

COORDINATION FAILURE IN GOVERNMENT OFFICES:

A CASE OF UGANDA

Namutebi Edith Nsubuga

National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies

SUMMARY

Long queues of citizens demanding for public services are still observed in many developing countries. Government offices still face a number of inefficient practices including poor time keeping, absenteeism, inability to sequence work, non - responsiveness, poor filing, political interference and others which affect their day to day operations.

Experimental games studies have established that coordination failure is a common occurrence that causes firms and corporations to become trapped in unsatisfactory conditions. However such studies have neither been followed up with field studies nor been done in government offices yet they are also facing inefficiencies and unsatisfactory situations. This study therefore envisages that government offices may be experiencing coordination failure.

The study thus examines coordination failure and its correlates in government offices. The study postulates that there is a positive correlation between the outcome of a government official's decisions and the choices made by the people they are interacting with as in a coordination game. Further, the inefficient practices observed in government offices can be described as coordination failure and that coordination failure in government offices is closely associated with communication, leadership and incentives.

Providing suggestive evidence to the presence of coordination failure in government offices draws the attention of policy makers towards internal deficiencies that are within their control and also contributes to the coordination games and public administration literature because it is new to apply findings from coordination games to a field study and to micro - micro settings like government offices.

The study starts with a preliminary study to explore problems in government offices. It then reviews existing literature on coordination games studies and coordination failure and how they relate to communication, leadership and incentives in a government context in chapter 2. Peer-reviewed texts, articles and journals as well as government publications are used in this review. Key variables used in the study and the hypotheses examined are drawn from the review of literature.

Two questionnaires are developed and administered to 88 managers and 297 officers respectively drawn from 20 ministries of the government of Uganda. Departments from which respondents are selected are proportionately selected from the ministries. The head of department and three officers are targeted to be interviewed. Where a department has more than three officers, the three required to be interviewed are randomly selected as described in chapter 3.

Chapter 4 explores inefficient practices, the coordination game and coordination failure situation in government offices. The coordination game situation in government offices is illustrated using the level of time keeping for meetings by an official given the time keeping level of his colleagues under conditions of certainty and uncertainty. The coordination failure situation is explored by observing the rate of participation in report writing with and without coordination. Findings from chapter 4 suggest that mature, educated

and experienced people can be trapped in inefficient practices. The outcome of a government official's choice of action depends on the choices made by the people they are interacting with as in a coordination game. A government officer is willing to keep time if he expects others to keep time; is willing to put maximum effort to work if he or she expects others to put maximum effort and finds it better to shirk if colleagues shirk and so on. Findings further offer suggestive evidence that the inefficient practices in government offices can be described as coordination failure. Though inferior outcomes are more often observed, results reveal that superior outcomes can be observed with coordination.

Chapter five presents an analysis of the relationship between communication structures, leadership abilities, the incentive structures and coordination failure in government offices. The relationship between communication, leadership, incentives and coordination failure is established using fixed effect regressions, the linear probability model and ordered probit. Findings from the study offer suggestive evidence that communication, leadership abilities and the incentive structures in government offices are closely associated with the failure to coordinate government officials towards the attainment of desired outcomes. Knowledge of the set targets is also established to be closely associated with coordination failure in government offices.

Conclusions and policy implications are presented in chapter six. Since government offices are in a coordination game situation with coordination failure being common as in assembly lines, inefficiencies in government offices can be reduced without necessarily adding resources but rather with changing the mindsets and beliefs of the staff through eliminating factors associated with coordination failure. Giving clear instructions, ascertaining that the knowledge of targets are known to all involved, ascertaining sharing of

information and giving feedback to officers, improving a manager's communication ability and his ability to lead by example coupled to rewarding good performance and sanctioning poor performance are internal factors that can eliminate inefficiencies yet they are within the control of a manager. Eliminating inefficiencies may in turn lead to improved performance in government offices.

The study recommends continuous training and mindset change geared towards strengthening communication, leadership effectiveness and incentive structures. Kaizen is a management tool that has been established to change mindsets of workers towards productivity improvement. Leadership also ought to ascertain that officers know what they are expected of and job descriptions made as clearer as possible.