

Evidence-Based Training for Civil Servants

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Common Perceptions

Everyone makes mistakes. An increasing number of studies show that everyday decisions in a variety of contexts are plagued by random errors, biased or unbiased (Kahneman et al. 2016). When it comes to governance, it is often assumed that public officials ignore evidence when designing public policy. Past research at DIME asked officials to report their beliefs about key characteristics of the population they worked with (Roger and Somani 2018). In a minority of cases, the public officials made relatively accurate claims about their constituents. Many of them, however, were far from accurate: 47 percent of officials claimed their district's population was 50 percent bigger or smaller than it was.

When public officials hold mistaken beliefs, they can skew the distribution of public resources away from those most in need, and potentially undermine the effectiveness of policies designed to assist them. Since public officials sit at the front-line of development, it is crucial to minimize errors in the information they rely on to make decisions and implement policies.

Evidence-based policy making rests on the idea that policy makers should adopt a more rational, rigorous, and systematic approach to the policy-making process. When evidence is used to improve the quality of the public administration itself, it allows agencies to improve how government functions more broadly. DIME's Bureaucracy Lab has collaborated with the Ghanaian government since 2016 to understand how to best support its employees to deliver the highest quality of public service.

Questions We Should Be Asking

Together with the University of Oxford and University College London, DIME's Bureaucracy Lab partnered with the Office of the Head of the Civil Service (OHCS) in Ghana to conduct a baseline diagnostic on the state of the civil service. The goals were to understand the perspectives of public officials—and the systems and organizations in which they worked. For example, which government divisions were the most and least effective? What options were there to improve public service training, and to empower officials to lead reform?

A trove of microdata was leveraged to help answer these questions. The team digitized the records of 3,628 public projects, audited over 7,000 quarterly and annual progress reports, and surveyed 3,000 civil servants across 47 central ministries, departments, and agencies. Officials were invited to identify the organizational bottlenecks that hindered their productivity and constrained their ability to make better-informed policy decisions.

Challenging Perceptions

Four key insights stood out from the data analysis:

1. The Ghanaian civil service is characterized by substantial variation in productivity across and within organizations.
2. The quality of management across and within organizations (see figure 4.8) explains much of the variation in productivity.
3. Civil servants demonstrated a clear knowledge of the constraints they face in resolving

institutional problems, indicating a disconnect between identifying problems and tackling them.

- Public officials were not satisfied with current training programs that aimed to help them overcome constraints.

The baseline analysis led to briefings for every agency head, a broad action plan for the OHCS, and an academic paper on the findings. Overall, the data provided a detailed quantitative picture of the status quo in the Ghanaian Civil Service.

If Ghanaian civil servants know the constraints they face in improving their work, can they be given the tools and capacities to reform government themselves? To this end, DIME's Bureau-cracy Lab collaborated with Ghana's Civil Service Training Centre and a consultancy firm to deploy a new package of trainings, dubbed the Training for Productivity (TFP) initiative. Officials who participated in the initiative designed action

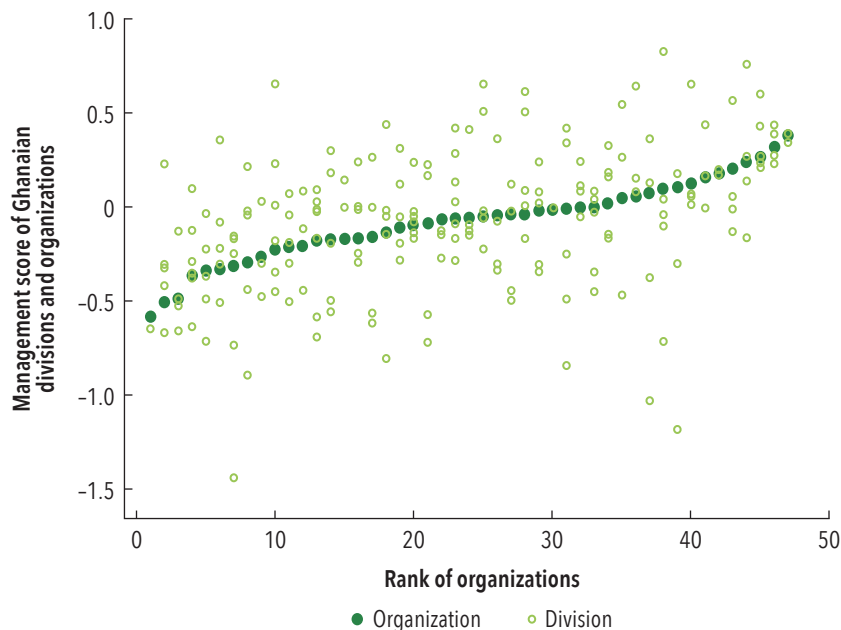
plans addressing constraints specific to their division. An impact evaluation tested different ways of delivering the new curriculum and found that individual on-the-job training resulted in the most benefits. The TFP initiative increased the overall productivity of participants, the quality of procedure with which government files were processed, and the likelihood that team tasks were fully completed.

Policy Implications

The work done in Ghana resulted in three major takeaways:

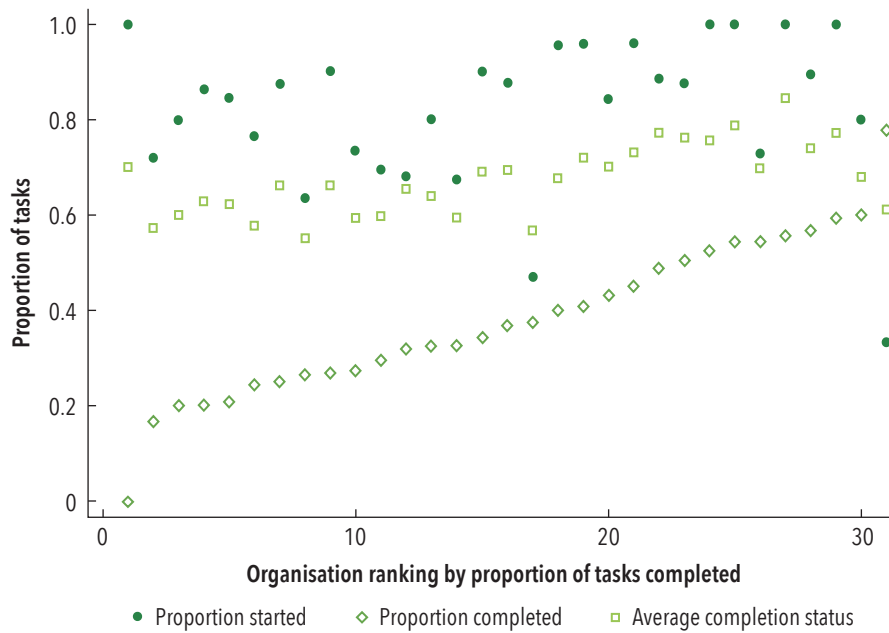
- The work highlighted the importance of **measuring public service**. Most public policy is channeled through the public service, so understanding where the service is weak helps uncover barriers to effective policy implementation. This evaluation provided the basis for

Figure 4.8 Diversity in Management Scores Across Divisions in Ghana's Civil Service



Note: Organizations in Ghana's civil service comprise several divisions. Figure 4.8 shows the spread in perceived management quality across organizations (represented by the distribution of the solid dots), as well as across divisions within those organizations (represented by the hollow dots).

Figure 4.9 Distribution of Task Completion Rates of Ghanaian Civil Service Organizations



Note: Figure 4.9 shows the proportion of tasks completed, the proportion of tasks started, and the average completion status for each Ghanaian civil service organization.

a data collection system, where administrative data on productivity (see figure 4.9) was successfully integrated with reports of constraints faced by surveyed personnel. The evidence generated through this system pinpointed which government divisions needed reform.

2. The impact evaluation demonstrated that the **most impactful way to train public servants** is through in-service sessions, conducted at the individual level, that generate a clear plan of action for enacting recommended reforms. The effectiveness of training can be greatly improved by allowing participants to identify both the issues that need resolving and who they must work with to overcome those issues, and by helping them practice applying their training to their unit’s work practices. Tailoring training curricula to the reality that each team faces leads to a substantially higher

rate of solution implementation.

3. The project created a roadmap for **strengthening the analytical capacity** of government offices. The Ghanaian government leveraged DIME’s findings by implementing targeted institutional reforms, thereby improving senior officials’ performance agreements and accountability structures. DIME’s Bureaucracy Lab is now supporting the OHCS to undertake its own civil service analysis. By generating its own analytics, Ghana is strengthening its state from within.



This case study is based on an impact evaluation conducted within DIME’s Governance and Institution Building research program. See: Rasul, Imran, Daniel Rogger, and Martin J. Williams. 2018. “Management and Bureaucratic Effectiveness: Evidence from the Ghanaian Civil Service.” Policy Research Working Paper 8595, World Bank, Washington, DC.*

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