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Public–private partnerships for improved service delivery: the case of Intercity STC Coaches in Ghana

Clement Mensah Damoah  and Kwame Asamoah 

ABSTRACT

This article assesses how the public–private partnership involving Intercity STC Coaches in Ghana has impacted on service delivery. An exploratory qualitative research approach was adopted for the study. The key findings indicate that the PPP has helped Intercity STC Coaches to increase the number of fleets, although these are still considered inadequate. Additionally, Intercity STC Coaches' clients are satisfied with the services rendered to them. The article, therefore, recommends that Intercity STC Coaches should look for more investors to procure additional buses so as to meet the growing demand from their clients.

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Introduction

There is a constant demand for improvement in the delivery of public services across the world (Quium 2011). However, the tax and consolidated mechanisms through which governments secure funding for projects and programmes have proved ineffective. Consequently, there has been a shift in the discussion on how the public sector can develop through restructuring to the search for more innovative ways of public service delivery. Public–private partnerships (PPP) have been a lucrative venture which various governments have pursued as a solution to the inefficiencies and anomalies in the delivery of public goods and services (Bland and Overton 2016). In theory, PPP is a significant means of improving infrastructure and service delivery in the growth and development of the economy. Yet, the outcomes of PPP arrangements, whether positive or negative, cannot be presumed without research into service delivery. Although many studies have looked at the PPP engagements in both developed and developing countries, and have projected its success – value for money, enhanced efficiency, risk transfers and cost savings (Osei-Kyei and Chan 2017a) – other scholars have argued that PPP arrangements have not lived up to their expectations (Boardman, Siemiatycki, and Vining 2016) and are “mad, bad and, on occasions, dangerous to be involved with” (Tarrant 2007, 48). Some scholars have also argued that there is an enormous financial burden on the government in engaging the private sector rather than in doing things itself (Mouraviev and Kakabadse 2016).

PPP as a development tool is not a new phenomenon in Ghana. The private sector has been actively involved in the delivery of public goods since the early 1990s. Their involvement, however, has been in service delivery sectors like sanitation, telecommunication, and energy. The transportation sector, an important sector of the economy, seems to have been ignored and literature on PPP in Ghana is skewed towards other sectors (Osei-Kyei and Chan 2017b; Osei-Kyei, Chan, and Dansoh 2017; Osei-Kyei and Chan 2015). With growing demand for better services and increasing competition in the transport sector, Intercity STC Coaches Limited (ISTC) in Ghana has had to look for mechanisms aimed at helping it deliver its mandate effectively without compromising its clients' safety. Perceived to lack the requisite expertise and human resources in delivering

effective and efficient services to its clients, ISTC has partnered some private entities to overcome this: Smice International, Nordic Logistics Limited, AMPS Family and the M Plaza Transport Limited.

Given the above, plus the fact that in the transport sector in Ghana there appears to be a “lack of systematic evaluation of actual practice, reasoned debate on the thorny policy issues and common implementation challenges” (Sagalyn 2007, 7), this article aims to examine the ISTC-private partnership and its implementation outcomes by asking to what extent the partnership has contributed to efficient service delivery.

Theoretical and empirical literature

This study uses the neo-liberal theory as its theoretical basis. Neo-liberalism is perceived to be an ingenious, constructivist, revolutionising force, aimed at creating a new social and political model, and not an attempt to revive an outdated one. Consequently, it involves organisations and activities which are deemed to be outside of the market: public administrations, trade unions, universities, and households. By so doing, it enables them to be a part of the market, through acts such as privatisation; or to redesign them in a “market-like” manner. In order for this to be achieved, it is essential for the state to be an active force, and not simply relying on market forces. This distinguishes neo-liberalism from Victorian liberalism. Competition and inequality are deemed to be good under neo-liberalism, as a non-socialist principle for society in general, through which value and scientific knowledge can best be pursued (Mirowski and Plehwe 2015).

Neo-liberal theory is thus appropriate for this study. It places much emphasis on the influence and impact of the inclusion of the private sector in the delivery of services. The state creates an enabling environment by which the private sector can leverage to succeed. It also brings to light the competitiveness that comes to bear as a result of engaging private institutions. Privatising service delivery promises higher productivity gains, efficiency and effectiveness. Governments have extensively used PPP in infrastructure and public services, such as transportation, water and sewage, energy, environment protection, education, and public health services due to the notions of efficacy, effectiveness and other qualities that neo-liberalism suggests characterise the private sector (Wang et al. 2018). Pursuant to this ideal, urban waste management and sanitation services have been largely privatised in Ghana (Pimpong and Bi 2016). A public–private partnership is not complete privatisation (Reynaers 2014). This is because it gives the actors involved, be they citizens or private sector, the opportunity to “become involved and accountable to the public and to be creative in solving immediate social and economic problems” (Grossman 2012, 185). It can therefore be argued that as a combined effort from both the private sector and the public sector, PPPs offer high-standard services. Additionally, PPPs have been perceived to be a collaborative effort of both public and private sector actors who exhibit similar principles and believe that their decisions have long-term implications (Phua, Wan-Hui Ling, and Phua 2014).

It is generally accepted that resources are scarce to governments and they also lack the ability to find solutions to the numerous challenges confronting them alone (Vinogradov and Shadrina 2018). As a result, these partnerships seek to harness the combined effort of the public sector’s “authority to legislate and regulate, and its solemn obligation to sustain the public interest with the private sector’s capacity for risk-taking, innovation, marketing, and for tapping a variety of financial resources” (Finney and Grossman 1999). The combined “strength” on both sides helps in solving the many problems of society (Finney and Grossman 1999). Apart from limiting the risks involved in PPP, it also has the tendency to help share the investment risks partners encounter in the course of a project. The public sector is able to utilise resources, expertise, and skills from their partnering with the private sector.

Lastly, PPP is seen as an important and innovative administration tool (Linder 1999), used in aiding the public sector to be more effective, efficient and responsive to deliver public goods and services. Congruent with the New Public Governance and New Public Management philosophies of public sector management with the private sector’s expertise and entrepreneurial skills, public–private

partnerships engender greater productivity in public sector service delivery (Velotti, Botti, and Vesci 2012).

Public-private partnership in transportation

Although there is no single accepted definition of sustainable transportation, it has been argued that sustainable transportation ought to be effective and efficient while ensuring equitable access to social and economic services that promote economic development and environmental integrity (Jeon, Amekudzi, and Vanegas 2006). Soliño and Gago de Santos (2010) contend that issues relating to good procurement practices in PPPs have received much attention. The general assumption is that PPPs are inclined to higher transaction costs than that provided through the traditional public method. It is argued that, in order not to deter private involvement, transactional costs must be minimised. Their study, however, overemphasises the procurement process of PPP in transportation infrastructure and value for money measurements, while ignoring how PPP can help improve service delivery in the transport sector.

According to Juan, Estache, and Trujillo (2007), the twenty-first century has seen a significant decline in the idea of privatisation and an increased rejection of the private sector in the financing and subsequent management of public services. This shift in ideology, they assert, is not only predominant in developing countries but also in developed ones. This notwithstanding, PPPs “continue to be on the agenda of many politicians in both developed and developing countries” (Juan, Estache, and Trujillo 2007, 1). They also assert that the primary motivation for the adoption of PPPs is the need to reduce fiscal costs in the transport sector. There are also concerns about cutting unit costs. It is further postulated that “the conviction that private operators are likely to be able to deliver services more efficiently is indeed often also a key driver of the continued effort to get into PPPs” (Juan, Estache, and Trujillo 2007, 1). The government of China in recent years has required extra financing in transportation infrastructure than it alone can provide. Consequently, the ability of the government alone to provide an effective and efficient public service has been questioned and reassessed at various levels, and recent years have seen the promotion of “private investors in the development of Metropolitan Transportation Systems” and adopting more the PPP model (Yuan et al. 2010, 5). However, China’s quest for transportation infrastructure projects has been in the area of urban development, for instance, bridges, highways and tunnels, with little attention seemingly paid to improvement in transportation service delivery.

The adoption of PPPs in public service infrastructure has the propensity for effectiveness and efficiency because it is enhanced by capitalising on the private sector’s professional and technical expertise, and financial and managerial competence. This augments the necessary maintenance and operation of infrastructure. According to Rao and Vokolkova (2007, 3):

this allows public services to be delivered more efficiently and effectively, which allows Government resources to be channelled into other areas where direct public investment and intervention is required. It is also true that partnerships need not necessarily mean mega investments but could also be involving more citizens to be part of partnerships that can bring in all the desired results normally associated with PPPs, more so in the transport sector of Botswana.

Transportation infrastructure in the US has traditionally been financed through gas taxation and not through direct taxes like road tolls. Murray (2007, 53) states that:

traditionally, in the US, the public sector shouldered the main responsibility for managing transportation – acquire right-of-way (ROW), design, finance, operate, own, and maintain while the private sector was only allowed to build roads following all the regulation and permits introduced by the government. The reformed PPP model awards “design-build” contracts on a competitive “best-value” basis instead of the conventional “low-bid” basis and thus turn over the design-build responsibility to the private sector leaving with the government the financing and maintenance of the roads. The idea is to give the road to everybody while allowing the private sector to earn some profit and the public sector to save some money.

Soomro and Zhang (2013) see PPPs as institutional arrangements that ease private business activities in the public sector. Implementation of transportation PPPs is “based on governmental efforts to achieve extended efficiency, economy, and effectiveness in comparison to conventional infrastructure procurement systems” (Soomro and Zhang 2013, 1). Transportation PPPs have achieved notable success in infrastructure development goals. This notwithstanding, the authors believe that the introduction of long-term public infrastructure which is profit-oriented but operates on social welfare principles will lead to several unconventional managerial issues and risks in infrastructure procurement systems.

From the above, it can be seen that PPP has helped in the area of transportation, notably in infrastructure. However, the literature seems to suggest that not much effort and attention has been paid to the improvement of service delivery in transportation, especially when it comes to people’s day-to-day travel. This study address this gap in the existing literature, namely the efficient and effective provision of services, as well as the nature and management of transport-related PPPs and how this enhances or impedes the outcomes or expected outcomes of PPPs in the transportation industry. The study focuses on the transport sector in Ghana in the form of ISTC’s PPP.

Methodology

This study used an exploratory method in a qualitative inquiry to answer the research question: to what extent has the partnership contributed to efficient service delivery? The use of exploratory methods is justified on two grounds. First, given the descriptive nature of the research question, the exploratory method was appropriate as it is deemed relevant for descriptive studies (Creswell 2014). Second, given the seemingly non-availability of an appropriate model to measure and test the constructs of PPP as conceptualised in this study, the exploratory method was employed in order to gather relevant information for further quantitative analysis. Two main sources of data, comprising primary and secondary data, were employed. The sources of secondary data include; books, journal articles, government reports and documents, newspapers, and magazines, while primary data were collected through interviews with ISTC workers and the private entities. Relevant literature for analysis was reviewed, guided by the research questions, allowing an understanding of the study subjects, and enabling in-depth description, analysis and presentation of data.

As an exploratory study, purposive sampling technique was used to select five ISTC staff with knowledge and experience relevant to the research: the Head of Marketing and Business Development, Human Resource Manager and the Greater Accra Regional Manager, Head of Traffic, and Research and Operation Officer. Three private partners were also sampled: the chairman of the board of SMICE International and the managers of both Nordic Logistics and M Plaza because they possess institutional knowledge about the partnership. Convenience sampling technique was adopted for two customer focus groups (six members in each) who were available at the ISTC yard and were willing to contribute. The focus groups consisted of seven men and five women aged between 20 and 65 years. In the focus groups, the highest educational qualification was a master’s degree and the lowest a senior high graduate.

Qualitative data analysis involved categorising and making meaning out of the collected data. Interviews were tape-recorded, augmented by note-taking. The recorded interviews were then transcribed. Data collected were then presented and analysed using themes, reflecting on the study objectives and the literature review. In order to reduce bias, participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded and also made aware that they could withdraw at any time. Results were anonymised using numerical systems to encourage participants to be as transparent as possible.

The research, however, was not devoid of some challenges. Some were surmounted, while others were not. The initial challenge was getting the respondents to agree to be recorded on an audio device. This challenge was surmounted after some discussions. One fundamental challenge was that of accessing some official documents from the ISTC, especially contractual agreements on the

partnership. Though it was impossible to access these documents, other operational reports which aided much of the analyses of this study were made available. There were some challenges in locating some critical respondents, as in the case of the AMPS Family, to conduct an interview. However, we were able to secure secondary data that helped in the analyses of the work. Transcribing the audio recordings was also a major challenge given the lengthy interviews. Due to ethical issues on confidentiality, the researcher had to transcribe the interviews alone.

Public transport in Ghana

The public transport system in Ghana encompasses both formal and informal sectors. The Ghana Private Road Transport Union (GPRTU) has a market share of about 70-80% of the intercity transport services in Ghana. Other competitors such as Metro Mass Transit Limited and Intercity STC Coaches Limited (ISTC) which are government owned, and other private owners such as the Progressive Transport Owners Association (PROTOA), Concerned Drivers Union, VIP, VVIP, battle for the remaining 20%. The GPRTU arguably would continue to control the transportation sector as it is able to win over other private operators through the sharing of its terminals. Although bus terminals are owned by the state through the local assemblies, the GPRTU operates them and they serve as a source of revenue to the government through the taxes paid by the local branches of the GPRTU. In an attempt to expand and develop public transportation, various governments over the years have tried to increase the capacity of state-owned transport companies such as the ISTC. However, data on individual market share for the various transportation agencies is difficult to find due to poor recordkeeping by the private transport companies and even the state-owned companies. Thus, data on market shares seem to be non-existent from the Ghana Statistical Service.

Data analysis and discussion

This section explores the outcomes of the implementation of this PPP agreement from the perspectives of ISTC, the private partners, and commuters who use ISTC buses.

ISTC's perspectives on the outcomes

ISTC expected that engaging the private sector would help augment their work. ISTC respondents acknowledged that they lacked the capacity to deliver their mandate to their full capacity. Therefore, they engaged the private sector knowing that it possesses “superior” knowledge in management and has the financial muscle to propel ISTC to achieve its mandate. This, they believe, will boost their market share in the transport sector. An ISTC staff member explained the purpose of this partnership as:

... we are now in a competitive world and we didn't want to lose some of our major routes to our competitors because we have run these routes for quite a long time. But the demand is now so high that the few buses that we have cannot suffice to meet the increasing demand. As a way of sustaining the routes, we asked these private people to come and join us. So that even if we are not making a profit, we can still serve our customers until the time that our own buses arrive. So, it's a matter of just engaging them to sustain our routes because we see some of the routes to be more profitable. And if you leave your more profitable routes to your competitors, you are going to be out of business very soon, and we don't want to be out of business. (Interview, 2018)

This was corroborated by the Head of Marketing, Business and Development at the ISTC head office, who said that ISTC: “was the sole ownership of the government of the day” but the current market trend requires the need to involve private investors. According to him, despite having “a competent, well-structured management team and a board”, ISTC at the time of initiating the PPP agreement had fewer coaches (50) and this would not allow it to achieve their goal of offering world-class services to commuters across all ten regions in Ghana. This necessitated the need to bring on board “well

diligent, well composed, and ... organisations or companies that have the resources or coaches to come into partnership with ISTC to enable us to serve our customers very well" (Interview, 2018).

The Greater Accra manager of ISTC stated that:

The main purpose of the partnership is to bring buses ... The thing is we ... don't have enough buses to operate or to cover our routes. And when it happens like that, the company breaks down. That is why all these agreements came in ... (Interview, 2018)

He also postulated that:

If you want to meet competition, you always have to ... come up with something that will add value to the service that you are giving out ... because you want to beat your competitors. This is not those days when ISTC was using seats and the others were using *atonkyene* [a lower grade of bus seats]. Then, it was a clear monopoly. But now people are using more sophisticated buses, so what else can you do to beat the competition? The idea came up, that why don't we do something for our passengers, so that at least we can catch up with our opponents. So, we sat down and thought about bringing people into the bus to serve the passengers with some snacks. And that has worked out very well. These days we are getting more passengers. (Interview, 2018)

These assertions illustrate the rationale for the PPP from the perspective of the ISTC management. For the ISTC management, the PPP arrangement is serving its purpose, though some challenges remain. Through the partnership ISTC is now able to offer more customers adequate buses and better services as compared to the years immediately preceding the PPP.

Table 1 shows that there was a decline in the number of trips and passengers carried from 2013 to 2015, although revenue generated increased due to fare increases year by year. The decline in the number of trips and passengers carried is attributed to the breakdown of buses which hindered the operation of ISTC. The decline in the number of buses due to their poor management led ISTC to seek to bring on board private companies. In 2016 and 2017 the number of trips and passengers carried increased, but this was because in 2016 the government procured 50 new buses to support the operations of ISTC.

Table 2 shows the operations of the private partners of ISTC. It is evident that ISTC has been able to serve thousands of commuters as a result of these partnerships. Additionally, they have increased their revenue base. Consequently, the Head of Marketing, Business and Development at the ISTC head office believes that:

We have so far not encountered any disappointments, but rather, the alliance is helping. It is giving us many returns; our revenue has increased because we now have buses to carry our clients. Also, we are not making losses because all operational costs are catered for before we take our 10%. (Interview, 2018)

He further intimated that:

Now we can meet all our responsibilities to Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT), staff and even pay our arrears ... Drivers' salaries have increased and we are considering every worker too, including management. We are also able to pay for the buses bought for us by the Government. We have been able to pay US\$1 million each for the three payments we have done so far.

From the above, it can be argued that the PPP has so far been beneficial to ISTC: a company which was at risk of bankruptcy is now able to meet its obligations and even increase the salaries of its workers.

Table 1. Operations by ISTC-owned buses.

Year	Trips	Number of passengers carried	Revenue GH¢
2013	9,428	254,675	10,425,135.82
2014	6,848	186,572	11,778,934.27
2015	6,402	165,463	12,139,703.61
2016	8,230	214,216	15,554,925.86
2017	14,498	483,222	34,162,429.12

Source: Fieldwork (2018).

Table 2. Operations by private companies.

Operations		2015	2016	2017
Smice International	Trips	8,993	10,244	10,816
	No. passengers	125,902	143,416	151,424
	Revenue	2,703,400.00	3,054,240.00	3,524,780.00
AMPS Family	Trips	–	957	2,860
	No. passengers	–	13,398	40,040
	Revenue	–	251,356.00	834,204.00
Nordic Logistics	Trips	–	–	322
	No. passengers	–	–	10,414
	Revenue	–	–	443,240
M Plaza	Trips	–	–	–
	No. passengers	–	–	–
	Revenue	–	–	–

Source: Fieldwork (2018).

Private partners' perspectives on the outcomes

The expectations of the private partners relate to the mobilisation of revenue, ISTC delivering on its part of the partnership, and the management of buses. First, due to the lucrative nature of the partnership, the returns on investment have been good. One private partner respondent attested to this:

of course, nobody goes into an agreement that will not be beneficial to him. And this partnership has proved to be worthwhile. When you take off the operation costs which include maintenance and the salaries of the drivers, we get a fair share of the deal, and that is good for us. (Interview, 2018)

The buses have so far been in good working condition since they are managed by the private firms. They are able to work on scheduled maintenance to improve the buses' lifespan, and the use of the buses is also monitored closely. According to one respondent:

We are very particular about how our buses are driven or used on the streets ... We comprehensively insured all the buses and installed tracking devices. At any given time we are able to monitor and tell the location and speed of each bus and the details of the driver. (Interview, 2018)

This fits with the neo-liberal mindset that views PPP as an important and innovative management tool (Linder 1999). It is seen as a reform instrument, used to make the public sector more effective, efficient and responsive to deliver public goods and services.

ISTC clients' perspectives on the outcomes

Customer satisfaction with ISTC's services has improved considerably. From the focus group discussion with 12 commuters, commuters are generally satisfied with the services offered by ISTC. Some commuters have been using ISTC services for over eight to ten years, while others had stopped patronising the services but now did again due to the changes they have witnessed. These commuters recounted their experiences of non-existent buses at ISTC terminals, a situation which has changed since buses are now readily available to all clients. One commuter stated that:

... before then, I was using other buses but I heard there has been a facelift in ISTC in the past two years so I wanted to come and experience the changes which have occurred. I know it is a reliable source of transport service. (Interview, 2018)

Another commuter agreed that their services have improved, but acknowledged that the buses were still inadequate:

... some time ago you could get a bus at 12 am but now they have changed and start work from 5.30 am. So, it means, if you come earlier than 5:30 you would not meet anyone. They don't have a lot of buses as they used to have before. However, when you come at the new scheduled time, you will meet a bus to transport you. (Interview, 2018)

According to other commuters:

The changes have been very slow, honestly, because being the premier transportation company they could have done far better than what we see today. However, there are now new buses and as far as safety is concerned, I still trust their services. (Interview, 2018)

ISTC has good services from what I have observed as compared to VIP. I have used VIP once but this place looks more organised than VIP. (Interview, 2018)

I used to hear at times that ISTC buses break down when travelling. Personally, I do not know how true that is since I have not had such an experience before and now there are new buses which really look nice. (Interview, 2018)

In addition to the availability of buses as and when they need one, safety was of much concern to these ISTC clients and they believe ISTC is safer than other transport companies in the country. A respondent contended that “for me, ISTC takes you home safely and so far as safety is concerned, they are good” (Interview, 2018).

Another ISTC client expressed how safe she feels when she takes ISTC buses:

For some time now, you hear of VIP buses involved in various accidents and you get scared when you take these buses, however, with ISTC, you feel safe when you take it and can rest assured of getting home because they take good care of their buses. (Interview, 2018)

Additionally, a respondent commented on the professionalism of ISTC drivers:

the drivers take their time and are very careful on the road. When you need assistance, they are able to help through the bus hostesses. Unlike other drivers of other companies I have used before, the ISTC drivers are friendly, even the young ones.

Asked about what other factors influence them to patronise ISTC buses, commuters outlined the following:

ISTC buses now have urinals inside which the other companies do not have in their buses. They serve snacks; you have access to free wi-fi and you are able to charge your phone. You also have a bus hostess you can talk to. (Interview, 2018)

These responses suggest that ISTC services have improved. The availability of buses coupled with the introduction of free wi-fi, snacks, bus hostesses, and above all, assurance of safety to passengers have increased the patronage of ISTC.

Conclusion

The study found that the expectations and aims for establishing this partnership were on course. The responses of the ISTC officials interviewed suggest that these private partners had to a large extent lived up to expectations, despite a few setbacks. As a result of this PPP, 52 buses have been added to the ISTC fleet, and an average of 220,090 commuters have been transported in 2017. This gives an indication of growth in the patronage of ISTC, which before the partnership was losing customers to other competitors in the transport sector. The private partners see this partnership as a lucrative avenue to make money while helping ISTC deliver its mandate. Thus, ISTC should build more terminals so that the private entities can provide more buses, which will, in turn, increase their competitiveness in the transportation industry.

Furthermore, the study shows that ISTC clients are happy about the improvement in service delivery, with the non-availability of buses at ISTC terminals have been resolved, making their services much improved. The introduction of bus hostesses, free wi-fi, and urinals aboard buses are also seen as recent improvements.

Based on these results, the following recommendations are provided for future steps in this PPP process. Though ISTC services have improved as a result of the PPP, ISTC should look for more investors who are capable of procuring buses for them to meet the growing demand of their clients.

The government ought to also help in purchasing more buses, just as it did in 2016, because ISTC has shown good faith in repaying the loan the government used in purchasing the buses. Procuring these buses for the ISTC should result in an increase in their market share.

In addition, the ISTC should look for investors who are willing to build a modern hostel or accommodation facility for their clients since they do early morning trips both locally and internationally. This will allow clients coming from afar a place to rest for the night before their trips and will, in turn, generate income for the ISTC in the long term. Also, a mini-mart ought to be established on their premises given the potential for passing trade. This will, in turn, serve as an alternative source of funds for their operations.

Neo-liberal theory is germane in explaining why ISTC brought on board the private sector to help in the delivery of its mandate. It emphasises the impact of private sector involvement in the delivery of public services which was evident in the case of the ISTC. Privatising service delivery is expected to result in higher productivity gains, efficiency and effectiveness. Congruent with the New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG) ideals of managing the public sector with the entrepreneurial skills of the private sector, PPPs seek to enhance greater efficiency in the delivery of public services. It is interesting to note that, in the specific case of ISTC, the PPP is a bi-management partnership: while ISTC manages the drivers who man the buses, the buses are managed by the private firms. The study affirmed that involving the private sector in management and delivery of public service helps in improved service delivery, and consequently increased ISTC's market share.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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