



Challenges to policy implementation in Uganda

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- This brief summarises findings from a study of policy implementation in Uganda that sought to quantify implementation progress across eight policy areas to identify common challenges.
- A set of related issues in policy implementation was identified as the most common, including delay or non-release of funds, lack of technical knowledge, and inadequate coordination.
- Policy implementation barriers are further exacerbated by mandate overlap across Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs).
- To address identified bottlenecks, there should be more investment in capacity-building, coordination and clarification of roles among MDAs, improvements to financial management to ensure timely release of funds, and design of projects that include clearer targets to better monitor progress.

Policy motivation

Governments play a crucial role in setting policies that can facilitate economic growth and improved development outcomes for the public. Yet, too often enacted policies fall short of their goals. This can occur when there are failures in the policy implementation process. For public policy to succeed, robust policy management systems must be put in place to allow for smooth implementation (OECD, 2015; OECD, 2021).

The benefits of robust management systems to keep policy implementation on track are clear. Countries that have attained high- and middle-income status have systematically improved policy implementation through improving monitoring and evaluation of their government systems, training civil servants, strengthening public financial management systems, and ensuring systematic coordination of government activities among the state entities.

Despite improvements in policy formulation across Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, policy implementation remains weak in the region (Chigudu, 2015). A related set of challenges has been identified as barriers to policy implementation in SSA. These issues include skills deficiencies to transform policies into action, weak monitoring and evaluation systems to identify bottlenecks, inadequate financing, insufficient policy clarity, targeting, and sequencing (Mac-Seing et al., 2022; Signé, 2017; Ajulor, 2018; Hudson et al., 2019; Rasul et al., 2021).

Despite the range of initiatives intended to promote sustainable growth that the Government of Uganda has enacted, Uganda experiences the same set of issues as are seen across SSA. Inadequate policy implementation has left many Ugandans in dire social conditions (UMI, 2019), resulting in the failed performance of government programmes and has negatively affected policy outcomes (Ggoobi, 2019). Furthermore, there has been a lack of cross-sector analysis into the barriers to policy implementation. This study was thus designed to address this knowledge gap, assessing implementation challenges across a set of eight key policy areas.

Overview of research

Our study assesses challenges in policy implementation by applying a mixed-method evaluation approach across eight prominent policy areas: tourism, trade, urbanisation, agriculture, oil and gas, private investment, and public investment. We focused our inquiry on whether MDAs successfully implemented a specific set of government-approved policy recommendations that emerged from the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MoFPED) and IGC-led annual Economic Growth Forum (EGF).

The study had the following objectives:

1. To code and systematically quantify progress on policy implementation in the selected policy areas.
2. To identify policy areas that are highly affected by weak policy implementation in Uganda.
3. To examine the challenges to policy implementation in the studied policy areas.
4. To analyse the mechanism(s) through which different challenges affect policy implementation in the different policy areas.
5. To inform government policies that cut across different policy areas.

Guided by these aims, a desk review was conducted to evaluate the implementation status across our selected policy areas. Our team coded outcomes stemming from a set of MDA-submitted government performance reports from fiscal years 2017-2018 to 2021-2022 as the information source for this evaluation. The coded evaluation of policy implementation for task completion ranged from failed implementation to moderate success to full implementation and targets met.

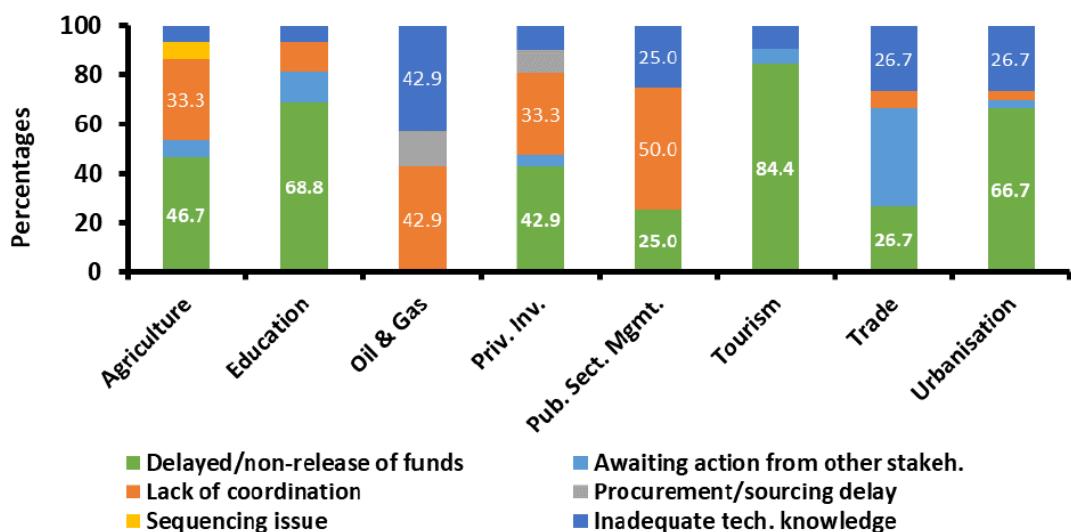
We focused on assessing the successes and challenges in fulfilling project process indicators. These indicators, established in the government's policy directives to MDAs, are often policy-area specific in content and number. Still, a standardised coding scheme was employed to produce a reliable evaluation of implementation completion and characteristics. We considered the following topics of our analysis of public implementation: technical complexity, coordination, task definition and scope, target clarity, and implementation challenges.

Lastly, the exercise of quantitatively coding policy implementation was followed by a set of qualitative interviews with key stakeholders. These interviews were conducted to gain a better understanding of the observed challenges that influence policy implementation. The information these senior government officers related revealed some of the steps that lead to underperformance between policy adoption and policy implementation.

Key findings

Policy implementation challenges vary across policy areas. As shown in Figure 1, while most MDAs report funding issues as a major bottleneck, there is variation in which other measured challenges are faced in each policy area. For example, alongside funding issues, trade primarily faces issues with capacity and awaits action from stakeholders. Agriculture, on the other hand, has a relatively greater issue with a lack of coordination. This finding underscores the importance of solutions that cater to specific policy areas.

Figure 1. Challenges to policy implementation in selected policy areas



Low technical capacity, lack of task clarity, coordination failures, and the ever-challenging funding issues are all key barriers to project completion. An analysis of the determinants of task completion resulted in this set of issues that were particularly correlated with project success. This analysis aligned with the intuition that projects with broader and less clear scopes, and with more challenging coordination dynamics, resulted in greater project incompletion rates. However, it was also found that projects that required technical complexity were more likely to be completed, perhaps because such projects received more resources and greater attention, given their known complexity from the start.

Interviews with stakeholders provide details on the nuances of the identified issues. Inquiries to government officials about the identified patterns of implementation issues across the policy areas helped validate the lessons learned from the desk review and quantitative coding exercise. Additionally, details about how these issues specifically interfere with implementation were revealed, including how the involvement of expensive outside consultants can increase costs and fail to improve capacity-building aims.

Key findings

These findings highlight the importance of identifying policy implementation challenges to begin addressing them. The approach of this study, that is, separating out both key issue areas and policy areas, proved valuable in providing area-specific guidance for policymakers. Prime among these policy lessons are the importance of focusing energy on improving the following aspects of policy implementation:

- **Invest in Capacity-Building:** Enhance training programmes to address skill gaps, particularly in high-priority sectors like oil and gas.
- **Streamline Coordination:** Clarify roles and reduce overlapping mandates among MDAs to improve efficiency.
- **Ensure Timely Funding:** Develop mechanisms to release funds promptly, avoiding the delays that derail progress.
- **Define Clear Targets:** Establish measurable indicators and timelines for every policy to improve accountability and tracking.

Efforts in these problem areas are likely to reduce systematic challenges—shifting policy ambition towards policy implementation—all of which will pay dividends to Uganda's development.

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