



NAVIGATING THE CORPORATE GOVERNANCE MAZE FOR SMALL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOS): A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

Corporate governance plays a crucial role in the success of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The focus of this narrative review was to explore the challenges faced by small NGOs and examine the opportunities available to them. A literature review was conducted on the topic of corporate governance within small non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The researcher discovered several corporate challenges that hinder the operations of small NGOs. These challenges include issues like inadequate leadership, ineffective board composition, and a lack of risk management. The researcher also identified opportunities that can assist small NGOs in improving their corporate governance practices. The study promotes the idea of partnerships and collaboration as a means of enhancing the operations of small NGOs.

Keywords: Corporate governance, non-governmental organizations, leadership, board composition, management, board members

Introduction

Non-governmental organizations play a crucial role in assisting governments in addressing a wide range of social, economic, and cultural disparities for their citizens. However, small NGOs often encounter many obstacles that significantly impact their operations and overall effectiveness. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the challenges faced by small NGOs and propose governance opportunities that can enhance their activities. The paper will start by giving an overview of corporate governance in the context of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The researcher will proceed to examine the various governance challenges faced by small NGOs and the consequences. In addition to that, we will also be discussing opportunities for small NGOs. Finally, there will be a discussion and recommendations.

Non-governmental organizations are important in helping governments to deal with many problems that affect their people. However, small NGOs often face many difficulties that affect their work and results. The aim of this paper is to talk about the difficulties faced by small NGOs and suggest ways of improving their work. The paper will begin by explaining what corporate governance means for non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The researcher will then look at the different difficulties



faced by small NGOs and the effects. In addition to that, we will also talk about the chances for small NGOs. Finally, there will be a discussion and suggestions.

Overview of corporate governance

Governance, often known as "Corporate Governance" in the business sector, is the term used to describe the guiding principles, policies, and procedures by which an organization is managed. Organizational values are the guiding principles that shape behaviour and actions as it works towards its goals and objectives. Governance plays a crucial role in both shaping the operations of an organization and fostering trust among donors, participants/beneficiaries, and society as a whole. Successful organizations are characterized by the combination of a strong governance policy and effective management.

Small NGOs are non-profit, community-based organizations with limited financial and/or human resources. In contrast to bigger non-governmental organizations, tiny NGOs tend to concentrate on addressing a few pressing issues in a given community (Pasha, Ramzan, & Asif, 2019; Shabaike, 2022). According to Rose (2013), these NGOs have direct connections or links with the communities they serve. Small non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often encounter difficulties when it comes to securing funding.

Aim of the study and its relevance

The purpose of this paper was to conduct a literature review on corporate governance in small organizations and identify the challenges faced by these small NGOs. The paper also aimed to understand how these challenges impact the operation of small NGOs. The paper also aimed to provide recommendations for implementing good corporate governance practices in small NGOs.

This paper holds great significance for small NGOs as it offers valuable insights into the most effective corporate governance practices. It also highlights governance practices that can enhance the effectiveness of small NGOs, promoting the development of more sustainable NGO structures. By examining the corporate challenges that small NGOs face, this study aims at strengthening their capacity to attract funding and expand partnerships. Ultimately, this will contribute to improving the living conditions of the people they serve.

Research objectives

The following research objectives were used in the study:

- a) To come up with corporate challenges that small NGOs face in their operations.
- b) To identify opportunities for corporate governance for small NGOs with the aim of improving their governance structures.
- c) To propose recommendations for corporate governance for small NGOs.

Research questions

1. What are the corporate challenges that small NGOs encounter in their operations?



2. What are the corporate existing opportunities for small NGOs that can enhance their governance?
3. What kind of recommendations can be offered to small NGOs in order for them to improve their corporate governance?

Methodology

Search strategy

Various studies related to the research topic were reviewed. The researcher conducted a systematic search using academic databases and reputable sources such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search was limited to the years between 2013 and 2023. The scope of our research was defined with an emphasis on corporate governance and small NGOs. The search keywords used were "small NGOs," "corporate governance," "challenges," "opportunities," and other related terms. The researcher also utilized relevant studies from international development organizations and government websites to access grey literature and gain practical insights. The researcher only included articles that were written in English.

The researcher focused only on peer-reviewed articles to maintain relevance and currency. The researcher was also guided by the established exclusion and inclusion criteria in selecting literature for the study. The researcher only used articles that were checked by other experts to keep them related and up-to-date. The researcher also followed the set rules for leaving out or including literature for this research study.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The researcher included studies that addressed the challenges of corporate governance and opportunities with a focus on small organizations were included in the study. Studies that were published between the years 2013 to 2023 were included in the research. To ensure quality and meet academic standards, only peer-reviewed articles were included in the study.

The research excluded studies that focused on large organizations. The research excluded all studies that were not in English. Additionally, non-peer-reviewed articles, such as newspapers and white papers lacking academic rigor, were also excluded from the research.

Data extraction

During the data extraction phase, the researcher collected the names of the authors, the year of publication, and the methods used. Furthermore, the primary findings and key recommendations were also extracted. The researcher gained important knowledge about the corporate governance landscape of small NGOs, including the obstacles they face and potential strategies for improving their governance practices.

Literature Review

Governance Challenges for Small NGOs



Small non-governmental organizations (NGOs) encounter many obstacles. These challenges have a negative impact on the organization's performance, making it challenging for them to achieve their intended goals.

Long term sustainability

Small non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often encounter challenges when it comes to securing sustainable funding and resources for their operations. Because they rely heavily on donors, funding can sometimes be unpredictable (Davis, 2013). This is because the majority of them lack the ability to mobilize resources, resulting in their reliance on a limited number of donors. The majority of them lack effective leadership, governance, and accountability mechanisms. Some small NGOs also struggle with having vague goals, which can make it challenging to assess the impact they are making (Dyck & Silvestre, 2019).

Partnership development gaps

Small NGOs encounter challenges when it comes to establishing partnerships due to various factors. While some funding partners are willing to support small NGOs, others may have concerns about the proper utilization of their funds (Batti, 2014). Certain small NGOs face challenges in establishing and maintaining partnerships due to limited financial and human resources. In addition, it can be challenging to find partners who have the same goals, and the lack of specialized expertise may limit collaborative opportunities. There are several key challenges that arise in partnership development. Other challenges include; power imbalances, competing agendas, limited capacity and expertise, trust and reputation-building, negotiation and legal complexities, as well as communication and coordination hurdles (Contu & Girei, 2014).

Misunderstanding between board members and NGO leaders

Many small NGOs often face challenges due to misunderstandings between board members and NGO management. This situation typically arises when there is a lack of clarity regarding the roles that each party is expected to fulfill. This friction within the organization can have a negative impact on the NGO's performance and hinder the achievement of its overall objectives and mission. If left unaddressed, this misunderstanding can potentially lead to tension between board members and management, ultimately impacting the overall work environment. According to Counts (2020), a potential cause of misunderstanding between board members and management is when board members assume management roles in addition to their existing power, which can lead to a disempowerment of the management team.

Counts (2020) argues that it is crucial for small organizations to ensure that their board members refrain from engaging in the three practices. He contends that board members should not act as rubber stamps. Board members must exercise caution and refrain from approving every proposal put forth by management. They must possess analytical skills and demonstrate a willingness to thoroughly comprehend concepts before embracing them.



He also suggests that board members must not micromanage and must ensure that they are aware of their boundaries within the organization. Having a board that wants to be involved in every aspect of the organization's operations is not beneficial or helpful. This can lead to a decrease in motivation among staff members as they may feel that their contributions are not being valued (Count, 2020). Board members should focus on the big picture and the long-term goals of the organization, rather than interfering with the day-to-day operations and decisions of the staff. Board members should respect the expertise and autonomy of the staff, and trust them to do their jobs well. Board members should also be clear about their own roles and responsibilities, and avoid overstepping their authority or boundaries.

Board members may micromanage because they lack understanding of their roles, they have no clear policies or guidelines, they have weak leadership, or they have concerns about the performance or accountability of the staff. Micromanaging can have negative effects on the staff's motivation, morale, creativity, and productivity. Additionally, board members must avoid balkanizing. A balkanized board is characterized by individuals who solely concentrate on one specific aspect of the organization. The boards often fail to fully understand how all the different aspects of an organization are interconnected, thus placing the responsibility solely on the chief executive officer (Count, 2020).

Poor leadership

Many small NGOs face challenges due to inadequate leadership. They lack sufficient resources to establish effective leadership frameworks that can enable them to thrive (Kiron et al., 2015). Small NGOs that partner with international NGOs have the advantage of accessing the expertise of these well-established organizations. There are various indicators that can reflect poor leadership within small NGOs. Examples of issues include mismanagement of resources, inadequate top-level decision-making, unsustainable structures, a negative organizational reputation, and many more. An NGO's ability to achieve its objectives and goals is highly unlikely if it has poor leadership (Eversole, 2015).

Stakeholder engagement problems

Stakeholder engagement plays a crucial role in the success of NGOs. Unfortunately, it is one aspect that is often overlooked by many NGOs (Batti, 2017). Engaging with stakeholders not only enhances a sense of ownership but also helps in building strong ties with the community and other organizations. It can also serve as a platform for receiving feedback about your activities from others. Small NGOs that fail to engage with other stakeholders miss out on valuable learning opportunities from experienced counterparts (Apotsu, 2013) Furthermore, stakeholder engagement presents various possibilities for networking, forming partnerships, and securing funding. Many small NGOs struggle to engage stakeholders due to a lack of resources. The limited resources available to them are only for supporting the organization's activities.

Board composition and capacity

Having a well-composed board is crucial for achieving organizational success. The chances of success for an NGO with a poorly composed board are highly unlikely (Jizi, 2017). Many small NGOs struggle to find qualified board members due to limited resources for effective board recruitment. They often find themselves with board members who lack the necessary understanding of their roles and



responsibilities, to the extent that they are unable to effectively contribute to their organizations as board members (Naciti, 2019). A good board should consist of members who can contribute to the organization's decision-making process and bring added value, rather than simply agreeing with everything that the management says.

Poor risk management

Effective risk management is crucial for the success of any organization. Risk management involves the establishment of systems that are designed to mitigate risks within an organization (Thamhaine, 2013). For instance, implementing effective human resources systems can mitigate the risk of unjustly terminating employees, which can result in significant legal implications for the organization. Ensuring that potential risks are avoided is always crucial in any organization. One way to mitigate risks within an organization is by hiring a compliance officer. This compliance officer is responsible for ensuring that the organization has effective policies in place and that all staff members adhere to these policies (Pritchard, 2014). Due to financial limitations, many small NGOs may not have the resources to hire a compliance officer. In such cases, it becomes crucial to recruit staff in other positions with experience or knowledge in risk compliance.

Poor succession planning

One significant challenge that many small NGOs encounter is poor succession planning. Local NGOs often suffer from a lack of well-defined leadership structures, resulting in power being concentrated in the hands of a select few individuals, particularly the founders. This situation can potentially result in what is commonly known as "founder's syndrome." Founder's Syndrome occurs when a founder remains in a leadership position for an extended period, leading to the development of severe organizational dysfunction (James, 2019). Despite lacking competence and knowledge, the mere fact that they founded the organizations drives their desire to retain power. In cases where the founders of NGOs pass away, many organizations often face collapse due to a lack of proper handovers.

Transparency and accountability

Small non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also face challenges regarding transparency and accountability. Keating and Thrandardottir (2017) conducted research that sheds light on the current perception of Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) facing a crisis of trustworthiness which comes about because they are not accountable and transparent. This is largely attributed to their inadequate management systems. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of checks and balances, as well as the ambiguity surrounding the roles involved. Small NGOs may lack transparency and accountability because they may have a desire to conceal any wrongdoing they may have committed. The fear of losing partnerships and funding often drives this behavior (Hope, 2014).

Non-compliance

Many small NGOs face challenges when it comes to complying with regulations. This is often due to their limited knowledge and access to the necessary resources for understanding and complying with intricate legal obligations (Abdulkadir, 2014). Many small NGOs have difficulties in following the



rules and regulations that apply to their activities. This may be because they do not have enough knowledge or access to the information and resources that can help them understand and comply with the complex legal requirements.

According to some sources, NGOs in the United States face regulations on issues such as immigration, visas, campaign finance, lobbying, terrorism financing, and money-laundering. These regulations may affect their operations, funding, and accountability. NGOs may also face challenges in governance, such as defining the roles and responsibilities of the board and the executive director, managing conflicts of interest, and ensuring transparency and diversity (Asif, 2021). In some countries, NGOs may face more restrictive or hostile regulations that limit their freedom of expression and association.

In Malawi, small NGOs struggle to submit their audited reports due to a lack of resources to obtain audit services. Some NGOs even neglect paying their respective regulating bodies their subscription fees. Non-compliance with regulations can hinder the operations of small NGOs, potentially leading to legal penalties, loss of funding, and damage to the organization's reputation (Espinossa-Romero et al., 2014).

The Impact of Governance Challenges

The above-explained challenges can have multifaceted negative impacts on the operations of small NGOs. Below are some of the impacts of the above challenges;

Losing donors and other partners

Poor leadership and a lack of organizational systems can cause small NGOs to lose donors. This can also have an impact on their relationship with their partners. Donors and partners seek reliable systems to ensure that their resources are utilized for their intended purposes. If there is poor communication between NGOs and donors, it can lead to mistrust and dissatisfaction (Batti, 2014). If the NGO fails to demonstrate the impact of its work, funders, and partners may choose to withdraw their support due to concerns that their resources are not being effectively utilized.

Financial mismanagement

Misuse of resources can occur easily in organizations with poor systems in place. This issue can arise when there is a lack of financial controls, insufficient oversight, and a staff that lacks competence in financial management (Unit, 2015). This situation can result in financial instability and a loss of confidence from donors. If left unaddressed, it can also result in the organization's agenda coming to a halt. Financial mismanagement can occur when audits are not conducted and there is a lack of transparency and accountability (Masdar, 2015). This is because individuals may not feel obligated to answer to anyone else for their mismanagement.

Legal implications

Many small NGOs have encountered difficulties due to gaps in corporate governance. Certain non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been compelled to pay significant financial



compensation to their employees due to unjust dismissals. Instances like these could have been avoided if they had implemented effective human resources policies. Small NGOs should prioritize being cautious and adhering to legal frameworks when making important decisions to avoid potential legal consequences.

Inability to meet organizational goals and mission

Given the aforementioned challenges, it is probable that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may struggle to achieve their organizational goals and fulfil their intended mission. If an NGO does not have a risk management plan, it is highly probable that it will encounter significant difficulties when confronted with major risks (Banks et al, 2015). Furthermore, it is unable to effectively mitigate potential risks, hence frustrating its vision and mission accomplishment.

Conflicts

Conflicts can also rise in the organization if there is no good leadership. These conflicts can be between employees or between management and board members and they can create an environment that is not conducive for work. If left uncontrolled, these conflicts can make organizations lose focus and miss out on its objectives and mission (Khieng & Dahles, 2015). It's important that small organizations have good systems in place that have the capacity of putting conflicts at bay in the organizations.

Governance Opportunities for Small NGOs

The following are some of the opportunities that small NGOs have;

Capacity building

Investing in capacity building is crucial for organizations to thrive in terms of corporate governance (Appel & Schnable, 2021). Small NGOs can strategically prioritize the development of their employees by investing in their capacity in areas such as leadership, management, finance, monitoring and evaluation, and other relevant skills. Additionally, it is crucial to enhance the skills and knowledge of board members who may have deficiencies in their capacity as members of the board (Espinosa-Romero, 2014; Ishfaq, Imran, Joseph, Haqdad, & Asif, 2022). This will assist them in providing better service to their organization. Another important step after building the capacity of the organization is to consistently monitor and evaluate whether the capacity being built is contributing value to the organization (Smillie & Hailey, 2015). One crucial tool for assisting small organizations in enhancing the skills and abilities of their members is the capacity assessment tool. This assessment aids in identifying any areas where staff members may have gaps or areas for improvement.

Adoption of technology

In order to thrive in their operations, small NGOs should also consider investing in technology. This is important because the world of work is becoming increasingly digital, and it is necessary to align organizational activities with current technological trends. Organizations can effectively establish linkages and partnerships by utilizing social platforms and other applications in a proper manner (Theis



et al., 2018). Moreover, small organizations can also leverage the Internet to access funding opportunities. In today's age, it is extremely challenging for an organization to succeed without effectively utilizing technology. Small organizations can also use the Internet to find chances for getting money. In today's time, it is very hard for an organization to do well without using technology well.

Good communication

Small organizations also require the establishment of effective communication channels. A key indicator of a well-functioning organization is effective communication, where information flows freely and reaches its intended recipients. Effective communication is essential for organizations to translate their mission and objectives into actionable steps (Abok, 2014). Small organizations need to have ways of sharing information with each other and with their stakeholders. A sign of a good organization is that information is not blocked or distorted, but reaches the people who need it. Effective communication is important for organizations to turn their vision and goals into concrete actions.

Collaboration and partnership building

Small NGOs have many possibilities for collaboration and partnerships (Kiron et al., 2015). Thanks to technology and the internet, small NGOs now have the ability to easily access partnership opportunities with just a simple click or swipe on their phone. However, in order for these small NGOs to access readily available opportunities, it is crucial for them to demonstrate dedication and commitment. Collaborations and partnerships hold significant importance for organizations as they offer valuable learning opportunities and serve as a catalyst for growth (AbouAssi, 2016; Asif, Khan, & Pasha, 2019).

Discussions and Recommendations

Based on the literature, it has been observed that small NGOs encounter numerous challenges when they lack effective corporate governance mechanisms. Therefore, it is crucial for them to take all necessary steps to ensure that their corporate mechanisms are properly established and effectively contributing to the success of their NGOs. According to Chakrabarty & Bass (2014), in order for an NGO to achieve high performance, it is crucial for them to have a competent team and they attribute the success of the organization to the composition of the board. Edwards & Hulme (2014), assert that responsible practice requires both effective performance and transparent accounting, which are dependent on good corporate governance.

Scholars have emphasized the significance of networking and partnership in NGO management. NGOs do not operate in isolation; they need to establish connections with other NGOs (Islam & Walkerden, 2015). This helps NGOs in creating learning platforms that can accelerate their growth. Small NGOs should prioritize the establishment of strong partnerships and ensure that their work aligns effectively with the broader society. They also need to engage various stakeholders to avoid duplication of efforts. NGOs can benefit from creating opportunities to learn from each other and from other sources of knowledge. Small NGOs should focus on building relationships with other organizations and groups that share their goals and values. They also need to coordinate their work with others who are working on similar issues to avoid wasting resources or creating confusion.



Effective leadership is a crucial aspect of NGO governance. NGO leaders should prioritize staying current with new trends in the NGO industry, such as gender mainstreaming and organizational safeguarding, in order to effectively adapt to changing times (Fattah, 2023). They should strive to create a supportive work environment where their employees feel safe and comfortable. It is crucial to consistently exhibit effective communication within the organization as it is the lubricant of organizational performance (Mitchell, 2015). In order to retain existing donors and attract new ones, it is crucial to prioritize transparency and accountability and ensure that resources are used as intended. It is essential for NGO leaders to establish effective policies that govern their operations (Sharma & Bansal, 2017).

To uphold effective leadership, small NGOs should prioritize the implementation of risk management mechanisms. These mechanisms are essential for identifying and addressing potential risks before they become detrimental to the organization (Schneiker, 2018). This necessitates the presence of skilled and capable risk and compliance officers who will consistently be vigilant for potential risks. They will also ensure that the organization has effective systems and policies in place to manage and mitigate any potential risks (Power, 2018).

Conclusion

This narrative review offers a comprehensive examination of the challenges and opportunities in corporate governance that small NGOs encounter. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of the literature, this research has successfully identified various challenges, including financial limitations, poor leadership, and a lack of stakeholder engagement. Additionally, it has brought attention to certain opportunities, such as the adoption of technology and the development of capacity, which can greatly assist small NGOs in improving their governance practices. Based on the study, it is crucial for small NGOs to consistently demonstrate a willingness to seek new partnerships, as these partnerships offer valuable networking opportunities.

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