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Entrepreneurship in Oman; policies and practices

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Oman provides an interesting context to examine how formal institutions encourage local enterprise. We examine the views of local entrepreneurs about the effectiveness of government policies that are intended to foster indigenous small business. We ask how they evaluate the entrepreneurial ecosystem. We provide an overview of the remarkable context, the Sultanate of Oman; thriving oil based economy, but characterised by a high percentage of expatriate business ownership. Moreover, the current industrial and commercial structure looks unlikely to be able to provide sufficient satisfying jobs for the rapidly expanding youthful population. The government has responded by creating modern formal institutions to facilitate enterprise and by providing a number of well-funded programs to enable local entrepreneurship. This forms the basis of our research problem, establishing how local entrepreneurs respond to these initiatives to address the low levels of local entrepreneurship. We conducted a face-to-face interview -survey with 60 Omani SME owners asking about how well the initiatives had addressed their cultural and practical "requirements". We found that many respondents were motivated by a quest for independence coupled with the need for a "good" job. However, we also found that the sheer joy of entrepreneuring delighted some respondents. The initiatives had provided the means of achieving this self-determination. The formal structures were very supportive; initial funding for example was readily available. However, we also found the informal structures were less developed. There was evidence of an emergent cognitive appeal and approval for entrepreneurship. We argue that there is need to develop such informal institutions to help existing businesses to grow and to cultivate an Omani enterprise culture.

Keywords

Entrepreneurship, formal institutions, informal institutions, Oman, policy

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider how well formal and informal institutions work to support entrepreneurship in the rather unique context of a flourishing, but oil dependent economy. Our objective is to study the entrepreneurial ecosystem and its effectiveness according to users, entrepreneurial agents. We examine these processes in the Sultanate of Oman. Oman shares some characteristics with its neighbouring countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), categorised as hydrocarbon-dependent economies. Consequently the development trajectories of the Arab Gulf states are shaped by the vicissitudes of the petroleum market (Ennis, 2013). As such, the economy has a substantial expatriate presence and less well developed local human capital. Moreover, the population is young and new satisfying jobs for Omanis in the private sector are scarce. Hence, as in many developed (Dana et al, 2008) and developing countries (Harbi et al, 2009), entrepreneurship is seen to offer a solution.

The paper examines the entrepreneurial support systems through the lens of respondents who are engaged in the system. Thus the views are informed by practice and experience, but are subjective interpretations. However, our analysis of these opinions allows us to step

back from individual opinions to reflect and form an overview of the more general implications emanating from the patterns of responses. As we see it, although an interpretation of interpretations, this is particularly useful because it is grounded in real entrepreneurial lived experiences rather than a checklist evaluation determined by the policy objectives themselves. We believe the paper contributes at different levels. There is a burgeoning awareness that context shapes enterprise (Welter, 2011; Dodd et al, 2013), so our appreciation of the Omani context may be useful for understanding entrepreneurship is similar contexts. Our institutional exploration, reflects on, and adds to, the significant point that institutions shape the nature and type of entrepreneurship (Harbi and Anderson, 2010; Baumol, 1996). These theoretical contributions are complemented by our practical contributions about the effectiveness of policies.

The paper begins by describing the context, Oman. We then expand on the descriptive account to discuss the nature of our research problem. Essentially Oman's rapid modernisation has been path dependent on oil and this has created specific problems related to the suitability of local human capital for the development process and a shortage of good jobs for the expectations of an expanding, but very youthful population. The problems to be addressed are seen as; reducing the reliance on an expatriate labour force; the indigenisation of the small business economy and broadening the economic structure to prepare for a reduction in oil revenues. More, and better Omani led entrepreneurship is held up as a solution and the effectiveness of policies is our research problematic. The paper continues with our data and analysis. Finally we discuss how our findings relate to Omani institutions and offer some suggestions.

The context, Oman

The Sultanate of Oman is a small but beautiful country that enjoys a reputation for international trading over 2000 years resulting from its geographic position straddling historical East-West trade routes. The population of some 3.8 million consists of approximately two million Omanis plus 1.8 million expatriates. Oman is one of the most progressive countries in the Middle East, with a stable political environment, a well-established legal system and international banking standards and regulations that encourage investment and enterprise (Khan and Al-Moharby, 2007). Although Curtiss (1999) had described Oman as one of most traditional societies in the Arab world, Oman has rapidly modernised (Kemp and Madsen, 2014) under the direction of Oman's monarch, His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id. Ghailani and Khan (2004) explain how the Vision for Oman's Economy: Oman 2020 proposed moving the country from reliance on the public sector to building the economy via private sector enterprise. Brandenburg (2013) refers to this era as Oman's Renaissance; offering the example that more than 30 public higher education institutions (HEI) were established, all offering free education, but exclusively for Omani citizens.

Nonetheless, all the countries that form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are highly dependent upon an expatriate labour force. Ennis (2013) explains that labour and expertise dependence began in the early days of the oil boom. Small populations and human capital development constraints meant local labour pools were both insufficient and ill equipped to manage the rapid, large-scale development projects. However, amongst its GCC neighbours, Oman is structurally less dependent upon an expatriate workforce. Oman expatriate workers represent 59.4% of the total workforce in contrast to, Qatar at 94%; UAE at 93%; Kuwait at 80.5% and Bahrain at 77.3%. Saudi Arabia's working population is eight times larger than Oman but has only some 50.2% of this workforce as expatriates.

Nonetheless, Ennis (2015) concludes that the regional economy is circumscribed by two interrelated path dependencies; national addictions to hydrocarbon revenue and foreign labour.

Addiction may be a poor description of structural features that have served the country so well, thus far. Moreover, it is also important to recognize the extraordinary improvements made in a comparatively short historical period. Before 1970, Oman was in political turmoil especially in the south of the country. Importantly, there were only two schools in the entire country so that national illiteracy prevailed. Thus the changes since 1970 when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, the Sultan of Oman, assumed power are remarkable in the extent and reach of the radical improvements. This *Renaissance* period began with infrastructure improvements and spread to all sectors. It is fair to say that Oman now has a modern infrastructure and supporting institutions, albeit with a hydrocarbon dependency. Nonetheless, it was oil discovery that has positioned Oman as one of the most progressive countries in the Middle East Region and oil remains pivotal for the development of the country. This is because oil production creates around 80% of the total revenue (Al Shanfari 2012). In 1970, GDP was $ 110 million and $ 1,760 per capita income, but by 2014 GDP was $ 80.57 Billion and per capita income was $15,145.

However, perhaps as a consequence of financial success of the hydrocarbon economy, two related problems have arisen. The overdependence upon a foreign workforce influenced a weakened supply of local human capital. Indeed local Omani labour ambition was often for a well paid secure government job. However the state sector has been described as bloated and cannot absorb the sharply increasing numbers of new labour market entrants. The indigenous Omani private sector is growing, but not fast enough to soak up these large numbers. Buckley and Rynhart (2011) estimated that youth unemployment (15-24 years old) could be as high as 30%. More than 35 % of Oman's population is under the age of 15, and 63 % is under 25 (MoNE 2010). Moreover although the education system produces international standard graduates, "the annual number of college and university graduates already exceeds the annual number of jobs available in Oman" (Al-Barwani *et al.*, 2009, p. 416). Furthermore there may be a question about the suitability of local graduates. It is reported that near half of surveyed Arab CEO's consider that the education system produces an unqualified national cadre (Arab Human Capital Challenge, 2009).

Accordingly the "problem" is more than merely adjusting the imbalances of expatriate versus local labour and expertise, or of simply creating more jobs. Solutions must create satisfying jobs, especially if avoiding the disaffection of the youthful population is a priority. In the longer term, growth, but especially sustained growth, will have to be home grown. Such growth may well involve international partners, but will have to be anchored in Omani expertise and in Omani owned and managed businesses. Thus given the complexity of the "problem" it is unsurprising that the promotion of entrepreneurship has become a policy objective. The socio-economic dilemmas have been the driving force for the government support for entrepreneurship and self-employment especially among the young (Khan and Al-Moharby, 2007). Moreover, Ennis (2015) argues that the entrepreneurial ecosystem is closely tied to government policy and initiatives. Thus an understanding of how these work in practice will allow us to see how the "problem" is being addressed. Figure 1 below, numerically illustrates the extent of the problem.

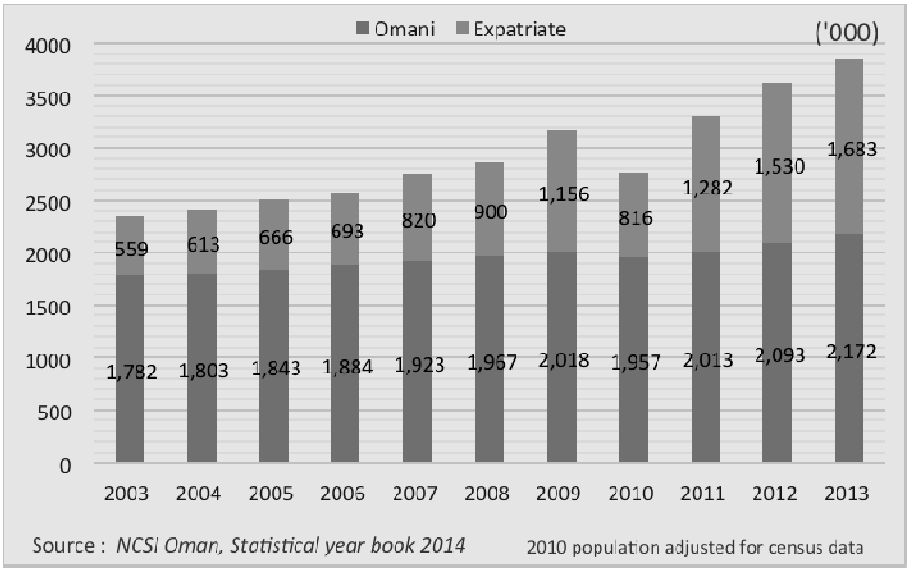

Figure 1 Indigenous population growth and numbers of expatriates

Indeed, governments around the world have striven to promote entrepreneurship and develop the institutions necessary for a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem. An outstanding example from a less developed country is Rwanda. It made a spectacular leap in the World Bank list for Ease of Doing business, jumping from 143rd to 67th. (World Bank, 2015). This has paid off for Rwanda; the per Capita GDP has almost quadrupled since 1995, (Isenberg, 2010). Of course, if entrepreneurship forms and practices are shaped by context and institutions, so too is the appeal of entrepreneurship, especially for younger people (Dodd et al, 2013; Harbi et al, 2009). The appeal of entrepreneurship is uneven; according to the World Bank research in 2010, developed economies produce 10 times more new ventures per adult per year as compared to economies of countries in the Middle East. This seems to illustrate the extent of the challenges that Omani policies must face.

Nonetheless, compared to other Arab Gulf governments, the Omani government has been more active in its labor market intervention through its job nationalisation (Omanisation) program. The Omanisation program is an initiative that aims to integrate local labour into the job market and reduce foreign labour in both private and public sectors. A focus has been the entrepreneurship programmes, supported by both private and public organisations. We now describe the programmes.

Entrepreneurship support in Oman

Intilaaqah

Intilaaqah, Shell's social investment initiative was set up in 1995 and designed to stimulate and encourage unemployed Omani youth to consider starting their own business as a career option. By supporting their business ideas and plans with free expert training and counseling, Intilaaqah aims to create young entrepreneurs who will help diversify the economy away from oil and gas.

Since its inception, the programme has trained more than 7,600 Omanis, many of whom now successfully run their own business. Intilaaqah's main focus is to help in creating sustainable businesses and job opportunities. It does this by providing guidance, business development assistant and online self-paced training courses. Furthermore, the programme offers

financial support ranging from US 50,000 to one million dollars to qualified Small and Medium Enterprises (SME's).

Its vision is to create an entrepreneurial environment and assist small businesses to prosper. Intilaaqah recognizes that startup businesses go through many obstacles at the early stages; it therefore addresses these obstacles by providing necessary counseling and business development services. The program has contributed to the creation of many businesses and will continue to do so to achieve its objective of promoting and encouraging entrepreneurship in Oman.

Intilaaqah's Objectives

- To focus on development of entrepreneurial talents and business mindset of young entrepreneurs.
- To support the development and growth of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME's).
- To create sustainable SME's in Oman.
- To build the capacity of local entrepreneurs.
- To recognize successful entrepreneurs and promote the concept of entrepreneurship to others.
- To contribute to the national strategy to diversify the economy.
- To help alleviate the growing job seeking rate amongst young Omanis.
- To demonstrate Shell's commitment to the sustainable development of the Sultanate of Oman.

As observers, we are interested in Intilaaqah as an institution and the roles played. We note the type and extent of practical support provided by the programme. Yet it has an ambitious objective; unemployed youth will likely lack the sort of experience and knowledge that steers a new small firm through the liabilities of newness. Nonetheless, counseling is an effective way of sharing knowledge, but is very dependent on the knowledge resources of the counselor. We know that general codified knowledge is useful at start up, but that tacit specific knowledge is critical for firm growth (Anderson and Ullah, 2014; Hardwick et al, 2013). From this viewpoint, we see Intilaaqah as a formal institution that offers cognitive and practical support for new small firms. However as a formal, albeit private, institution it may lack the capacity to enable growth. We are nonetheless, impressed by the extent of financial support for new firms. This would be the envy of many new firms in other parts of the world!

Al Rafd Fund

Unlike most of the world, finding finance for small firms is remarkably easy in the Sultanate. We noted above the funding from Intilaaqah, but alternative funding for small firms is available through the Al Rafd fund. Internationally, many small firms struggle to secure finance, especially loans. Not only is credit limited, when available, it usually requires security. In Oman through the Al Rafd Fund, SMEs are offered loans without any guarantee. The Al Rafd Fund offers finance for projects worth up to RO 100,000 (over $250,000 US). This is clearly a substantial pillar of formal institutions.

Riyada

The government institutional support for entrepreneurship is represented in Riyada. On 30th May 2013, a Royal Decree was issued to convert the Directorate General of Small, Medium Enterprises within the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to the Public Authority for Small Medium Enterprises (Riyada) with a dedicated management structure. The main objectives of the Authority are as follows:

- Development of SME establishments and foster them to spread and enable them to get finance and services by collaboration with the concerned public and private authorities and bodies.
- Instilling the culture of entrepreneurship in young and youth.
- Enforcing the role of establishments to provide various and renewable job opportunities to Omani youth.
- Assisting entrepreneurship to take the initiative to establish and execute their own projects and to develop them.
- Enhancing the competitive, advantage of the existing SME Establishments.
- Increasing the ability of establishments to achieve added value to the national economy; to take part in economy diversification, to support innovation, and to use modern technologies.

"Riyada" launched five initiatives: a business center "incubator", entrepreneurs' business card, open registration for industrial lands acquisition, the establishment of an entrepreneurs' club and the establishment of entrepreneurs' newspaper. The establishment of the business incubator is the first of its kind in Oman and is intended to help enterprises to progress towards excellence and sustainability through the use of services and facilities provided. These include training programs, technical support, consulting and creating a partnership among the entrepreneurs and with government and private sectors to provide a solid ground for these institutions to flourish and develop.

This is clearly a substantial formal institution offering both cultural and practical support. Within the institution are the possibilities of supporting growth rather than simply start up, but the focus is on start up and inexperienced entrepreneurs.

Research Methods

Our research problem is about the effectiveness of institutional support but our research questions enquired about the subjective opinions, the views, of our respondents. This signaled a qualitative, interpretative approach as the most suitable for the study. We used a questionnaire with both open and closed questions in face-to-face interviews. Thus, we acquired quantitative data, mainly based on Likert scales, which was useful for showing the range and extent of opinions. The qualitative comments were intended to help us understand and then conceptualise the patterns we found. Our focus was not on capturing effects, "explaining" in positivistic terms (Anderson, 2015) through variances, but in understanding processes.

Our sampling was purposeful (McKeever et al, 2015) that is to say be sought out respondents who had experienced and used the support programmes and thus were active participants in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. We interviewed 60 Omani entrepreneurs whom we selected from a list of participants in the Riyada programme. We used a questionnaire and interview schedule that had two sections. The first section was about the entrepreneur and the business and the second asked about their perceptions and experiences of government support programs. The lead author who is Omani and an experienced businessman conducted all of the interviews. This helped to develop rapport with the respondents, especially in the more sensitive question areas. Of course, it may also have introduced some bias, but this kind of study is never value free.

We first completed a simple descriptive analysis, but then employed the constant comparative method to explore the data in detail. The constant comparative method involves analytical induction; first identifying themes in the data and then iterative comparisons with and between other data and theory (Jack et al, 2010). This is not full blown formal grounded theorizing but neatly described by Anderson et al (2010) as "dancing between data and theory"

Description of our sample

The greatest number of respondents, 25, were aged between 31 and 40; the next largest group aged between 41 and 30 included 18 respondents. We had only one older respondent, but 14 aged 25 to 30 and 2 between 19 and 24 years. Thus our respondents were generally mature, Omani males with some life experience. All had completed high school, for 18 respondents this was their highest qualification; 20 had diplomas, 15 bachelor degrees and 7 had a master's degree. However their backgrounds and previous experience was quite varied. Only 18 had previous business experience, of these 5 had family business experience; for the remainder, 18 had worked for the government and 25 had no work experience.

Although most of our respondents were originally entrepreneurial novices, several were now well established; 5 had started their business before 2000; 10 were established 2000-2004; 13 between 2004-2007; 15 between 2008 and 2010 and the remaining 17 started in business after 2010. Thus the respondents have had substantial business experience to enable them to reflect on the support programmes. Company turnover varied considerably; 39 respondents' companies could be classified as small with a turnover of around $150k; 12 as small to medium with a turnover around $250k; 6 had a turnover of $250k to just under a $million and the remaining 3 had turnovers exceeding $1m. We asked how their businesses were doing and 52 reported that their businesses were growing; 6 felt that business had not changed very much, but only two thought their business was not going well. It seems that our respondents were generally quite successful.

Our final descriptive question was about whether they were satisfied with the support they had received. Figure 2 below shows a very disparate response to the question.

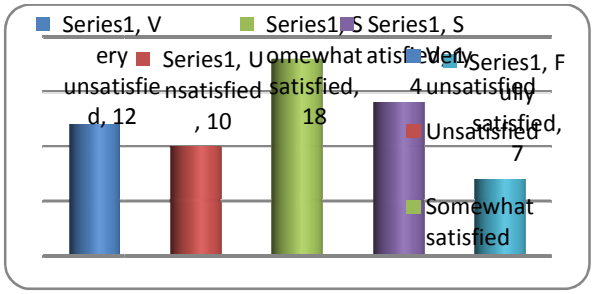

Figure 2, extent of satisfaction with support

Qualitative analysis and thematic findings

This section presents our interpretations of the respondents' replies to the open questions. We thought it important to establish why they had decided to start a business, especially in light of the lack of previous business experience for most of the respondents. We thought this might help us to understand if there was any evidence of an enterprise culture in Oman. We had expected to hear quite instrumental responses; the sort of motivations that are deemed necessity or opportunity or pushed or pulled. However we were surprised at the type and range of answers we were given.

Nonetheless, several respondents had a narrow instrumental motivation. 6 respondents told us that they wanted to secure a job for themselves; typically *"I didn't have a job*". But only two respondents said, "*no other option*". Moreover, one respondent told us that starting his own business was "*instead of waiting for a government job".* Similarly another explained, "*instead of looking for a job or wait for a government job".* One respondent didn't explain his motivation, but told us he currently worked for the government as well as in his own business.

Although our respondents had not been members of the "problem" group of unemployed graduates; we are, nonetheless, surprised by the low numbers who saw entrepreneurship as no more than creating a job for them. Interesting too is how the career options were bound up with a government job. Indeed one respondent told us, *"this was better than a government job*". Clearly, as the literature had indicated, a secure government job is seen as a baseline of Omani career options. However, if that is not possible, or as we discuss later, desirable, entrepreneurship is considered quite favourably. Chinese youth attitudes towards entrepreneurship provide an interesting contrast. China too is beginning to experience a shortage of graduate jobs. China's economy had been dominated by state owned enterprises, not unlike the situation of Omani government jobs. However, informal but normative institutions such as strong parental pressure favour the steady job and preference for the "iron rice bowl". Starting your own business is seen as "jumping into the sea" (Anderson and Zhang, forthcoming). Yet in Oman, it appears that in broad terms, the idea of starting a business is generated from positive reasons. In turn this suggests that although there may not be a strongly manifest Omani enterprise culture, there is a positive perception of entrepreneurship.

This positiveness about entrepreneurship becomes very evident in the responses, which emphasise the benefits as motivation. Many talked about achieving a better income; "*to improve my income and welfare"* was typical. A strong theme was independence,"*I don't want to belong to anyone*" or, "*to work independently".* This idea of independence was related to success in personal terms*,* "*for a change and for better future* "; *"to be self dependent, feel the success".* This suggests that entrepreneurial autonomy is more than just being your own boss and escaping being told what to do. These words taste of liberation and responsibility. But listen to these declarations: "*I love entrepreneurship!"* This was not the only passionate response, *"I believe in entrepreneurship".* We were also told, "*I love my business*!" Moreover, this joy in entrepreneurship was explained, as "*I love being in business*". Statements such as, "*I love the spirit of entrepreneurship, would like to be my own boss*", echo and resonate with the munificence of enterprise and of being enterprising.

Interestingly, two respondents told us they were motivated by the status of being an entrepreneur. Thus looking at these data thematically we see a strong positive characterisation of entrepreneurship. Of course this is biased, as these respondents were successful entrepreneurs. But the characterisation of entrepreneurship as a desirable means to an end is powerful. As an end in itself, the delight in doing was almost an ecstasy of enterprise. These are powerful indicators of the desirable status of entrepreneurship in Oman.

Conclusions

In the section above we looked for explanations of why there were such varied opinions on support programmes. Unfortunately we could not see any logical reasons! If results matter, most of our respondents' businesses were doing rather well. A superficial conclusion has to be that given the general prior lack of experience they programs had worked, and worked very well. For many, they are now established entrepreneurs so we can only imagine that the early stages of ignorance and hope that characterise the liabilities of newness have been forgotten. Building from the confidence that success creates they may have set their sights on higher targets. The programmes were perhaps great for early stage enterprise but less good for a growth orientation.

Turning to institutional explanations, we saw strong enabling formal institutions in the shape of the government-supported schemes. We didn't detect specific informal institutions. However, we can see a beginning in the strong cognitive support for entrepreneurship. This stands as a counterpoint to the security but lack of excitement in a government job. Indeed for those who are entrepreneurially inclined, entrepreneurship itself is the opportunity!

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