic capabilities which can help African firms to overcome these institutional voids (e.g., Adomako *et al.*, 2019), like in the emerging economies in other parts of the world (e.g., Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2019).

3. Discussion

This paper has unpacked the prevailing constraints to international entrepreneurship in Africa and highlights why the dynamic capabilities of African entrepreneurial firms cannot achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in the international entrepreneurship environment. Apart from the African thought system (Ahiazu, 1986) and institutional voids (Adelowo *et al.*, 2015; Atiase *et al.*, 2018) which impact management thinking and workers behaviour in Africa, our study also found financial, managerial, religious and spiritual barriers among the main constraints to entrepreneurship growth in Africa (Stewart, 2010). Against this backdrop, for African entrepreneurial firms to bring their dynamic capabilities to bear and build a sustainable competitive advantage in a dynamic and competitive international entrepreneurial environment, organisational learning is an invaluable mechanism for building and deploying dynamic capability (Farzaneh *et al.*, 2021). Research examining how learning relates to dynamic capabilities highlights the role of managerial capabilities in learning and knowledge management, typified by knowledge creation, knowledge dissemination, knowledge integration and the reconfiguration of dynamic capabilities in response to the dynamics of the business environment. This is crucial in the 21st century entrepreneurial landscape, as the changing faces of technological, regulatory, and competitive environment implies that adhering to the same operating routines can prove highly risky and can sometimes have irreparable consequences (Farzaneh *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, a proactive response to the

dynamics of the competitive environment calls for developing, reviewing and constantly reconfiguring of dynamic capabilities through learning. Against this backdrop, our study highlights the crucial role of human resources who can understand, transfer, and exploit knowledge continually in performing their assigned tasks (Martinez-Conesa *et al.*, 2017).

To deliver new value in the international entrepreneurial environment, African entrepreneurial firms must generate and categorize knowledge (Farzaneh *et al.*, 2021), and thus can reposition themselves in response to the dynamics of the international competitive environments (Zahra *et al.*, 2018). Yet, the ability to develop a sustainable competitive advantage in an uncertain environment is dependent on a firm's ability to constantly review its dynamic capabilities (Kachouie *et al.*, 2018), to continually acquire more knowledge, and to create a learning-oriented culture (Farzaneh *et al.*, 2021). Finally, as organisational learning is the basis of new products, services, and improved business processes (Farzaneh *et al.*, 2021), African entrepreneurial firms need to develop the capacity to recognize and seize opportunities as they arise, and thus boosting their dynamic capabilities in the turbulent international entrepreneurial environment. Figure 1 presents the key arguments of our paper in a graphical format.

Figure 1: African firms, constraints, capabilities, and international entrepreneurship.



4. Conclusions and Implications

For an effective international entrepreneurial activity, a convergence of ‘best practices’ from developed economies’ business models and the management (and cultural) aspects of emerging economies, is critical. Yet, such a blend must be supported by rich empirical data that provides a rigorous comparison of management strategies and HRM approaches in complex organisational settings, and in different national contexts (Newenham-Kahindi, 2009). Based on past experiences of development of African management theory (e.g., Nzelibe, 1986), it will be deceitful to believe that what prevails in the advanced countries will also be applicable in the unique African environment. The institutional voids and resource limitations in African countries are critical challenges that must be addressed, as effective (international) entrepreneurship development depends on effective supportive institutional infrastructure – state institution, financial institution, utility providers and markets (Atiase *et al.*, 2018). Atiase *et al.* (2018, pp. 644) therefore suggest equipping both public and private institutions in Africa to deliver credit facilities, to enforce contracts, and to provide utility

services such as electricity, which are crucial for international entrepreneurship development. Through efficient allocation of entrepreneurial resources and execution of binding agreement, these institutional infrastructures can facilitate effective entrepreneurship development (Aidis *et al.*, 2008; Atiase *et al.*, 2018) in African countries. This epitomises an effective entrepreneurial ecosystem which has been linked to effective competition (Atiase *et al.*, 2018), a facilitated entrepreneurial strategic direction and performance (Orser *et al.*, 2006), effective network building and market entry (Bastiéa *et al.*, 2016), and thus a facilitated capacity for international venture (Atiase *et al.*, 2018). All these potential strategies are expected to strengthen the dynamic capabilities of African firms going global.

Moreover, business, and entrepreneurial education curriculum in Africa needs to be more specifically focused on the skills which enhance capabilities in individuals and firms such as high creativity, accuracy in operations, high pace of work, high intensity of concentration, timing of procedures, complexities in operations, limits to social interaction, technical intelligence, teamwork, problem solving, and the impersonality (Kuratko, 2007). This is expected to ensure that the human capital will be available to strengthen the dynamic capabilities of African firms. Some of the very early studies found that most Africans are pleased to work in industrial organisations (e.g., Hutton, 1969; Wober, 1967) as it offers them opportunities to learn new things on daily basis, to develop experience, and to hold a technical job (Seibel, 1973). Evidence also links the African thought system with entrepreneurial success of indigenous firms. For instance, Jackson *et al* (2008) provides fresh insight that links relevant indigenous management approach with SME success in Kenya. Like Kamoche's (2001) findings, Jackson and colleagues found that the Kenya's mixed orientation between collectivism and individualism enhance entrepreneurial success in the country (p. 413). Similarly, Bhawuk and Udas (1996) found the individualist trait a crucial factor for creativity and innovation, while the collectivist trait is critical for gathering people

together and fostering commitment and sacrifice – which under balanced conditions are key characteristics of successful entrepreneurship (Morris *et al.*, 1993). Apart from their mixed orientation between collectivism and individualism, high levels of paternalism were also a dominant characteristic found in 5 out of the 6 successful SMEs studied in Kenya (Jackson *et al.*, 2008). These factors made Kenya a fertile breeding ground for entrepreneurship activities (Jackson *et al.*, 2008). So, culture and its links to individual achievements (and recognition) are aspects, which should be more visible in theorisation and research particularly in African context.

Currently, the research examining how HRM practices can strengthen human capital (and their capabilities) to foster entrepreneurial development in Africa is rather limited (e.g., Kamoche *et al.*, 2012; Amkwah-Amoah, 2019). Yet, certain emergent HRM and organisational human capital development systems such as the high-involvement (Shin *et al.*, 2018), high-commitment (McClellan and Collins, 2011), high-performance (van Esch *et al.*, 2018) and psychological empowerment (Gumusluoglu and Ilsev, 2009) have been linked to workplace creativity and high performance. This workplace creativity and high performance is important for success in international markets for the African firms as it will help overcome constraints and foster the development of the capabilities. Kamoche *et al.* (2012) highlight the role that HRM practices can play in potentially fostering new product development, innovative approaches to service delivery, and cutting-edge application of sophisticated technology in African organisations. Similarly, Walumbwa *et al.* (2011) also call for more research that examines the nature of leadership dynamics in HRM in African organisations. This multifaceted understanding of people management and human capital development practices in African organisations (George *et al.*, 2016; Nkomo, 2011; Zoogah and Nkomo, 2013) can foster a growing self confidence in African management research

(Amankwah-Amoah, 2018, p. 511), along with overcoming some of the constraints associated with capabilities development as mentioned in this paper.

To complement on-the-job learning and to develop specific skills (Choonara *et al.*, 2017), employees in African entrepreneurial firms are encouraged to engage in online-self-directed learning (Karatas and Arpacı, 2021; Lai, 2011). Hence, entrepreneurial firms and their managers should take initiatives in this concern to guide the employees. As some skills are likely to become obsolete in the foreseeable future, continuous learning is also suggested (Muller, 2013), while African entrepreneurs are encouraged to continually review and change their business models in response to such dynamics of the global business environment. To enhance their critical thinking, confidence, public speaking and self-esteem (Choonara *et al.*, 2017), African entrepreneurial firms can try to send regularly send their managers and workers to conferences and workshops, where they interact with other managers from different countries with potentially different value assumptions about work and life quality. This can potentially strengthen the capabilities needed for success in international markets.

5. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our paper has several limitations like any other academic study. A key limitation of our paper is it being conceptual, and hence, the presented discussion and arguments are not empirically tested. However, the purpose of our paper was to identify the sources of the constraints in capabilities development, as well as highlight the possibilities of positive role of those factors. So, based on literature review from multiple academic areas, our paper provides a good bases for future scholars to undertake empirical exploratory studies highlighting the peculiarities of these factors in relation to dynamic capabilities development in different African countries. Another limitation of our paper is looking at international

entrepreneurship generically, as there are significant differences if an African firm is undertaking international activities in a neighbouring African country compared to competitive developed (Western) or increasingly tough and physically distant emerging markets of Asia or Latin America. Future studies can be more specific in this concern and analyse which constraints to capabilities development are more visible by segmenting the target markets as mentioned above. Our paper highlighted the importance of development of indigenous management theories and research in African context, and the future studies should strengthen such management theorisation. The role of religion and spiritual perceptions is very important in African context. There is need of specific research in different African countries to better understand this interlinkage especially in relation to the capabilities' development. Finally, Africa is a very large continent with significant diversity even within countries, and we are aware of that. Our generic approach to identifying sources of some constraints in the capabilities' development is based on most common factors across African countries, and specificities related to afore mentioned diversity in the continent and countries will be unmasked as more scholars undertake future empirical studies on this topic.

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