

An Analysis of the Proposed Strategic Decision-Making Model in the Local Governments of Pakistan

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Abstract

Strategic decision making was first introduced to the government in the form of strategic planning, which had already developed a considerable track record in the private sector. Strategic decision making (SDM) is a tool usually much preferred in the private sector. This study aims to find a relationship between political interference, decisional rationality, autonomy and the environment, and to propose a strategic decision-making model to local governments in order to have efficiency improved. The data have been obtained from the local government structure of Pakistan through a questionnaire survey and interviews. For this purpose, as many as 132 questionnaires have been collected from respondents working in the local government and 50 local government administrators have been interviewed so as to confine the use of the SDM. The results obtained point out the fact that there is a significant and positive relationship between decisional rationality, political influences and environmental stability, on the one hand, and strategic decision making in the local government, on the other. This study, however, finds no significant relation between autonomy and strategic decision making.

Keywords

Strategic Decision Making, Decisional Rationality, Nazim, Naib Nazims, Tehsils, Local Government, Pakistan.

Introduction

Local government is widely known as local self-government in most South Asian countries (Siddique, 1994). The United Nations (1962) definition of local self-government is considered as the most acceptable definition that defines it as an elected or locally selected political subdivision of a nation or state. It is constituted by law and has substantial control over local affairs. Boex, Gudgeon, and Shotton (2002) argue in favor of effective local government bodies for several reasons. First, the implementation of any poverty reduction strategy requires improved access to and the delivery of the basic local public

goods and services (primary education, health, water, sanitation, road access, flood protection and drainage, etc). Second, local government is in an advantageous position with regard to the financing, planning, management and oversight of these local public goods and services (if not necessary in their actual delivery). Third, local democratic governance mechanisms can be created for local government. They may ensure a positive interaction by effective decision making. Decision making is the core subject matter of administrative science. It has been observed that relatively less time is spent on decision making no matter whether it is important or not (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976). Decision making

has been defined by researchers as the act of choosing one alternative amongst a set of alternatives. The core focus of this study is on strategic decision making in the public sector, especially in local government. The basic assumption in the public management theory is that decisions and processes of a public and a private organization differ; however, little research has identified the differences and similarities between a decision made in the public and the private sectors. The same situation is with decision making and strategic decision making. A number of researchers from different fields of management, mathematics, statistics etc. have discussed the types of decisions, processes, decision trees and other perspectives of decision making. The strategic aspect of management was basically triggered by the work of Miles and Snow (1978) and later Porter (1980), who introduced this concept in government in the shape of strategic planning. Recently, researchers have begun to examine strategic processes and models between strategic processes in the public and the private sectors (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976). The central process among strategic processes is the decision-making process (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992; Astley & van de Ven, 1983). The literature search for data in different databases (EBSCO, JSTOR, Taylor and Francis, Scopus, Google Scholar etc.) indicate rare research articles and works in the field of strategic decision making in local government, particularly in South Asian countries (e.g. Pakistan). Hence, this study is an effort to make a proposal for and focus on the strategic decision-making aspect of the local government in Pakistan.

The pertinent questions are as follows: 1) What strategic decision-making model has been used in the local government of Pakistan? and 2) What is the strategic decision-making model in local government in Pakistan? The main problem statement of this study is based on the observation and the literature identifying the SDM as being mainly considered to be an important tool in the private sector and rarely do we find any SDM model to be followed and utilized by local governments. Thus, the problem statement of this study is “to develop and integrate the SDM as a technique of decision making in local government”. The next section of this paper discusses the proposed SDM model for local government; the other sections are focused on the discussion and the conclusions.

1. The Proposed Model of Strategic Decision Making and Hypotheses Formulation

It will be useful to begin with the definition of strategic decisions. For the purposes of this research, a strategic decision is described as the one involving a commitment of large amounts of organizational resources in order to achieve organizational goals and purposes by applying appropriate means (Chandler, 1962). Dean and Sharfman (1996) describe strategic decisions as committing substantial resources, setting precedents and creating waves of lesser decisions (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976); as ill-structured, non-routine and complex (Schwenk, 1988); and as substantial, unusual and all-pervading (Hickson, Butler, Cray, Mallory, & Wilson, 1986). In his research study, Streib (1992) presented the crux of a different study related to the strategic decision making theme by identifying the mission statement, the environmental and organizational scan, the strategic objectives and the implementation and reviews as the major components in all approaches. Strategic decisions have an impact on many aspects and functions of an organization and influence its direction, administration and structure in fundamental ways (Christensen, Andrews, Bower, Hamermesh, & Porter, 1982). Strategic decision making has been described as a series of analytical processes whereby a set of objective criteria are used to evaluate strategic alternatives (Hilt & Tyler, 1991).

Earlier strategic decision making has been used as a tool in private organizations. The SDM in the shape of strategic planning was introduced into the public sector 20 years ago, with much of the early literature focusing on local government applications (Dodge & Eadie, 1982; Eadie, 1983; Sorkin, Ferris, & Hudak, 1984; Denhardt, 1985). Streib (1992) supports the fact that many authors (McConkey, 1981; Eadie, 1983; Denhardt, 1985) promoted the use of the SDM as a technique to help the government to cope with the unstable environment. Research into strategic decision-making has often been divided into two categories: ‘content research’ and ‘process research’. Content research deals with the issues of the strategy content, such as portfolio management, diversification, mergers and the alignment of firm strategies with environmental characteristics. Process research, however, deals with the process by which a strategic decision is made and implemented and the factors it is affected by. Janis’s (1982)

case studies suggested that public policy decisions that used rational methods were more successful than those that did not use that method. Strategic decisions create the waves of sub-decisions and tasks (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976) that must be implemented successfully. A successful implementation may need some sort of change in the organizational structure and culture (Bourgeois & Browdin, 1984; Skivington & Daft, 1991). Glen Whyte raised an important question in his research study, namely: Why do talented, ethical and experienced administrators occasionally make decisions on important matters they knew were likely to end in failure? Why do groups composed of such administrators occasionally display a lack of vigilance and excessive risk taking in dealing with matters of utmost importance? He explained such a type of behavior by applying Janis's (1982) groupthink model. In order to analyze which model is appropriate or in use with local government, this study highlights the literature on the decision making model. The rational perspective sometimes referred to as the synoptic or comprehensive model of decision making (Anderson, 1983; Nutt, & Backoff, 1987) assumes that during the decision making process, the majority of managers and administrators think they are the most rational of all. According to this model, actors approach decision-making situations with known objectives. These objectives determine the value of the possible consequences of an action (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). Researchers presented the classical model of decision making that pre-assumes that managers/administrators are logical and rational if they identify and define the situation and the alternatives, evaluate the alternatives, select the best ones, implement them and follow them up. Several empirical studies reveal cognitive limitations (Cyert & March, 1963; Anderson, 1989). The original work is by Cyert, March, and colleagues (Cyert & March, 1963). These authors presented the theory and the case studies demonstrating that goals can be inconsistent from one person to another and across time, search behavior is often local, and standard operating procedures are those that guide much of the organizational behavior. This leads us to the behavioral perspective of decision making pre-assuming that decision makers have incomplete information and are constrained by bounded rationality and tend to satisfice when making the best alternatives.

The proposed model of strategic decision making is depicted in Fig. 1 below. It is our inten-

tion to examine administrators' cognitive and management criteria in decision making rather than the overall performance and outcome of strategic decisions.

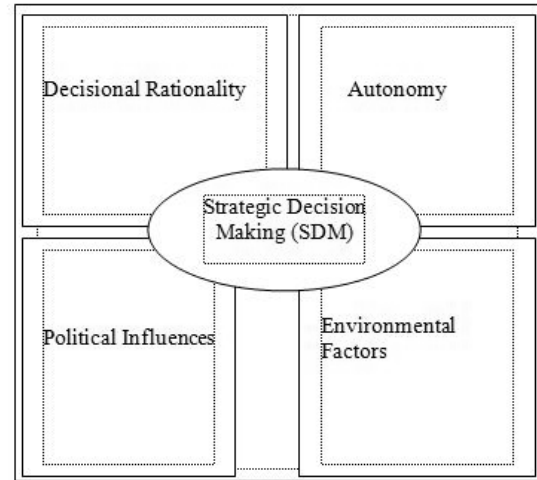


Figure 1 Proposed Conceptual Framework of Strategic decision making in Local Government

For this purpose, the following four hypotheses have been formulated based on the following literature review.

Decisional Rationality: The two concepts of bounded rationality and political interference play the central role in strategic decision making as identified by research studies (Cyert & March, 1963; Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992; Pettigrew, 1973; Pfeffer, 1981). In a research study they had conducted, Eisenhardt and Zbaracki (1992) identified the fact that the rational model of decision making assumed that human behavior had some objectives. In their studies, Bourgeois and Eisenhardt (1988) concluded that a successful firm's decisions were mostly based on rationality. In their study, Dean and Sharfman (1996) conclude that an administrator's strategic decisions have an impact on the fortune of the organization. Janis's (1982) case study identifies that the public-policy decisions based on rationality are more successful. While researchers (Cyert & March, 1963; Anderson, 1989) presented the theory and various case studies which demonstrate that goals can be inconsistent from one person to another and across time, search behavior is often local and standard operating procedures guide much of the organizational behavior. In a review of the six top-level planning decisions, Cyert and March (1963) formulated a view of the search processes by segmenting them into two types. A personnel-

induced search occurs when strong executives with definite objectives in mind stimulate a search, while an opportunity-induced search occurs when firms engage in search upon the emergence of unexpected opportunities (Cyert and March, 1963). Dean and Sharfman (1996) examined rationality in their study. They studied 57 strategic decisions in 24 firms. They concluded that threatening environments, a high uncertainty and external control decreased rationality. It is often the case that research (Janis, 1982; Nutt & Backoff, 1987) indicates how decision makers can move along the rationality vs. bounded rationality continuum, typically by increasing a conflict. Eisenhardt & Zbaracki (1992) state that new threads of research actually break from this dominant view that rationality and bounded rationality anchors are the ends of a continuum. This work argues that rationality is multidimensional, so strategic decision makers are rational in some ways, but rather not in other ways. It also argues that such behaviors are effective, particularly in fast-paced environments. In another study of strategic choice in 8 microcomputer firms, Eisenhardt (1989) showed that effective decision makers developed many alternatives, but only thinly analyzed them. They also sought information from many sources, but rather focused on a few. In other words, these executives were rational in some ways, but rather not in other ways. Thus, decision makers are rather seen adjusting their rationality in complex ways than being blindly and uniformly more or less rational.

H₁: There is a significant positive relationship between decisional procedure and strategic decision making.

Politics and strategic decision making: The second concept presented in this model is politics. Research studies (Pettigrew, 1973; Quinn, 1980; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988) identify the fact that an organization is basically a political system in which people have conflicting goals. Conclusively, these studies significantly favor the fact that politics are common in strategic decision making. Dean and Sharfman (1996) identify the key idea underlying the political dimension of decision making that 1) people in organizations have different respective interests, such differences resulting from the functional, hierarchical, professional and personal factors (Hickson et al., 1986) and that 2) people in an organization try to influence the decision making process through a variety of techniques (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980;

Pfeffer, 1981). In addition, Quinn's (1980) study of executive choice indicated that effective managers used such politics, which he termed 'logical incrementalism'. Senior executives developed a broad strategy of what they wished to accomplish, but rather had the strategy implemented in a series of piecemeal, opportunistic decisions along the 'corridors of indifference'. From the traditional point of view, politics are essential to organizations (Quinn, 1980; Pfeffer, 1981). Initially, politics in any organization emerge in the form of a conflict or a difference of opinion that converts into a conflict at a later stage. Research studies identify the fact that people with conflicting preferences engage in politics in order to gain a favorable decision. They switch over their alliances or parties more frequently depending on their own benefits. Politics are triggered by power imbalances (Dean & Sharfman, 1992). He further stated that frustrated executives turn to politics as the last resort in autocratic and power-vacuum situations. For example, autocratic CEOs created an atmosphere of frustration and mistrust in which subordinates came to regard politics as their last resort to getting their views considered (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988). Empirical evidence suggests that decision makers rely on the same allies and the same politics time after time (Pettigrew, 1973).

In their study, Eisenhardt & Zbaracki (1992) mention that an emerging debate within the paradigm is whether politics are a positive, conflict-driven phenomenon or a power-driven process signaling dysfunctional decision making.

H₂: There is a significant positive relationship between political influences and strategic decision making.

Autonomy: The third concept of this model is autonomy in strategic decision making. A completely autonomous decision is a decision brought independently of other authorities, to a substantial extent of a policy freedom and on the board's own initiative. The prime responsibility of most government functions and services has been designated to the central government, or if local government does not have a constitutionally granted autonomy and a possibility of appealing to a court in the case of a central intrusion into its autonomy, the administrative system is centralized and the autonomy of local government is small (Fleurke & Willemsse, 2004). Decentralization and local autonomy are two inter-related concepts in intergovernmental studies. Many studies

in intergovernmental relations follow the deductive approach of autonomy. In this approach, decentralization and local autonomy are either implicitly or explicitly treated as interrelated concepts: the larger the extent of decentralization is, the larger the local autonomy is, and vice versa (Fesler, 1965; Rolla, 1998; Fleurke & Willemse, 2004).

In her study, Foster (1997) examined the role of several different measures of municipal autonomy in stimulating the creation of these governments. She found that the states imposing debt limits had greater reliance on special-district governments. In his study, Lewis (2000) identified the fact that local government officials, property owners and other interested parties have sufficient tools at their disposal to adapt to restrictions in local government autonomy without resorting to special-district governments to circumvent these laws.

H₃: There is a significant positive relationship between autonomy and strategic decision making.

Environmental Factors: Many environmental factors also influence strategic decision making. Among many factors, researchers' (Goll and Rasheed, 1997) focus is on the environmental uncertainty. In her study, Eisenhardt (1989) finds an association between fast decision making and a better performance. Fredrickson (1983) argues that in a stable environment, synoptic processes should be used (rationality), whereas in an unstable environment, incremental processes should be adopted. Goll and Rasheed (1997) find that a rational decision process is strongly associated with organizational performance in highly munificent environments. While other studies (Dean and Sharfman, 1996; Elbanna & Child, 2007) find that environmental instability does not moderate the link between procedural rationality and organizational outcomes. Elbanna and Child (2007) also concluded that decision-specific characteristics played the central role in relation to strategic decisions, with environmental factors playing a less significant role.

H₄: There is a significant positive relationship between environmental factors and strategic decision making.

2. The Methodology

This study is both qualitative and quantitative. In the quantitative research study, the survey has been conducted within the local government

structure of Pakistan. For the triangulation purposes, the qualitative research study has been carried out. The qualitative research aims at interpreting the precise meanings of people's interactions in normal social contexts. It is focused on the complexity, authenticity and shared subjectivity of the researcher and the subject-matter of his/her research (Fryer, 1991). Given the foregoing, the theory of the qualitative approach is generated from and "grounded" in data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In generating the "grounded" theory, researchers do not seek to prove their theories, but rather merely demonstrate a plausible support for these theories (Taylor, 2000). Using semi-structured interviews and the focused group interview, the study aims to identify the relationship between political interference, autonomy, environment and decisional rationality, respectively on the one hand, and strategic decision making, on the other.

2.1. Data collection

The data were collected in two stages. In the first stage, the semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to provide an in-depth examination of decisions in local government and to understand the SDM models followed. The relationship between decisional rationality, political interference and autonomy and strategic decision making was subjected to examination. In the second stage, the survey was conducted so as to find out the relationship between dependent and independent variables. The sampling criteria applied in this study comprised of the key officials of local government and the members of the districts and the local union councils of Pakistan (province-wise). For the purposes of the survey, the questionnaires were sent to 200 respondents, amongst whom approximately 150 of them returned their respective questionnaires, out of which questionnaires 132 were completely filled out, whereas 10 were not filled out at all and eight were partially completed. So, the sample size was 132 respondents. The members selected for the research agreed to participate in it. Later, informed consent was obtained from each member. The profile history depicted that, amongst respondents, 30% of them were Nazims, 20% were Naib Nazims and 50% were district officers and union councilors. While sampling the population, the focus of this study was put on the capital cities' offices. For the purpose of doing interviews, the local government offices at Quetta, Lahore, Karachi and Peshawar were in focus.

2.2. Results and Discussion

Table 1 below describes the mean, the standard deviation and the correlation matrix. The Pearson correlation of the studied variables is also significant, with the reliability of 0.78, where none of the values exceeds 0.80, which is the criterion of multicollinearity as recommended by Cooper and Schindler (2006).

Table 1 The Pearson correlations between the SDM and decisional rationality, political interference, autonomy and environmental stability

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
1. SDM	4.08	1.345	1				
2. Decisional Rationality	3.57	1.160	.013*	1			
3. Political Interference	4.11	1.292	.628**	.179*	1		
4. Autonomy	4.14	1.156	.222	.279**	.122	1	
5. Environmental Stability	3.51	1.156	.222*	.279**	.122	1.000**	1

* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-Tailed)
 ** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-Tailed)

Source: Authors

The correlation accounted for in Table 1 above suggests that there are significant relationships between decisional rationality and the environment, on the one hand, and the SDM, on the other, at $p \leq 0.05$, and between political interference and strategic decision making at $p \leq 0.01$. Autonomy and environmental stability have decisional rationality at the 0.01 level of significance, while autonomy is significant at the 0.05 level. Recruitment and organizational effectiveness are significant at $p \leq 0.05$. Similarly, there are significant relationships between autonomy and environmental stability at the 0.01 level of significance. The mean and the standard deviation value of all these variables range from 3.51 to 4.14 and from 1.292 to 1.345, respectively. Thus, the results imply that decisional rationality, political interference and environmental stability are significantly related to strategic decision making.

Table 2 Regression between strategic decision making and political interference, decisional rationality, autonomy and environmental stability

Model		Coefficients ^a			t	Sig.
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.146	.422		2.715	.008
	Decisional Rationality	-.185	.081	-.159	-2.274	.025
	Political Interference	.487	.140	.465	3.470	.001
	Autonomy	.209	.144	.195	1.447	.150
	Environmental Stability	.209	.081	.179	2.579	.010
R		.667				
R Square		.445				
Adjusted R ²		.428				
F		25.504**				

a. Dependent Variable: SDM
 * Significant at the 0.05 level (2-Tailed)
 ** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-Tailed)

Source: Authors

The regression results (Table 2 above) suggest that there is a significant relationship between strategic decision making, political interference and environmental stability. The table depicts the R at .667, the R-square at 0.445 and the adjusted R-square at 0.428. Thus, on the whole, the proposed model can explain about 44.5 per cent of the variation in strategic decision making. The results support Hypotheses 1, 2 and 4, except for the fourth hypothesis implying a significant relationship between the SDM and autonomy. The results also show that Hypotheses 1 and 2 are found to be significant at $p \leq 0.05$ and Hypothesis 4 is significant at $p \leq 0.01$. The regression results suggest a negative and significant relationship between a dysfunctional conflict and the SDM.

In order to put our theoretical model to the test, we also did interviews. The first question related to rationality was found to be in line with the result of the questionnaire survey. Responding to the question related to the rationality of the manner in which they usually make decisions on local government, about 80% of the respondents responded by saying that they base their decisions on procedural and decisional rationality. Responding to the question related to eliciting their understanding of rationality, the respondents stated that “rationality means our bringing right decisions on a particular matter”. Responding to the second unstructured question whether political influences have an impact on strategic decision making, approximately all of the respondents agreed that political influences and interferences played an important role in strategic decision making. Responding to the question asking what kind of political interference is involved, about 75 % of the respondents identified in their concluding remarks the fact that influences mostly came

from influential parties and individuals, sometimes from a government official, contractors etc. when decisions on projects, the budget allocation and public facilities such as sanitations, parks etc. are concerned. Not one of them identified any influence coming from the general public in strategic decision making; on the other hand, this study has not confirmed the perception of local governments as ones established for people and by people. The general public's say is rarely heard in strategic decision making. Hence, this result is in line with the survey questionnaire of this study.

Responding to the question of the autonomy of decisions in local government, 55% of the respondents were somewhat doubtful about autonomous decision making. They perceived that the local government structure in Pakistan was mostly such that the powers of delegation were not defined, or in other words, Nazisms, nab Nazisms and district officers needed an approval from their provincial government and the federal government. 40% of them stated that decisions at the low level were autonomous, whereas decisions concerning two- and five-year plans and the budget were not autonomous at all. This is supported by Paracha's (2003) studies, in which he stated that the local governments had never been autonomously functional in the presence of democratic governments.

Goll and Rasheed (1997) find that a rational decision process is strongly associated with organizational environments that are highly munificent. This finding is in line with our finding in this study that a stable environment leads to making a successful strategic decision. About 95% of the respondents agreed that the environment is the major factor in strategic decision making. A hostile environment is a kind of a hurdle in strategic decision making, whereas, on the other hand, stability levers up the strategic decision making process.


To sum up, all the three hypotheses of this study have been supported, except autonomy. The LG structure of Pakistan does not support the autonomy of decision making, either, as LG is the third level of the government structure. The federal and provincial levels are the first and the second levels of the structure.

Conclusion

Strategic decisions are very important in the local government structure. Local government in Pakistan is the third level of the government, and the main aim is to provide services to the public and

look after public affairs. Hence, local government is made for people's welfare and their major strategic decisions have a direct influence on the public welfare. Considering the importance of strategic decision making, this study has formulated the conceptual model of the strategic decision model. The perceptual analysis of the SDM model in local government in the context of Pakistan is supportive of bounded rationality, political influence and environmental factors as the major contributors to strategic decision making, whereas autonomy has not been supported in the context of the LG structure of Pakistan. However, autonomy may be supported if such a kind of study is conducted in a mature local government structure and in another context.

Limitation

This study has tested a strategic decision model in Pakistan's local government structure, which is not at a mature level. The results may vary and the model can be tested in a mature local government structure. Hence, this study may be retested and the model may be reformulated in that context in the future; as a result, this model may be added to local government theories. In addition to this, more components may be added or removed, paying considerate attention to the local government structure in the context of that particular country. 

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