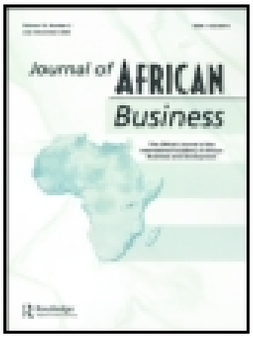

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Coordination and Quality Service Delivery in Service Organizations: Qualitative Investigation

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ABSTRACT
The study investigated how coordination mechanisms drive quality service delivery in Uganda's local governments. Using an interview guide, data were collected from 24 participants of Uganda's local governments and analyzed through thematic content analysis. Findings indicated that coordination mechanisms drive quality service delivery in Uganda's local governments. Practically, it is manifest that organizations should be aware of the importance of coordination mechanisms on quality service delivery and strive to execute policies crucial for coordination mechanisms to deliver quality services. In addition, local governments that manage their dependencies (coordination) have better chances of survival. This study empirically extends the limited research on coordination and quality service delivery to the local government sector, an area least considered in the literature. Further, it demonstrates that coordination mechanisms are very important in the quality service delivery processes. Methodologically, the findings suggest that in a wider sense, the framework linking coordination to service quality in local government sector can be investigated from a qualitative angle.

KEYWORDS
Local Government (LGs); Quality Service Delivery (QSD); Coordination Mechanisms (CMs)

Background

Quality service delivery (QSD) has been a central focus of many countries for the past two decades (cf. Malhotra, Ulgado, Agarwal, Shainesh, & Wu, 2005; Shafiq, Naeem, Munawar, & Fatima, 2017; Ueltschy, Laroche, Eggert, & Bindl, 2007). Delivering services of high quality is an important pursuit for service providers that seek to create and provide value to their customers (Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). Provision of high levels of service quality is associated with increased customer satisfaction, retention, and organization success (Bataineh & Al-Hazaymeh, 2011; Talib, Rahman, & Qureshi, 2013). Despite the associated benefits, QSD in public sector is still appalling (Agus, Barker, & Kandampully, 2007), yet existing service quality models aimed at reverting this trend as seen in the works of Agus et al. (2007), Chahal and Kumari (2011), Mekoth, George, Dalvi, Rajanala, and Nizomadinov (2012), Chahal and Kumari (2010), Chahal and Mehta (2013) in public sector have neglected the role of coordination mechanisms (CMs) on QSD. Extant literature has it that CMs are very important in the QSD processes (Musenze, Ntayi, & Munene, 2013; Skiver, 2014; Uddin, 2017).

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This scenario persists against the background that the 21st century has witnessed renewed significance of the services' sector to global economies. Services sector is the leading and fastest-growing sector in the global economy, accounting for a satisfactory share in overall output and employment in most developed countries. The proportion of services sector in total GDP is 47% in low developing economies, 53% in middle-income economies and 73% in developed economies (Ayaz & Henna, 2011; Cali, Ellis & Te Velde, 2008; StatisticsTimes.Com, 2018).

Prior studies highlight the need for the public sector to be more customer-oriented. This can be through a service quality-focused approach (Gleeson, 2011). The importance of this approach is well documented. For instance, it sustains an organization's competitiveness necessary for survival. However, the complexity associated with QSD, competing demands, the differing client needs, and exploding service delivery costs, heighten the need for coordination (Bromfield, Lamont, Parker, & Horsfall, 2010; Robinson, 2010). Studies show the strategic benefits of CMs in QSD. It leads to increased efficiency and economy, optimum use of resources, reduction in personality conflicts and organizational rivalry, promotion of synergy and lowers QSD costs (Gleeson, 2011; Robinson, 2010).

Uncoordinated tasks, resources, and activities greatly increase service delivery costs and result in poor QSD. Recent research in the field of coordination focuses more on the influence of CMs on firm performance (Christian, Grohsjean & Kretschmer, 2010; Uddin, 2017), and the main attention is on European economies (Skiver, 2014). Within the stream of service literature, the center of attention is usually on specific industries like health (Atherly & Thorpe, 2011; Robinson, 2010) and airline industry (Gittell, 2008). Literature disregard the role of CMs on service quality delivery in public sector organizations, specifically Uganda's LGs.

Further, studies that have attempted to investigate the impact of CMs on QSD in the services sector have considered a quantitative approach (Hartgerink et al., 2014; Musenze et al., 2013). There are limited studies in Uganda on how CMs drive QSD in service sector organizations, specifically in the setting of Uganda's LGs based on a qualitative lens. Yet, evidence suggests that qualitative methods provide insights into how definite local situation determines the outcomes of a given intervention for service quality improvement (Nolte, McKee, Evans, & Karanikolos, 2012a; Nolte, Roland, Guthrie, & Brereton, 2012b). Based on the foregoing arguements, the current study aimed at inductively exploring the influence of CMs in the local government sector. This will provide a holistic appreciation of the role of CMs in QSD. A deeper understanding of how coordination promotes QSD may make lessons from service quality initiatives more actionable.

Literature review & research question(s)

Service quality in public sector

Contrary to the marketing literature, literature on public sector management has provided largely generalities in respect to the nature of service quality – usually "awful reflections" of heightened service delivery costs, time and mental mistreatment by a civil service establishment initially meant to serve the public, not itself (Cowles & Myers, 2015). van Antwerpen and Ferreira (2016), Mazibuko-Madalani (2016) have observed that there are pressing problems with the delivery of quality services in the public sector. Despite this, ambiguity in

relation to the definition and measures that tap of the concept of service quality in the public sector still exists. Ease of access and impartiality in the delivery of services, client respect, and the extent of responsiveness to the marginalized are some of the quality features mostly cited in the literature (Klaus, 1985). Recently, Martinović, Pavlić, and Tolić (2017), and, Wijesekera and Fernando (2017) provide definite features of service quality, such as those debated in the marketing literature. These characteristics offer a structure for the analysis of public sector service quality delivery. While there is a paucity of empirical work in public sector service quality, some studies are lately emerging in the public administration discourse (cf. Mazibuko-Madalani, 2016; van Antwerpen & Ferreira, 2016). Largely, this empirical work is anchored on service quality measurement approach advanced by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), which concentrates on two key domains of customer expectations and performance perceptions aligned on five fundamental facets (tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) in the evaluation of service quality delivery.

Service quality compares customer expectation to actual service delivery. It is the degree to which customer expectation matches actual performance. The literature identifies five facets of service quality (Bataineh & Al-Hazaymeh, 2011; Parasuraman, Zeithmal, & Berry, 1988). These include: *tangible*: how appealing are physical surrounding and tools used to deliver the service; *reliability*: accurate and timely delivery of the promised and error-free service; *responsiveness*: the willingness to assist customer; *assurance*: knowledge, understanding, ability, and attitude of staff to execute the service to customers; *empathy*: care extended to the customers.

Based on the Gap Model (Parasuraman et al., 1985), service quality is defined as a difference between the way how a customer experiences a service (perception) and expectations which a customer creates before using the service. Variations in the process of service offer are as follows: *Gap 1* – the listening gap (not knowing what customers expect); *Gap 2* – the service design and standards gap (not having the right service designs and standards); *Gap 3* – the service performance gap (not delivering to service standards); *Gap 4* – the communication gap (not matching performance to promises). *Gap 5* – represents the difference between customers' expectations regarding the service and their perception of the specific service. The last gap is the result of all the previous gaps (Blešić, Ivkov-Džigurski, Dragin, Ivanović, & Pantelić, 2011).

The rising customer needs for superior services and mounting competition between public and private sector organizations offering the same services has placed interest for organizations to develop customer-focused approach (Talib et al., 2013). Service quality studies have mainly considered the physical service delivery environment as critical for QSD (Li, Huang, & Yang, 2011). However, these studies are silent on the potential role of CMs in driving QSD (Atherly & Thorpe, 2011; De Pablos, García, Perea, & Angón, 2013). Similarly, few studies on service quality in Uganda's LGs (Agus et al., 2007) exist.

Coordination mechanisms and service quality

Coordination mechanism is conceptualized as any administrative tool for implementing integration among different divisions within an organization (Clemmons & Simon, 2001). There is a growing body of research exploring the impact of coordination mechanisms (CMs) on QSD. Most findings demonstrate a positive association between CMs and QSD

(Atherly & Thorpe, 2011; Robinson, 2010). This is because the effectiveness of the service delivery processes depend on the ability of service organizations to properly coordinate different agents in the sharing of ideas, resources, knowledge, and objectives.

Evidence suggests that coordination is a pre-requisite for better organizational results (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). Thompson (1967) explains the significance of effective CMs in QSD amongst extremely interdependent tasks. De Pablos et al. (2013) have studied the relationship between CMs and the organizations' outcomes, and established that coordination is positively correlated with better organizational results.

De Pablos et al. (2013) observe that coordination by mutual adjustment generates improvement in other organizational coordination mechanisms such as routines, timetables, prior planning and task harmonization which enable organizations to realize QSD. Similarly, Okhuysen and Bechky (2009) argue that coordination through mechanisms like plans and standardization (rules) are fundamental for QSD. Plans define the project aim, offer direction and provide the timeline and resources allocated to project tasks. Standardization through rules, on the other hand, defines task responsibilities for actors and creates rapport among team members and team tasks, which is essential for QSD.

Literature is replete with studies on the importance of CMs on service quality delivery. However, the majority of these studies dwell on industry-specific sectors like health (Atherly & Thorpe, 2011; Robinson, 2010), airline industry (Gittell, 2001) and trauma units (Faraj & Xiao, 2006). But the extent to which CMs trigger QSD in public service organizations; more so in the setting of Uganda's LG sector has not received adequate attention. It is, therefore, an empirical question on whether these results generalize to other settings. Accordingly, the following research question is developed:

R1: *How do coordination mechanisms drive quality service delivery in local governments?*

Coordination mechanisms

Coordination is the integration of organizational work in conditions of task and uncertain interdependence (Faraj & Xiao, 2006). It refers to the management of interdependencies. A mechanism for coordination exists for each category of interdependence (Puranam, Raveendran, & Knudsen, 2012). CMs have been segmented into two basic categories: 1) formal – interaction processes supported, monitored and regulated by established organizational structures, and 2) informal – interpersonal interactions involving individuals and groups that rise spontaneously outside the formal reporting structure (Tsai, 2012). Based on this, the following mechanisms can be discerned: 1) formal – rules and regulations, formal information systems, cross-functional teams, committees, and task forces (Galbraith, 1973); informal mechanisms – involving direct contacts, spontaneous groups, liaison roles (Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011).

From the organization theory perspective, varying CMs have evolved. For example, programming and feedback (Brosius, Haki, Aie, & Winter, 2017), impersonal versus mutual adjustment (Santamarı´a-Sa´nchez, Nu´ n˜ez-Nickel, & Gago-Rodrı´guez, 2010) and formal versus informal (Brosius et al., 2017). March and Simon (1958) and Mintzberg (1979, 1998) have also extensively studied CMs. Brosius et al. (2017), and Santamarı´a-Sa´nchez et al. (2010) recognize three essential activities for coordination: standardization, planning, and feedback. Mintzberg's work of 1998 is partly based on

March and Simon's (1958) work: (1) mutual adjustment (2), direct supervision (3), standardization of skills and norms (4), work processes, and (5) results.

Through plans, coordination embraces the definition of timetables and the use of control methods so that behaviors of inter-contingent organizational units could be handled. Conceptually, standardization refers to the coordination of activities when pooled interdependence exists (Gulati, Sytch, & Tatarynowicz, 2012). This involves the building of procedures and regulations that define the actor's role in a coordination chain (Gulati et al., 2012). Coordination by mutual adjustment is realized when there is reciprocal information through the course of interaction (Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Feldman, 2012).

Building on the classical coordination literature, Okhuysen and Bechky (2009) have updated this discourse to include: plans and rules, objects and representations, roles, routines, and proximity with integrating conditions of accountability, predictability and common understanding. Lack of consensus on universal CMs to guide actor's activities makes the need for further research. Thus, as a corollary, the following research question is developed:

R2: *What types of coordination mechanisms exist in Uganda's service organizations?*

Methods

Research design

The role of CMs as a driver to QSD has not received adequate attention, more so in the LG sector. Based on this, we established an empirical need to deeply investigate the phenomenon, which is consistent with the justification for a qualitative research design (Hallberg, 2013; Morse, 2011). Within this framework, this study relies on a phenomenological approach to investigate how CMs drive QSD in the LG sector. This approach was found suitable due to its ability to unmask the subjective reality of LG staff experience of CMs, and how they drive and shape QSD (Creswell, 2013).

Research strategy and setting

This study followed a multiple case study strategy due to the inclusion of respondents drawn from different LGs (Thomas, 2011). The LGs of attention included: district councils, municipal councils, town councils, division councils, and sub-county councils. Their choice was driven by their cardinal role in QSD (GoU, 2008; Ibok, 2014). The participants therein included the clients, heads of department and sections. Three key inclusion criteria for participating in the study included: (1) availability and willingness to participate; (2) levels of seniority in local governance matters; (3) at least a beneficiary of services delivered by participating LG. Departmental and section heads were chosen owing to their seniority in local governance and service delivery matters; and therefore assumed more authoritative to comment on QSD issues. Clients, on the other hand, were selected, consistent with recommendations by Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2008) who advise that clients are in a better position to comment on issues of subjective nature of service quality.

Interviews were conducted in a professional and ethical manner that took into account the convenience of the participants. Maximum effort was undertaken to secure

a comfortable environment that was noise-free for the participants. To achieve this, interviews were conducted at the respondents' offices, while participating clients were intercepted at service delivery points and requested to participate in the study.

Research participants and sampling techniques

Guided by the inclusion criteria suggested above, purposive sampling was used to enlist 27 respondents. According to Black (2010), the goal of qualitative studies is to enrich the understanding of experiences from participants' viewpoint. This requires a purposive selection of participants (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). The number of 27 (27: staff, 17; clients, 10) was judged sufficient for respondents since data saturation point had been realized (Creswell, 2013). This sample meets the threshold of 15 suggested by (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) for qualitative investigations.

Data collection methods

Data were collected through an interview guide. The semi-structured interviews involved questions that allowed researchers to define key areas to be explored. It also allowed detailed exploration of issues (Britten, 1999). This enabled focus on specific themes (Raworth, Sweetman, Narayan, Rowlands, & Hopkins, 2012). Questioning associated with semi-structured interviews often generates an emerging theory grounded in reality (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The flexibility of this approach, in contrast with structured interviews, allows for the discovery and amplification of information that is significant to participants but may not have previously been considered as pertinent by studies.

Interview items included in the interview guide were derived from the literature on CMs and QSD constructs. These items were finally qualified after five pilot interviews. Thereafter, five major standard questions were generated and raised at every interview followed by inquisitive follow-up questions for local government staff: What do you understand by the term QSD in your work setting? What do you understand by the term coordination and how have you achieved this in this LG? Do you recall any experience when you delivered quality services, if so describe the incidence and what actually happened? What factors facilitated, or/acted as a barrier to QSD in your LG during that incident? How do you experience the role of CMs in your QSD efforts?

For the case of the clients, the following questions applied: Describe what you would consider as quality service? Do you recall any moment where you received a service that pleased you? Please, describe what happened. Are you consulted on your service needs by your respective local government during the planning process?

Researchers sought respondent's appointment at their convenience and participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and used specifically for research purposes. The study purpose was explained at the onset. To ascertain their willingness to participate in the study, participants were requested to sign a Consent Form. Departmental heads' interviews were longer – 1 hour owing to the vast scope of their operation relative to their counterparts (Section Heads).

Data recording

With participants' consent, the interview narratives were tape – recorded and stored on safe and sound devices to which only researchers had access. Recordings, memos, and notes were also kept in a protected place. The field notes were utilized to derive the thoughts of the researcher during the interviews for subsequent analysis.

Data quality management

Many approaches of evaluating qualitative research have been suggested. The two foremost are that of Dixon-Woods, Shaw, Agarwal, and Smith (2004) which stresses on methodology, and Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) that emphasize the rigor of interpretation of findings. Dixon-Woods produced a checklist of items for assessing clarity and appropriateness of the research question; description and appropriateness for sampling, data collection and data analysis; levels of support and evidence for claims; coherence between data, interpretation and conclusions, and level of contribution of the paper. Consistent with this approach, efforts were made to contact a random sample of participants for purposes of verifying the findings, which process revealed that the results were consistent with the participants' views and experiences.

Quality for qualitative research can also be assessed in terms of validity, reliability, and generalizability (Lincoln et al., 2011). Various approaches are available for the researcher's use in addressing validity (quality/rigor/trustworthiness) and reliability (dependability), in qualitative studies (Simon & Goes, 2011). The most popular include: triangulation of information among different sources of data – a method in research where one uses more than one approach in the investigation of a research question. The aim is to increase confidence in the results through the confirmation of a proposition using two or more independent measures, a scenario that provides a more comprehensive picture of the results than either approach could have in the singularity (Heale & Forbes, 2013). Besides triangulation, other approaches include, receiving feedback from informants (member checking), and expert review. Since data were collected from different sources, triangulation of information among various sources was secured. Through member checking, we accessed the participants making it possible to verify information, and in the event of error detection or any misinterpretation, the record was rectified. Through expert review, to ensure that collected data answer the formulated research questions, we sought experts' opinions right from the onset of the formulation of an interview guide. As quality management criteria, this study has benefitted from the outcome of expert validation.

Data analysis

The analysis was based on 24 interviews as the three were discarded for lack of clarity. Whilst there are a variety of approaches to qualitative data analysis suggested by authors like Creswell (2013); Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Neuman (2011), we relied on thematic analysis. This method fundamentally identifies and analyzes data patterns (Guest et al., 2012). According to Gibbs (2007) thematic coding involves recording or identifying passages or patterns of text that are linked by a common theme or idea allowing the researcher to index the text into categories and hence establish a framework

of thematic ideas about it. This approach was considered theoretically flexible since the search for and examination of overlapping data patterns does not require adherence to existing theories.

The conceptual framework of the thematic analysis was largely built on the theoretical positions of Braun and Clarke (2006). According to them, thematic analysis is a technique utilized for 'identifying, analyzing, and reporting overlapping patterns within the data' (p.79). The justification for this choice was that a rigorous thematic approach has the potential to produce an insightful analysis that responds to specific research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As well, this approach complemented the research questions by easing an investigation of the interview data from two perspectives: first, from a data – driven standpoint and a perspective based on coding in an inductive manner; second, from the research question viewpoint to verify whether the data were in line with the research questions and providing sufficient information. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis model of 2006, is structured along a range of six phases. These include: familiarization with data coding; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes and finally writing up the report.

Phase 1: Familiarization with the data: This phase involves reading and re-reading the data, to become immersed and intimately familiar with its content. Data from the audiotapes and field notes were transcribed. The analysis commenced by reading through the transcribed interviews and listening to recordings to ascertain whether they complied with the data.

Phase 2: Coding: This phase engrosses generation of concise labels known as codes that identify important data features that might be relevant to answering the research question.

It involves coding the entire dataset, and after that, pulling together all the codes and all pertinent data extracts, together for afterward stages of analysis. We engaged a research assistant who acted as a co – coder throughout this stage. Researchers developed the primary codes. The involvement of a co – coder ensured that the results were consistent and valid (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Phase 3: Searching for themes: This involved exploring the codes and gathering data to identify important broader patterns of meaning (possible themes). It then involved assembling data relevant to each specific theme, so that one can work with the data and review the viability of each specific theme. After the identification of codes, we began on the process of categorizing corresponding topics into themes. This process yielded three emerging themes as shall be seen later.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes: This phase calls for checking the specific themes against the dataset, to establish whether they tell a convincing story that answers the research question. In this phase, themes are normally refined, which occasionally involve them being split, combined, or discarded. We used field notes and classified items right from the first interview to guide the process while coding the second interview. This process persisted throughout the coding of all the 24 interviews in a process referred to as a comparative method (Thomas, 2012).

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes: This involves developing a thorough analysis of each theme, working out the scope and focus of each, determining or formatting the 'story' of each. It also involves deciding on an informative name for each theme. Throughout this process, the notes were extracted including the original texts for the notes and stored as an independent topic in a separate file to use for analysis. This process gave the researcher a holistic scrutiny of a specific topic from the 24 interviews.

Phase 6: Writing up: This involved merging the analytic narrative, data extracts, and contextualizing the analysis in relation to existing literature. Based on rich interview data, three major themes emerged. As these phases are sequential and that each builds on the previous, the entire analysis process was typically a recursive activity. So the process was not rigid.

Results

The main purpose of the study was to explore how coordination mechanisms (CMs) drive QSD in LGs. Three themes emerged: (1) positive experiences of CMs; (2) different types of CMs and (3) the role of CMs on QSD.

Theme 1: positive experiences of coordination mechanisms

From Table 1, it was apparent from the interview narratives and subsequent analysis that most participants felt positive, working in an environment where coordination was evident. Participants often mentioned that the use of CMs allowed them to reduce conflicts through harmonization of competing interests. Participants further remarked that reliance on CMs in the execution of their work offered them team support. As stated by the participants, CMs such as plan allowed actors to come together during the process of identifying service delivery gaps which provided an opportunity for the derivation of rational and coherent interventions. One respondent remarked:

> Heads of Department are regularly invited by Chief Administrative Officer to attend Technical Planning Committee meetings for purposes of planning for improving service delivery in their respective departments (Participant 6).

Participants also pointed out that CMs enabled them to deliver quality services with efficiency. Task interdependence, they argued, allowed them to perform tasks faster and

Table 1. Theme 1 – Positive Experiences of Coordination Mechanisms.

Participant's experience	Sub theme	Associated/connected meaning
Coordination is positive/ relevant in local governments because	Supports teamwork	It particularly brings together various stakeholders/actors to identify service delivery gaps and to generate Local Government work plans.
		secures more cooperation among actors, re-enforces their activities, minimizes barrier to performance,& harmonizes competing interests
	Harmonization of competing Interests	It allows actors in a coordination chain to align their interests toward a common goal of the organization
	Increases efficiency	It allows supervisors to regularly monitor the works of subordinates in order to secure compliance with established standards. It also allows maximum utilization of Resources
	Improves employee effectiveness and productivity	It allows employees to perform faster, eases communication and improves work quality
	Facilitates cost reduction	Allows resources to be directed to areas where they are most demanded that is, where they deliver the best value to the clients
	Uniformity in work operations	Allows for standardization of work process through specifying work content in rules and routines to be followed, communication of expected results

with optimum resource usage. It also offered supervisors the opportunity to frequently monitor subordinates' works to ensure that it complied with predetermined QSD standards. One participant remarked:

> Owing to the strict supervision regime in this Local Government, I am compelled to produce regular performance reports on schedule so as to avoid prescribed sanctions (Participant 9).

Participants also noted that CMs allowed them to follow identical standards in their schedules. Specifically, they mentioned that through coordination, standardization of work process was feasible through specifying work content in rules and routines to be followed, and thereafter communication of expected results. One participant remarked:

> Every employee in this organization is given service delivery guidelines and tasked to follow them to the dot without any variation. The purpose of this, is to ensure consistence in service delivery across departments (Participant 18).

Theme 2: different types of coordination mechanisms

From the analysis, coordination means the sharing of information, resources, and responsibilities to achieve a particular outcome. It was also conceptualized as task interdependence for purposes of achieving a goal. As derived from Table 2, the participants pointed out the following CMs in LGs: (1) direct supervision and monitoring; (2) mutual adjustment; (3) plan and (4) standardization.

Direct Supervision: Coordination is realized when one individual assumes liability for the work of others. One participant said:

> During capacity needs assessment, as a head of Human Resource department, I have a tight departmental schedule. I occasionally delegate the implementation of this noble activity to my subordinate, but closely watch how the entire exercise is being undertaken … (Participant 4).

Mutual adjustment: Participants pointed out that the work process is achieved through a process of informal communication between individuals performing independent work. Actors undertaking joint tasks observe one another and adjust their own activities as required. Participants indicated that departmental managers regularly interact with counterparts to permit flexible CMs, largely informally. It was observed that while LGs are open to and have encouraged a formal organizational structure to facilitate their

Table 2. Theme 2 – Different Types of Coordination Mechanisms.

Types of coordination mechanisms	Sub theme	Associated meaning
	Direct supervision	Co-ordination is accomplished by one individual assuming liability or accountability for the work of others.
	Mutual Adjustment	Co-ordination of work process is achieved through a process of informal communication between individuals performing independent work. Actors undertaking joint tasks observe one another and adjust their own activities as warranted
	Standardization	Activity performance is undertaken in a predetermined way aimed at ensuring uniformity. Standard procedures are established for agents to follow
	Plan	Advance formulation of activities to guide future execution of tasks being coordinated

operations; they see great value in encouraging the use of informal mechanisms that create more incentive for parties to talk to one another.

Standardization: Participants often mentioned that activity performance is undertaken in a pre-determined way aimed at ensuring uniformity. Standard procedures are established for agents to follow. Data analysis yielded three main forms through which standardization can be accomplished: (1) standardization of work process that exists when the work content is specified. One participant remarked:

> In this Local Government, the job description issued by Ministry of Public Service in 2011 has guided recruitment and selection across departments, where personnel of same qualification are employed in same positions but in different departments (Participant 24).

(2) standardization of skills is achieved when specific training necessary to do the work is specified; (3) standardization of output was found to exist in instances where the results of the work are specified. It was established that District LGs organized competence tests for their staff to ascertain their universal ability to deliver in a specified role.

Coordination by Plans: The analysis revealed a tendency for the advance formulation of activities to guide future execution of tasks. Participants mentioned that there is a tendency for managers to specify key outputs and delivery schedules of different tasks to be implemented in order to avoid duplication and wastage of resources, a practice that leads to QSD.

> Heads of Department are required on a monthly basis to attend Technical Planning Committee to plan for their respective departments (Participant 17).

Theme 3: how coordination mechanisms drive QSD

As derived from Table 3, CMs emerged as a key driver for QSD. Most participants pointed out the influence of CMs on QSD as positive because: it improves staff performance; organizational efficiency; execution of planned tasks; information acquisition and sharing; and develops mutual relationships. Specifically, coordination improves staff performance, which in turn improves QSD. It assembles various actors to identify service

Table 3. Theme 3 – How Coordination Mechanisms Drive Service Quality.

Sub themes	Associated meaning
Improves performance of staff	It particularly brings together various stakeholders to identify service delivery gaps and to generate work plans that benefit LG service recipients
Ensures planned execution of tasks	Allows advance preparation of activities which subsequently offer a basis for future task execution
	Work plans also stipulate key outputs and delivery schedules of different tasks implemented in order to avoid duplication
Improvement in mutual relationships	Enables harmonization of competing interests amongst actors performing a task
Enables monitoring and supervision of subordinate	Helps to ensure that program activities are implemented in accordance with initial designed plans and consequently permits LGs to deliver quality services
	Allows supervisors to oversee the works of subordinates and ensure timely interventions whenever deviations are detected
Improves organization efficiency	CMs are essential as they allow accurate directing of resources to where they most deliver value to the clients
Facilitates Information acquisition and sharing	Allows LG actors in a coordination chain to stay informed on task related performance activities and facilitates quick information sharing

delivery gaps and generate work plans that benefit service recipients. This joint planning realized through community consultations allows the community to input their needs in the work plans development process. A respondent remarked:

> During planning phase, councilors often visit their constituencies, interact with their electorate and present people's needs to the technical cadres for inclusion into the final service delivery plans (Participant 13).

> During the planning process, we are regularly consulted by local government officials on our community needs. For example, in the previous financial year, we had a problem of access of clean water. When asked by the officials what were our immediate needs, we raised this and in the subsequent financial year, a borehole hole was provided to us (Participant 17).

An interesting sub-theme identified was the trend of improved execution of LG delivery activities, as a result of CMs. Participants noted that plans allow advance preparation of activities which offer a basis for future task execution. It was further pointed out that work plans also stipulate key outputs and task delivery schedules to avoid duplication and resource wastage, hence QSD. Also, participants noted that standardization reduces variations through the adoption of formalized guidelines, protocol, and standardized trail thereby permitting QSD.

Participants as well indicated that coordination promotes the process of information acquisition and sharing among all actors concerned with task execution. This means that the customers' needs and preferences are known in advance and communicated at the right time to the right people. This information is used to provide safe, appropriate, and effective QSD. This is attested in the following response:

> In this health facility, doctors on duty regularly share patient disease and treatment information amongst themselves before treatment administration. This practice has enabled us to achieve safer and more effective care to the patients' satisfaction (Participant 11).

It also emerged that coordination drives QSD through regular consultation, inspection, monitoring, and supervision. During coordination, supervisors regularly monitor subordinates' works to ensure client satisfaction and value for money. One respondent said:

> In most of the Poverty Alleviation Fund grants, there is a component for technical and political monitoring. This brings together both technocrats and politicians to monitor the performance of government programs … (Participant 18).

Finally, a fascinating sub-theme identified was a trend of less clear lines of accountability and a longer decision-making process. Participants also indicated that while coordination recognizes the need for agencies and actors to work closely in dealing with the complex tasks and challenges, decision-making becomes a collective effort. Therefore, individual responsibility and accountability in the process of task accomplishment is waived as accountability becomes a group endeavor. This increases role conflict and confusion.

Also, coordination led to a longer decision-making process due to the need for consensus, which was time-consuming and hampered timely intervention in emergency situations. This compromises QSD. It was pointed out that:

> . . . coordination through mutual adjustment can lead to consensus and the lowest common denominator, at the expense of making tougher judgments about tradeoffs to get better and quality services for the public. This affected quality services delivery.

Discussion

The general study objective was to establish how CMs drive QSD in LGs. Three major themes emerged: 1) positive experiences of CMs; 2) different types of CMs and 3) how CMs drive QSD in service organizations. The extracted themes provide valuable insights for reliance on CMs to stimulate QSD. The findings highlight the importance of CMs on QSD among local governments.

Four different CMs that drive QSD in the LG service sector were found. These are: coordination by planning; mutual adjustment; direct supervision and standardization, which support the findings of Jarzabkowski et al. (2012). The findings sustain the view that interacting actors need to agree on which subtasks make up the major task, and in what order they need to be implemented, task action center and implementation modality (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). QSD efforts will, therefore, require that LG executives organize performance-enhancing staff workshops. This practice requires a lot of *ad hoc* communication, which symbolize the coordination form of mutual adjustment.

Coordination by mutual adjustment permits new information generation for QSD. Considering the uncertain and dynamic environment brought about by rising costs, complex decision-making procedure and fiscal limitations, under which service quality is delivered, reliance on informal communication is a credible intervention (Jarzabkowski et al., 2012). Through direct supervision, senior LG officials have been able to assume liability for actions of their subordinates and regularly intervened where expected performance deviated from normal.

Based on the SERVQUAL model, the findings highlight the importance of coordination on QSD (Blešić et al., 2011). The subjective customer's judgment of the ratio is dictated by the amount of the gap between the expected and the perceived quality of the actual service received. The difference between customer expectations and perceptions is conceptualized in the GAP model (Wisniewski, 2001). The greater the gap (that is, expectations are greater than performance), the less satisfactory is the service quality (Lewis & Mitchell, 1990). Based on this, closing the gap to ensure QSD will require better coordination.

The service quality gap model represents the right way of identifying inconsistency between perception an organization has, and perception customers have as far as service quality process is concerned. This model can help management identify reasons for poor service quality and take suitable interventions for improvement. One of such measures is through the formulation of plans. Coordination by plans embraces the definition of timetables and the use of control methods to ensure that behaviors of inter-contingent organizational units are handled cordially. Through this mechanism, LGs have been able to ensure advance activities' formulation to guide future task execution. The tendency of LG senior executives to specify key service delivery outputs and schedules through plans has eliminated duplication and resource wastage, a practice that leads to QSD.

More often questioning of LG service clients by applying various models (SERVQUAL model and other similar models) would cause the first gap (*Gap 1* – the listening gap: not

knowing what clients expect) to cease. Developments of strong relations with clients through regular consultations to inform the formulation of service delivery plans; continuous following of changes in the demands of clients and standardization of service delivery processes; regular monitoring and supervision; to minimize the mistakes in the delivery of services, are the best ways to overcome problems caused by the existence of Gap 1. Studies show that clients whose complaints were successfully dealt with become more loyal to a specific organization than those who have never complained so far (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

In order to overcome the second gap (*Gap 2* – the service design and standards gap – not having the right service designs and standards), the basic task of the management in this case is designing of standards and specifications of services that are in accordance with identified clients' demands, including providing physical evidences of services through a well-developed service ambience. Standardization was found prevalent in LGs. In view of this, LGs will need to formulate rules, standards, and procedures to ensure that service delivery activities are undertaken in a pre-determined way in order to eliminate variability in service delivery processes.

For the cessation of Gap 3 (*Gap 3* – the service performance gap – not delivering to service standards); LG management will need to support determined standards and specifications of services with suitable resources so that their application would be consistent and complete. Taking into consideration the importance of the functional service quality dimension, LG management will need to place emphasis on recruiting, selection, training, and development of employees in order to reduce the performance variability. Moreover, it is very important to introduce adequate systems of control and rewarding of employees. Considering the fluctuation of service quality in LGs, an important moment for overcoming Gap 3 is synchronization of services provided and demand through training of employees to deal with the work tasks in a universal manner.

Realistic promises given to clients through suitable channels of external communication represent a basic precondition for the cessation of the fourth or "communication" gap (*Gap 4* – the communication gap – not matching performance to promises). When offering truthful information concerning the service and process of its delivery, it is important to manage internal communications by establishing successful horizontal (mutual adjustment) and vertical communication within the organization. Through coordination by plan, local government management has been able to ensure that performance matches the promises (Blešić et al., 2011).

While the findings that CMs drive QSD are supported by previous literature (De Pablos et al., 2013; Robinson, 2010), the current study uniquely and empirically contributes to local government service delivery literature by aligning coordination as a key driver to QSD in LGs. Coordination therefore, significantly role drives improvements in LGs' QSD effort. These findings confirm that CMs chiefly affect QSD which provides the insight that the approval and encouragement of CMs lead to an improvement in the functionality of the LGs especially in the area of service quality. Findings suggest that CMs help build mutual relationships, ensure planned execution of tasks, permit effective monitoring and supervision of subordinates, facilitates information acquisition and sharing, and above all, lead to QSD. This is consistent with numerous studies that established a positive association between CMs and QSD (De Pablos et al., 2013).

Service organizations' effectiveness in QSD will require the establishment of a coordination framework to ease the interdependence of LG actors in the sharing of ideas and knowledge. Through coordination by plan, LGs have been able to schedule project activities and allocate required resources for their successful execution. QSD will thus demand a culture where LGs standardize their activities – for example, through increased regulations to define actor responsibilities in a coordination chain and facilitate mutual understanding and trust among team members.

The findings have theoretical and practical implications. They broaden prior studies and contribute to plug a number of knowledge gaps established in the literature. Existing studies (Gittell, 2008; Robinson, 2010) have recognized scanty research on the application of CMs on QSD in the LG context. In response to this, this study extends the limited research on CMs and QSD to the LG setting, an area least considered in the literature. This study contributes to the assessment of the CMs in service organizations with particular focus on local governments. An exploratory model for QSD has been generated based on coordination theory and offers an explanation for QSD in service organizations (LGs). Our research empirically explores and validates the use of CMs in service organizations to account for better performance (QSD). This study is relevant as there appears to be no solid piece of research that put into effect, the role of coordination mechanisms on QSD from an empirical point of view in the setting of developing countries and more importantly LGs.

The results of this study provide empirical support that is congruent with the research questions related to the different dimensions of CMs. Secondly, earlier studies on service quality have hugely considered the physical service delivery environment as critical in QSD (Li et al., 2011). This study consequently makes a contribution to enhance our understanding of how improvement in QSD can also be triggered by CMs, an area on which little research has been done in the setting of Uganda's LG. Finally, previous literature is replete with studies on CMs and QSD, but the majority of these studies take a quantitative perspective. The study findings have proven that in a wider sense, the framework linking CMs to QSD in LGS can also be investigated qualitatively, a rare approach in this thread of literature.

There are also practical implications associated with the study findings. First, the findings give confidence in the use of CMs within the LGs suggesting that organizations subscribing to coordination thinking would be in a better position to flourish and deliver quality services. Secondly, it is manifest that organizations should be aware of the thrust of CMs on QSD, and accordingly, strive to execute policies and procedures crucial for managing the impact of CMs on QSD. Thirdly, the findings also demonstrate to LG managers that investment in coordination approaches can yield positive results. Finally, findings provide a practical understanding of CMs and their adoption across Uganda's LGs for improved QSD.

Conclusions

The realization of QSD requires that LGs adjust and refocus their organizational routines to the appropriate service delivery processes. However, while this is necessary, it is not totally a sufficient prerequisite. In LGs' QSD effort, many events appear that show task interdependence, implicit knowledge, uncertainty, and time limitations. LGs need to develop mechanisms to deal with all these. It is for this reason that QSD can be achieved through the implementation of new service delivery processes and systems. This requires

coordination of staff efforts to permit the sharing of goals and knowledge and mutual respect for other professionals and skilled labor. In this research, a case has been made for coordination in the service organization (LG) context.

Limitations

First, this study focuses on coordination as an index score without differentiating the effects of various coordination dimensions and their relative significance in driving QSD. Further research could go beyond the current scope by examining the effect of individual CMs on QSD. Research in this regard might help LG executives understand what mechanisms of coordination are most vital in driving QSD, hence providing a decision-making framework in regard to resource allocation. Secondly, this study was qualitative in nature. Future studies should test this model using a mixed-methods research, in view of the limitations that may be associated with this research approach.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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