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Social Impact Project Core Competencies and Competitive Advantage in Kenyan Counties

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of social impact project core competencies on organizational competitive advantage in selected Kenyan counties. Drawing on the Resource-Based View and Institutional Theory, the research employed a cross-sectional descriptive and correlational design with 215 respondents comprising county officials, Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) leaders, project managers, and community representatives from Kiambu, Kitui, Kajiado, and Nakuru counties. Findings reveal three key competency dimensions: leadership (M = 4.34), evaluation (M = 4.09), and technical (M = 4.03). Correlation analysis showed significant positive relationships between competencies and competitive advantage, with technical competencies demonstrating the strongest association (r = 0.607, p < .01). Regression analysis indicated that competencies collectively explain 43.4% of the variance in competitive advantage (R^2 = 0.434, F (3,211) = 53.872, p < .001), with technical competencies (β = 0.413, p < .001) and leadership competencies (β = 0.312, p < .001) being significant predictors. The study offers a practical strategic framework for strengthening competitive advantage through competency profiling and targeted capacity building in the social impact sector.

Keywords: Social Impact Project Competencies, Competitive Advantage, County Governments, Kenya, Resource-Based View

Introduction

Worldwide, governments and non-governmental organizations increasingly depend on project management competencies to deliver effective and sustainable social outcomes (Project Management Institute, 2021). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022) reports that the absence of skilled project teams contributes to over 35% of global project failures. In the development sector, the ability to demonstrate competitive advantage manifested through enhanced reputation, increased funding opportunities, stronger stakeholder relationships, and demonstrated impact has become essential for organizational sustainability and growth.

In Africa, the African Capacity Building Foundation (2020) reports that 78% of African countries face critical human resource constraints in public project implementation. These constraints directly affect the ability of organizations to achieve competitive advantage in the social impact sector. In Ghana, Amoako et al. (2021) found that limited competencies in

monitoring and stakeholder management hinder local government performance, reducing their competitiveness in attracting development partners and resources.

Kenya's devolved governance system, established by the 2010 Constitution, transferred significant responsibilities to county governments for delivering social services and development projects. However, the Government of Kenya (2023) acknowledges that inadequate skills at county levels constrain Vision 2030 implementation. Kilonzo and Rotich (2019) documented widespread inconsistencies in county Monitoring and Evaluation systems due to inadequate training and accountability mechanisms, while Njeri and Kihoro (2020) reported that stakeholder engagement and leadership remain underdeveloped at the grassroots level despite being central to project success.

Despite the convergence of evidence highlighting the critical role of competencies in organizational performance, a significant gap persists in understanding how specific competency dimensions translate into competitive advantage within Kenya's devolved governance context. Existing literature has largely focused on individual competency domains in isolation, with limited empirical research examining the collective influence of leadership, evaluation, and technical competencies on organizational competitiveness. Furthermore, few studies have quantified this relationship using rigorous statistical methods within the unique context of Kenyan counties, where devolution has created new dynamics for project implementation. The absence of a robust empirical framework linking competencies to competitive advantage leaves county governments and implementing organizations without evidence-based guidance for strategic workforce development. This study addresses these gaps by systematically examining the influence of social impact project core competencies on competitive advantage in selected Kenyan counties, providing both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for enhancing organizational effectiveness in the social impact sector.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the recognized importance of competencies for organizational performance, a persistent gap exists between workforce competencies and competitive advantage in Kenya's county governments and implementing organizations. Wanguia et al. (2021) acknowledges this by stating that across board both public and private organizations have received constant business environmental forces that challenge competitive advantage. This competency gap manifests across multiple dimensions: inadequate evaluation skills for demonstrating impact, insufficient leadership capabilities for stakeholder engagement, and limited technical proficiency for leveraging data and technology. These overlapping gaps have resulted in underperforming social projects, poor alignment between competencies and outcomes, and missed opportunities for counties to gain competitive advantage through strategic workforce development. The specific relationship between social impact project competencies and competitive advantage remains underexplored in the Kenyan context, particularly under devolved governance structures. Thus, the primary objective of this study was to assess the influence of social impact project core competencies on the competitive advantage of organizations implementing social impact projects in selected Kenyan counties.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives that provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the relationship between competencies and competitive advantage.

Resource-Based View (RBV): Barney (1991) posits that organizations with rare and valuable resources gain a competitive edge. This perspective focuses on internal resources and competencies as sources of competitive advantage. Core competencies in evaluation, leadership, and technical skills are conceptualized as valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources that can differentiate organizations in the social impact sector. Barney (1991) argued that sustainable competitive advantage derives from resources that are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable—characteristics that well-developed competencies possess.

***Institutional Theory*:** DiMaggio and Powell (1983) focus on how external institutions, norms, rules, and laws influence organizational behavior. This theory explains how organizations conform to external pressures and how they may collaborate to access resources they do not own. In the context of county governments, institutional pressures from national policies, donor requirements, and professional norms shape how competencies are developed and deployed to achieve competitive advantage.

Empirical Review

Core Competencies in Social Impact Projects

Project management competencies have been extensively studied in various contexts. Crawford (2005) identified that project manager competencies significantly influence project success across industries. In the development sector, Turner and Müller (2005) found that leadership competencies are particularly critical for stakeholder management and project outcomes.

Competency frameworks for development professionals have been developed by multiple organizations. The American Evaluation Association (2018) identifies five domains of evaluator competencies: professional practice, systematic inquiry, situational analysis, project management, and reflective practice. Similarly, the United Nations Evaluation Group (2016) outlines competencies including evaluation knowledge, technical skills, interpersonal skills, and management capabilities.

In the African context, specific competency needs have been identified. Mkhize and Thwala (2017) documented that South African public sector project managers need competencies in community engagement, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive management. Amoako et al. (2021) found that Ghanaian local governments require enhanced competencies in monitoring and evaluation, stakeholder management, and data analysis to improve project performance.

Competitive Advantage in the Social Impact Sector

Competitive advantage in the social impact sector differs from traditional business contexts. Porter and Kramer (2011) introduced the concept of shared value, arguing that organizations can achieve competitive advantage by addressing social issues in ways that also benefit their operations. For non-profit organizations and public sector entities, competitive advantage may manifest as

enhanced reputation, increased funding opportunities, stronger stakeholder relationships, and demonstrated impact.

Kaplan (2001) found that organizations with strong monitoring and evaluation systems are better positioned to demonstrate results and attract resources. Ebrahim and Rangan (2010) argued that non-profit organizations achieve competitive advantage through strategic clarity, strong accountability mechanisms, and adaptive capacity. In the public sector, Andrews, Boyne, and Walker (2006) demonstrated that organizational capabilities significantly influence performance and competitiveness.

The Relationship Between Competencies and Competitive Advantage

The link between competencies and competitive advantage is well-established in strategic management literature. Barney (1991) argued that human resources, including competencies, are critical sources of sustainable competitive advantage when they meet VRIN criteria. Wright, Dunford, and Snell (2001) extended this argument, demonstrating that human resource management practices contribute to competitive advantage through the development of unique competencies.

In the development context, research has shown that competencies in monitoring and evaluation enhance organizational credibility and attract funding (Kusek & Rist, 2004). Leadership competencies enable organizations to navigate complex stakeholder environments and build partnerships that enhance competitiveness (Turner & Müller, 2005). Technical competencies, particularly in data management and technology, enable organizations to demonstrate impact more effectively and efficiently (Heeks, 2017).

Empirical Literature and Identified Gaps

Existing literature has established that project management competencies positively influence organizational performance (Crawford, 2005; Turner & Müller, 2005). However, significant gaps remain. Limited research focuses specifically on the social impact sector in devolved governance contexts. Few regression-based studies quantify the effect of competencies on competitive advantage. This study addresses these gaps by examining competencies comprehensively across Kenyan counties with advanced analytical techniques.

Methodology

The study employed a quantitative research approach with cross-sectional, descriptive, correlational, and explanatory designs. This allowed comprehensive examination of the relationship between competencies and competitive advantage. The study was conducted in four Kenyan counties: Kiambu, Kitui, Kajiado, and Nakuru. These counties were purposively selected based on the Kenya Community Development Index classification of counties (Commission on Revenue Allocation, 2012), with two counties from marginalized categories (Kajiado and Kitui) and two from well-off categories (Kiambu and Nakuru) to enable comparative analysis. The target population comprised 465 county officials, NGO leaders, project managers, and community representatives involved in social impact project evaluation processes. Using Yamane's formula, a sample of 215 respondents was calculated, with an additional 10 participants added for attrition, totaling 225 respondents. Purposive and random sampling techniques were employed to select participants.

Data were collected through structured questionnaires. The survey instrument was developed based on established scales from previous research. Competency dimensions were assessed using items adapted from the Project Management Institute's (2017) competency framework and the American Evaluation Association's (2018) evaluator competencies. Competitive advantage was measured using items adapted from Barney's (1991) Resource-Based View operationalization. A pilot study was conducted in Narok and Machakos counties, representing 10% of the sample (22 respondents, 11 in each county). The pilot study allowed for refinement of instruments and assessment of reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded 0.70 for all constructs, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Average Variance Extracted values exceeded 0.5 for all constructs, meeting Fornell and Larcker's (1981) threshold for convergent validity. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression using SPSS version 26.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of United States International University-Africa and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process.

Findings

Response Rate & Demographic Characteristics

A response rate of 95% was achieved, with 215 out of 225 questionnaires completed and returned. The respondent profile revealed that 52.6% were female and 47.4% male. Educational attainment was high, with 71.6% holding bachelor's or master's degrees. In terms of job level, 53% were in middle management, with strong representation in operational leadership roles. Experience in county project involvement was substantial, with 56.7% reporting over six years of experience.

Descriptive Analysis

Core Competencies

Descriptive analysis revealed three key competency dimensions. Leadership skills, encompassing team motivation, strategic decision-making, and partnership building, had the highest mean score (M = 4.34). Evaluation skills, including impact measurement, data analysis, and reporting, had a mean of 4.09. Technical skills, comprising data analytics, IT management, and problem-solving, had a mean of 4.03. Areas requiring improvement included monitoring and evaluation framework design and advanced technology application. Table 1 presents the detailed Likert scale analysis for core competencies.

Table 1
Likert Scale Analysis of Core Competencies (Scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

Statement	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Leadership Competencies		
1. Project leaders effectively motivate team members to achieve project goals.	4.38	0.70
2. Leaders in our organization make strategic decisions that improve project outcomes.	4.32	0.74

3. Partnership building with stakeholders is a strength of our leadership.	4.31	0.71
Evaluation Competencies		
4. Our staff can competently measure the impact of social impact projects.	4.12	0.76
5. Data analysis skills for project evaluation are well developed in our team.	4.07	0.79
6. Reporting on project performance is done effectively and accurately.	4.08	0.78
Technical Competencies		
7. Our team possesses strong data analytics capabilities.	4.01	0.82
8. Information technology management is a core strength of our organization.	3.98	0.84
9. Problem-solving skills using digital tools are well developed.	4.09	0.80

Leadership competencies received the highest ratings, with all three items scoring above 4.30, reflecting the perception that leadership is the strongest competency dimension. Evaluation competencies rated positively but with slightly lower means, supporting the identification of gaps in advanced evaluation practices. Technical competencies showed the most variability, with IT management scoring the lowest (M = 3.98), consistent with the need for enhanced technology application. Table 2 presents the Likert scale analysis for competitive advantage.

Table 2
Likert Scale Analysis of Competitive Advantage (Scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

Statement	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Reputation & Credibility		
1. Our organization is known for delivering high-quality social impact projects.	4.23	0.68
2. Donors and partners view our organization as a credible implementing partner.	4.19	0.70
Stakeholder Trust		
3. Community members have confidence in our organization's ability to deliver.	3.95	0.76
4. County government officials trust our project management processes.	4.01	0.73
Demonstrated Impact		
5. We consistently show measurable improvements in community wellbeing.	3.81	0.83
6. Our monitoring data clearly demonstrates the success of our projects.	3.88	0.81

Reputation and credibility received the highest ratings, indicating that organizations perceive themselves as competitive in attracting resources and partnerships. Stakeholder trust scored moderately, with slightly higher trust from government officials than from community members. Demonstrated impact had the lowest scores, suggesting that while organizations have evaluation competencies, translating them into visible impact remains a challenge.

Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation matrix was computed to examine the relationships among the three competency dimensions and competitive advantage. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Pearson Correlation Matrix for Core Competencies and Competitive Advantage

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Leadership Competencies	1			
2. Evaluation Competencies	.712**	1		
3. Technical Competencies	.684**	.698**	1	
4. Competitive Advantage	.565**	.487**	.607**	1

*Note: N = 215. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

All three competency dimensions show significant positive correlations with competitive advantage. Technical competencies demonstrated the strongest association ($r = 0.607$, $p < .01$), followed by leadership ($r = 0.565$, $p < .01$) and evaluation ($r = 0.487$, $p < .01$). The high intercorrelations among competencies ($r = .684$ to $.712$) indicate that they are interrelated capabilities rather than isolated skills.

Regression Analysis

To examine the influence of core competencies on competitive advantage, multiple regression analysis was conducted with leadership, evaluation, and technical competencies as independent variables and competitive advantage as the dependent variable. Results are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4
Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.659	.434	.426	.487

a. Predictors: (Constant), core competencies

As illustrated in Table 5, the regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 211) = 53.872$, $p < .001$, indicating that the set of core competencies collectively predicts competitive advantage. The R^2 value of .434 shows that the three competency dimensions explain 43.4% of the variance

in competitive advantage, a substantial proportion that underscores the importance of competencies for organizational competitiveness.

Table 5
ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	38.372	3	12.791	53.872	< .001
Residual	50.101	211	.237		
Total	88.473	214			

a. *Dependent Variable: competitive Advantage*
b. *b. Predictors: (Constant), core competencies*

Table 6 shows that among the individual predictors, technical competencies had the strongest positive effect on competitive advantage (β = 0.413, p < .001), followed by leadership competencies (β = 0.312, p < .001). Evaluation competencies showed a positive but non-significant coefficient (β = 0.138, p = .055), suggesting that while evaluation skills contribute, their influence is weaker when considered alongside technical and leadership capabilities.

Table 6
Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized β	Std. Error	Standardized β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.023	.201		5.089	< .001
Leadership Competencies	.298	.063	.312	4.730	< .001
Evaluation Competencies	.129	.067	.138	1.925	.055
Technical Competencies	.412	.069	.413	5.971	< .001

Overall, the regression analysis produced a statistically significant model, F(3, 211) = 53.872, p < .001, confirming that leadership, evaluation, and technical competencies collectively predict competitive advantage. The coefficient of determination (R^2 = 0.434) indicates that these three competency dimensions explain 43.4% of the variance in organizational competitiveness, underscoring their critical role in shaping competitive positioning within the social impact sector. Among the individual predictors, technical competencies had the strongest positive effect (β = 0.413, p < .001), followed by leadership competencies (β = 0.312, p < .001). Evaluation competencies showed a positive but non-significant coefficient (β = 0.138, p = .055), suggesting that while evaluation skills contribute to competitiveness, their influence is comparatively weaker when considered alongside technical and leadership capabilities. These findings highlight that investments in technical and leadership competencies are most directly associated with enhanced

competitive advantage, while evaluation competencies may require additional contextual enablers to fully manifest their potential

The t-values for leadership competencies ($t = 4.730$) and technical competencies ($t = 5.971$), both with significant p-values ($p < .001$), provided enough evidence to reject the null hypotheses for these two dimensions and conclude that leadership and technical competencies have a significant positive influence on competitive advantage. For evaluation competencies, the t-value ($t = 1.925$) and associated p-value ($p = .055$) were marginally non-significant, indicating that its influence, while positive, is not statistically significant when considered alongside the other competency dimensions.

The model drawn from the regression analysis is as follows:

Competitive Advantage = 1.023 + 0.298 (Leadership Competencies) + 0.129 (Evaluation Competencies) + 0.412 (Technical Competencies)

Discussion of Results

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence on the relationship between social impact project core competencies and competitive advantage within the context of Kenya's devolved governance system. The discussion adopts a funnel approach, moving from broader theoretical alignment to specific contextual interpretations and implications.

Technical Competencies and Competitive Advantage

The finding that technical competencies exert the strongest influence on competitive advantage ($\beta = 0.413$, $p < .001$) aligns with a substantial body of literature emphasizing the critical role of technical skills in organizational effectiveness. Crawford (2005) established that project management competencies, particularly those related to technical execution, significantly predict project success across diverse industry contexts. More recently, Müller and Turner (2010) demonstrated that technical competencies in areas such as planning, control, and risk management are foundational to project management effectiveness, providing organizations with the operational excellence necessary to outperform competitors.

Within the Resource-Based View framework, the strong influence of technical competencies supports Barney's (1991) proposition that valuable, rare, and inimitable resources constitute sources of sustainable competitive advantage. In the development sector, Heeks (2017) argued that technical competencies in information and communication technology have become increasingly critical for organizations seeking to demonstrate impact and attract funding. The present study extends this argument by quantifying the magnitude of this effect within the specific context of Kenyan county governments, where technical competencies in data analytics, IT management, and problem-solving enable more efficient operations and stronger demonstration of impact.

The significance of technical competencies resonates with findings from other African contexts. Amoako, Asiedu, and Arthur (2021) reported that Ghanaian local governments with stronger technical competencies in monitoring and evaluation demonstrated superior performance in attracting development partners. Similarly, Mkhize and Thwala (2017) found that technical competencies in South African public sector infrastructure projects were positively associated with project success and organizational reputation. The current study corroborates these findings while

providing the first quantitative evidence from Kenya's devolved governance system, suggesting that technical competencies are universally critical yet contextually shaped.

Furthermore, the finding aligns with contemporary discourse on digital transformation in the public sector. Mergel, Edelmann, and Haug (2019) argued that technical competencies in digital tools and data analytics are essential for public sector organizations seeking to enhance efficiency and transparency. In the context of Kenyan counties, where devolution has created new demands for data-driven decision-making and accountability, technical competencies enable organizations to meet these demands effectively, thereby enhancing their competitive positioning relative to peers with weaker technical capabilities.

Leadership Competencies and Competitive Advantage

The significant influence of leadership competencies ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < .001$) on competitive advantage supports the extensive literature establishing leadership as a critical determinant of organizational performance. Turner and Müller (2005) pioneered the argument that leadership competencies are particularly salient in project-based organizations, where leaders must navigate complex stakeholder environments and align diverse interests toward common goals. Their research demonstrated that leadership style and competencies significantly influence project success, a finding echoed in subsequent studies (Müller & Turner, 2010; Zulch, 2014).

In the development sector, Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2011) emphasized that effective leadership is essential for non-profit organizations to achieve their missions and maintain competitive positioning. Leaders who can articulate a compelling vision, build strategic partnerships, and motivate teams enhance organizational reputation and effectiveness. The current study's findings provide empirical support for these arguments within the specific context of Kenyan county governments, where devolution has created new leadership challenges and opportunities.

The importance of leadership competencies aligns with institutional theory perspectives on organizational legitimacy. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued that organizations conform to institutional pressures to gain legitimacy, which in turn enhances their ability to access resources. In the Kenyan context, leaders who can navigate the complex institutional landscape of devolved governance including relationships with national government, development partners, and community stakeholders, enhance their organizations' legitimacy and competitiveness. This finding is consistent with research by Njeri and Kihoro (2020), who found that leadership competencies in stakeholder engagement were central to project success in Kenyan NGOs.

Moreover, the significant influence of leadership competencies resonates with African scholarship on culturally relevant leadership. Hofstede (2001) identified cultural dimensions that shape leadership effectiveness across contexts, while Mbigi and Maree (2005) articulated the concept of Ubuntu leadership in African contexts, emphasizing community-oriented, relationship-centered approaches. The present study's findings suggest that leadership competencies in partnership building and team motivation which embody relational aspects are particularly valued in the Kenyan context, contributing to organizational competitiveness.

Evaluation Competencies: A Nuanced Finding

The non-significant coefficient for evaluation competencies ($\beta = 0.138$, $p = .055$) presents a nuanced finding that warrants careful interpretation. While evaluation skills are essential for

accountability and organizational learning, their direct contribution to competitive advantage appears less pronounced when considered alongside technical and leadership capabilities. This finding resonates with critiques of monitoring and evaluation systems in development contexts.

Kusek and Rist (2004) observed that results-based management systems often devolve into compliance exercises rather than genuine learning tools. Their work highlighted how organizations may prioritize meeting external reporting requirements over using evaluation findings for adaptive management, thereby limiting the potential of evaluation competencies to enhance organizational performance. Eyben et al. (2015) extended this critique, arguing that the "audit culture" in international development can undermine the very outcomes it seeks to measure, as organizations focus on demonstrating accountability to donors rather than learning from communities.

The non-significant finding may also reflect the nature of evaluation competencies as necessary but not sufficient conditions for competitive advantage. Bamberger et al. (2012) argued that evaluation competencies must be embedded within supportive organizational systems to yield meaningful improvements in organizational effectiveness. In the absence of such systems, including adequate resources, leadership support, and organizational culture conducive to learning, evaluation competencies may not translate into competitive advantage.

In the Kenyan context, Kilonzo and Rotich (2019) documented widespread inconsistencies in county monitoring and evaluation systems due to inadequate training and accountability mechanisms. Their findings suggest that while evaluation competencies may exist, they may not be effectively deployed in contexts where systems are weak and where evaluation is perceived as a compliance requirement rather than a strategic tool. This aligns with the present study's finding that evaluation competencies, unlike technical and leadership competencies, do not independently predict competitive advantage.

Furthermore, the non-significant finding may reflect the multidimensional nature of competitive advantage in the social impact sector. Kaplan (2001) argued that competitive advantage for non-profit organizations derives from strategic clarity and adaptive capacity rather than merely technical evaluation skills. Similarly, Ebrahim and Rangan (2010) emphasized that organizations achieve competitive advantage through strategic clarity, strong accountability mechanisms, and adaptive capacity, factors that may depend on leadership and technical competencies as much as on evaluation skills.

Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

Collectively, these findings contribute to theoretical understanding in several ways. First, they extend the Resource-Based View by demonstrating that competencies differentially influence competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). While all competencies represent potential resources, technical and leadership competencies emerge as the most valuable in the Kenyan county context. This suggests that resource value is context-dependent and that organizations must strategically prioritize competency development based on their specific competitive environment.

Second, the findings highlight the complementarity of theoretical perspectives. While the Resource-Based View explains how competencies constitute valuable resources, Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) helps explain why evaluation competencies—often demanded by institutional pressures may not translate directly into competitive advantage when implemented as compliance mechanisms rather than genuine learning tools.

Third, the findings contribute to the limited empirical literature on competencies in devolved governance contexts. The R^2 value of 0.434 demonstrates that competencies collectively explain a substantial proportion of variance in competitive advantage, supporting the argument that workforce capabilities are critical determinants of organizational performance in the social impact sector (Crawford, 2005; Turner & Müller, 2005).

Implications for Practice

The differential influence of competency dimensions has important implications for practice. County governments and implementing organizations should prioritize investments in technical and leadership competencies, as these yield the most direct returns in terms of competitive advantage. Training programs should emphasize data analytics, IT management, problem-solving, strategic decision-making, and partnership building.

However, the non-significant finding for evaluation competencies should not be interpreted as evidence that evaluation skills are unimportant. Rather, it suggests that evaluation competencies may require supportive organizational conditions to contribute to competitiveness. Organizations should therefore complement evaluation competency development with investments in systems, culture, and leadership that enable evaluation findings to inform adaptive management and strategic decision-making.

Implications for Theory

These findings contribute to theoretical understanding in several ways. First, they extend the Resource-Based View by empirically demonstrating that competencies are valuable resources that explain substantial variance in competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Second, they highlight the differential contributions of competency dimensions, suggesting that not all competencies equally influence competitiveness. Third, they provide evidence from a devolved governance context in Africa, addressing a gap in the literature.

Conclusion

This study examined influence of social impact project core competencies on competitive advantage in four Kenyan counties. The findings reveal that technical competencies and leadership competencies significantly influence organizational competitiveness, explaining 43.4% of the variance in competitive advantage. The three competency dimensions; leadership, evaluation, and technical are interrelated, with technical skills having the strongest influence on competitive advantage. Evaluation competencies, while positively correlated, showed a non-significant direct effect in the regression model, suggesting that their contribution may depend on organizational context.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Prioritize Technical Competency Development: County governments and implementing organizations should invest in building technical competencies in data analytics, IT management, and digital tools, as these have the strongest influence on competitive advantage.

Strengthen Leadership Capabilities: Leadership development programs should emphasize team motivation, strategic decision-making, and partnership building to enhance organizational competitiveness.

Integrate Competency Development with Strategic Planning: Competency frameworks should be embedded in organizational strategic plans to ensure alignment between workforce capabilities and competitive objectives.

Develop a National Competency Framework: Further funding and scale-up of this study could support the creation of a national competency framework for social project evaluation in Kenya.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relied on respondents' opinions and perspectives, which may be influenced by halo effects. Results may also be influenced by interpreter biases, and not all possible confounding variables were controlled. The cross-sectional design limits causal inferences, and findings may not be generalizable beyond the four counties studied.

Future research should pursue comparative studies across counties and regions, longitudinal analysis of competency development and competitive advantage, integration of artificial intelligence and data analytics in impact evaluation, and gendered perspectives on leadership and competitive advantage.

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