

Communication Practices and Quality Service Delivery Tradition: Uganda's Local Government Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the relationship between communication practices (formal and informal) and quality service delivery in Uganda's local Governments. The study findings are derived from a sample of 212 Local Governments in Uganda. Service delivery recipients - Heads of department and sectors comprised the unit of inquiry whose responses were aggregated to Local Government level, which formed the unit of analysis. Questionnaires were used to collect data from the respondents. Data analysis involved running correlations and regressing communication practices (formal and informal) on quality service delivery. The findings revealed that both formal and informal communication practices positively and significantly predicted quality service delivery in Uganda's Local Governments. The major study implication is that Local Government authorities need to focus and reform communication practices for delivery of quality services to the people. The study was however, limited by the fact that it relied only on cross-sectional research design and only utilised a single methodological approach. The study offers empirical evidence on the sparsely investigated public sector. The evidence indicates the immense role of both formal and informal communication practices on quality service delivery in the Uganda's Local Governments.

KEYWORDS: Informal Communication, Formal Communication, Local Government Structure, Public Sector, Quality Service.

1 BACKGROUND

The issue of quality in public sector has since 1980's become a recurring theme. This is perhaps due to increased demand by the public for quality services [1], [2]. The quality shift in public sector, is therefore a component of a series of reforms and transformation effort geared towards total eradication of the traditional bureaucratic model, and its eventual replacement with a more client – oriented paradigm [3], relevant in the delivery of best value to the public. Provision of quality services that satisfy client needs, has therefore become a critical issue, and a dilemma affecting modern service delivery sector [4], [5].

Teicher, Hughes, & Dow [6] have observed that the challenges facing Local Governments in the delivery of quality services are attributed to the fact that: quality tradition in Local Governments is slow; and further worsened by difficulties in measuring outcomes; greater analysis and examination from the public and media; limited autonomy to act in a subjective fashion; and a requirement for decisions to be based on a restrictive policy, or legal frame work.

Recent legislations evidenced by the 1995 constitution of the Republic of Uganda, and the Local Government Act (CAP 243), have placed a new responsibility of delivery of quality services on Uganda's Local Government authorities. This argument is premised on the fact that devolution of power closer to the local people has a positive link with the quality of services delivered [8]. This finding, has however been negated by a study by Khan [9], & Alam [10]. In view of this contradiction, no empirical study has been undertaken to establish the prospect and outlook of the Local Government

system in Uganda, in regard to quality services that they deliver, though what is clear, is that Local Governments increase popular participation [11], and allows local level services to be conditioned according to local preferences [12].

The duty bestowed upon Local Governments to deliver quality services conversely, require among other things that Local Government authorities embrace and reform their communication practices and systems [13], [14], [15]. This is so because communication has been singled out as a dominant and critical activity for organizations to meet their mandate [16].

Whereas theoretical evidence indicates that communication practices positively and significantly influence quality service delivery [15], [17], [18], [19], empirical studies in respect to the same are scanty, for example Manolias [20] and lacking in the context of Uganda's local governments. The need to ascertain the influence of communication practices on quality service delivery triggered this study. This study is therefore likely to facilitate academicians and local government practioners develop a concrete and definite understanding of the role of communication practices on the capacity of local governments to deliver quality services.

Similarly, while a plethora of literature demonstrate that quality service delivery has received much attention in private sector [21]-[22], the same cannot be said with certainty in public sector, especially where there is still considerable debate as to what constitute public services quality [23]-[24]. This is a clear indication of knowledge gap to which this study aspires to fill. More so, no dominant empirical study in Uganda's Local Government has been done, to ascertain how quality service delivery is predicted by communication practices. This study is expected to permit scholars and Local Government practioners to have a more distinct and direct understanding of how communication practices can enhance Local Government capacity to deliver quality services to the public.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The current Local Government system was introduced in Uganda under the 1995 Republican Constitution, and the Local Government Act (CAP 243), with the cardinal responsibility of: provision of democratic, and accountable government of local communities; ensuring provision of public services in a sustainable manner; promotion of safe and healthy environment; and above all, to encourage the participation of communities in matters of local governance.

The term '*Local Government*' describes a system of government of an area by elected representatives of the people who reside there, and are charged with the provision of services [25]. Lawal [26], on the other hand, considers a Local Government to be a government tier close to the people, and mandated with powers to oversee and man local issues of the people under its jurisdiction. A broader conceptualisation of local governments has been given by [27], who observed that Local Governments are a measure for promotion of popular participation of the people at local levels in all decision making process. This makes a local government to be perceived as an instrument of improved service delivery. This conceptualisation is premised on the view that contemporary states are evidently too big to be administered from a single power centre.

Uganda adopted a five tier system of local governance based on the district as a unit under which there are lower Local Governments and Administrative Units [25]. Uganda's Local Government system, ranges from Local Council I at village level, to Local Council V at district level (LGA Cap 243) as illustrated by figure 1. The Uganda's Local Government multi-layered structure bestows upon local government actors, the necessity and duty to communicate both horizontally and vertically in pursuance of role achievement which is critical and central in the delivery of quality services to the public, considering the fact that service delivery policies and operations need to exist in mutuality [28]. Still, the Local Government multi-layered structure requires effective communication system. Planning, supervision and co-ordination function of local government authorities demand a culture of regular information flow through proper communication structure to support quality service delivery endeavors [29].

The basis for Local Government system, is the view that it promotes financial efficiency and ensures quality, as resources and decision making power is directed to Local Governments with the aim of improving on the quality of services [8], [31]. As Local Governments are closer to the people, it is presumed that identification and analysis of client needs, besides fulfilling them in a quality and concerted manner becomes possible [32]-[33].

Based on this, we draw from the Freeman's Stakeholder theory [54] that attempts to explain the relationship between organisations, people and groups. Guided by this theory, interests of all those with stakes in a particular Local Government need to be factored in, through understanding their needs, expectations and values [34]. It is this that makes analysis and involvement of clients in service delivery frame work, a requirement.

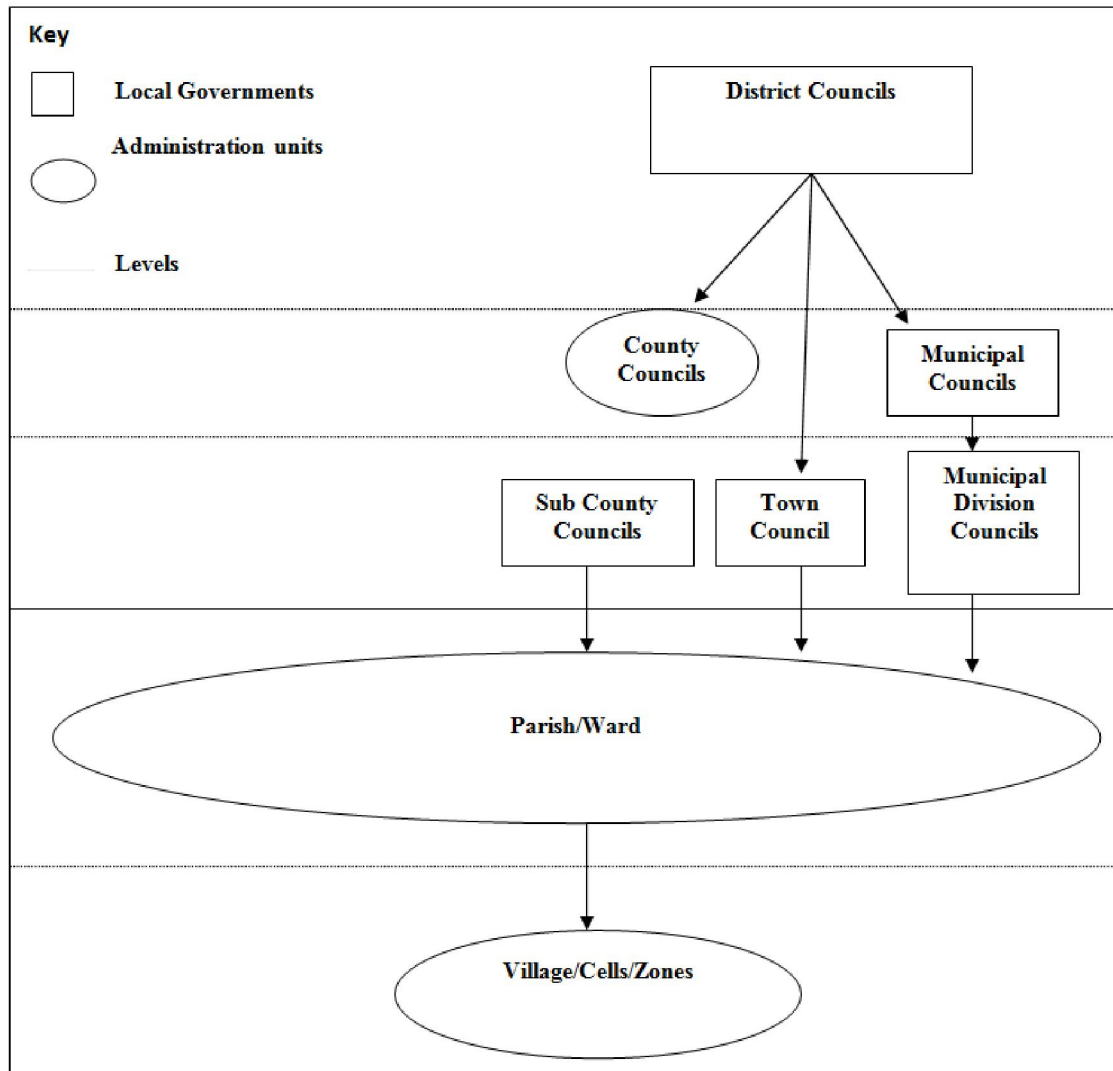


Fig. 1. Local Government Structure

Source: Adopted and Modified from Steffensen, Tidemand and Ssewankambo [35]

Administrative Units in a district include:

- a) County Council
- b) The Parish/Ward Council
- c) The Village Council

2.2 SERVICE QUALITY

There is no universal definition of the concept ‘quality’. It is therefore, apparent that its definition can be based on multiple perspectives. Quite often, the circumstance in which quality is referred to, indicates contradictory perspectives, and the apparent conceptualisation. The contexts can either be business, service, marketing sector, and public service sector. The previous definitions of quality, related to how delivered services conformed to requirement [36], and conformance to specifications [37]-[38]. These definitions have roots from manufacturing sector.

Based on the works of Parasuraman et al [21], service quality is conceptualised to imply overall judgment of a service to determine whether it meets customer satisfaction. It precisely refers to organization’s capacity to meet or exceed customers’ expectations. Zeithmal et al [39], perceive service quality as the difference that exists between customer expectation, and what actually is received. In this perspective, where customer expectations of service quality exceed performance, their

perceived quality becomes less satisfactory, resulting into dissatisfaction [40], [41]. Garvin [42], defines quality to mean excellence. This definition is however limited, based on the view that it shifts focus from the client to the supplier, a scenario which may result into the organization not to give due attention to the demands and needs of the customer [43].

There are basically two opposing paradigms in service quality literature: the expectation -disconfirmation paradigm, and the performance paradigm. The former posits that perceived service quality emanates from comparison between expectation and actual performance [44]. The latter tends to consider customer expectations as non - essential and only emphasises performance as critical. The two opposing paradigms generated two alternative frameworks of service quality measurement namely: SERVQUAL [40], [45] and SERVPERF [22].

2.3 COMMUNICATION PRACTICES AND QUALITY SERVICE DELIVERY

Greenberg and Baron [46] have singled out communication practice as a unique feature for all organisations. Organisations are structured in a manner indicative of their communication patterns. Communication practice also known as structure represents the pattern of interaction existent in every organization [15]. Berger [15] has identified two communication practices: formal channels and informal channels. Formal communication structure or practice exists where communication follows formally established channels of the organization's structure purposely established by the organization's legitimate authority through which instructions and orders are passed over to subordinates, while information is transmitted upwards [47], [17].

Informal communication practice on the other hand, represents communication patterns that exist out of the formally recognized communication modes [15], [47], [48]. It is therefore assembled around social relationship of staff within the organization, and arises out of personal needs of the employees to communicate. This form of communication is often unplanned and consists of concise "*impromptu*" conversations among staff within the organizations [49]. Obstacles to effective and efficient information flow within the organization often give rise to development of informal patterns of communication [15], [47]-[48].

The role of communication practice in influencing the quality of services that organizations deliver, has been well documented [15], [50], [17]-[19]. Both formal and informal communications strengthen employee relationships and foster their performance potential towards the goal of the organization [51]. A study by Manolias [20] about police organisation; identified break down in the communication structure arising out of poor consultation and communication, as a prime cause of stress that inhibited the institutions capacity to deliver quality services.

According to Semler [52], organizations can only realize their mandate when employees determine the worthiness of working together. Both formal and informal communication practices have been singled out as an integral component in developing relationships relevant in securing extra effort among workers. This extra effort is critical in stimulating delivery of best value to the public. A study by Coffey International Development [53], demonstrated that communication which is accomplished through both formal and informal channels, allow clients to lodge their demands to their respective governing entities, and influence decisions that are critical in generating quality public services.

In Local Government context for instance, the regular consultations in planning process and in budgeting cycle, specifically at budget conference phase allow multiple stakeholders like Non Government Organisations, employees and clients determine direction of resources in a bid to deliver quality services. This links well with the Freeman's Stakeholder theory [54] that requires involvement of all with interests or stakes in the service delivery framework. The same study established that the use of citizen score cards as a mode of formal communication practice significantly improved leadership and enhanced on the quality of public services delivered by public institutions.

Researchers have proposed that informal communication at work is a precursor to collaborative work and organization innovation [55], [14]. It sustains information sharing concerning work among employees, eases coordination of activities by actors, strengthens potential for collaborative prospect, and above all, improves the bond between co-workers, all of which are necessary requisites to quality service delivery [55], [14]. Canary [13] has noted that informal communication is necessary specifically for easing the process of coordination among workers within the organization. As a consequence of this, lateral information flow is permitted hence allowing units and departments to work with each other appropriately. This scenario allows service delivery sectors and institutions to deliver quality services to the public. Based on the above review of literature, the following hypotheses are formulated.

H₁: Formal communication practice and quality service delivery are positively associated in Local Governments in Uganda.

H₂: Informal communication practice and quality service delivery are positively related in Local Governments in Uganda.

3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional research design was used to resolve the formulated hypotheses since it is the most commonly used in social sciences to gather data from a sample of a population at a particular time [56]. A total sample of 302 Local Governments for this study was selected based on the rule of thumb as suggested by Krejcie and Morgan [57]. This sample was drawn from a total population frame of 1488 local Governments in Uganda which are registered members of Uganda Local Government Association (ULGA). Since Local governments are spread out under five (5) levels: District Councils, Municipal Councils, Municipal Division Councils, Town Councils and Sub County Councils, we relied on proportionate sampling procedure to draw 23 Districts, 4 Municipal Councils, 13 Town Councils, 35 Municipal Division Councils and 227 Sub County Councils. Using simple random technique thereafter, we wrote all names of Local Governments and placed them in a marked bowls from where we drew random samples without replacement, until we realized the number of 302.

The unit of analysis was the local government whose heads of department and sections, comprised the unit of inquiry. Guided by Gay [58], this study accepted a minimum of 3 respondents per local government. A total of 212 Local Governments responded generating a response rate of 70.1 per cent which was judged usable for this study. The sample size of 302 and the subsequent response rate of 212 Local Governments is convincing enough, as it is consistent with Bailey [59], who noted that a sample size of 100 is sufficient and Roscoe's [60] rule of the thumb, indicating that a sample size between 30 and 500 is sufficient for any study. The sample size for this study meets the suggested minimum requirement.

Since clients are in better position to offer judgment on quality, Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons [61], quality service delivery section of the instrument was completed by a total of 1365 respondents enlisted through non probability convenience sampling technique. Clients leaving Local Governments' public service delivery units were intercepted, talked to and those willing to participate in the study, were given the survey tool to complete. The 1365 respondents were aggregated to unit of analysis level which was the Local Government.

3.2 QUESTIONNAIRE DEVELOPMENT

3.2.1 COMMUNICATION PRACTICE

To measure communication practices, we used self generated measurement scale based on the extant review of literature on communication practice. Consistent with this review, a set of items for the two communication dimensions of formal and informal communication practice was generated. This measurement scale was later submitted to experts in the area of management for evaluation, who deemed it fit for the study with a Content Validity Index of .80 well above the suggested minimum of .70 [62]. A sample of a question items read, '*superior often inform us of new happening in the organisation through written memos (Formal)*'; and '*the content of Local Government communication we engage in is rich (Informal)*.' Items were anchored on a six point Likert like scale (1 - 6) ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

3.2.2 QUALITY SERVICE DELIVERY

Quality Service Delivery was measured using the works of Parasuraman et al [21] and Pivot – Core – Periphery (PCP) model developed by Phillip & Hazlet [63]. In this study quality service delivery dimensions included: responsiveness; empathy; reliability; assurance; tangibles adopted from the works of Parasuraman and deliverables/outcome derived from [63]. A sample of a question items read, '*prompt services are delivered to clients*.' Items were anchored on a six point Likert like scale (1 - 6) ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

3.3 RELIABILITY OF THE INSTRUMENTS

Reliability of the scale was determined using Cronbach Alpha (α). The internal consistence of scale used to measure the study constructs on the scale was measured using Cronbach Alpha (α) coefficients. The generated results indicated that the instrument was reliable since all the alpha levels were above the suggested minimum of 0.7 [62] as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Test for reliability

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient (α)
Communication Practice	0.78
Quality Service Delivery	0.94

Source: Primary data

We tested for Common Methods Bias (CMB) so as to minimize the potential measurement errors in the process of data collection, which if not taken care of, threaten the validity of the findings about the associations between measures [64]-[65]. Aware of the potential problems of CMB and its likely grave consequences on this study, we adopted Podsakoff et al [64] recommended solutions to minimise and manage CMB namely: procedural remedies which require use of different scores and sources. In this regard, we collected data from different heads of department and section heads, and from different Local Governments. We also used psychological separation procedure in an attempt to make it appear as though measurement of exogenous variables was not related to the measurement of the endogenous variable. In this respect, scale items were clustered together under different sections so as to make them appear unrelated to the study respondents.

Data were checked and cleaned to ensure their completeness. Data were aggregated to unit of analysis level (Local Government). Through frequency inspection and missing value analysis, MCAR test was not significant and we proceeded to replace missing values using linear interpolation due to its ability to connect data points and ensure continuity without necessarily distorting the data structure Dodge [66].

We screened our data to ascertain whether it conforms to the assumptions of parametric tests. We tested for the assumptions of normality, equality of variance, linearity and multi-collinearity. We tested for multi-collinearity using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance Statistics. The multi-collinearity tests produced Variance Inflation Factor (VIFs) for all study constructs below 1.2 and Tolerance statistics well above 0.9 and for all study variables. The results demonstrate tolerable intensity of multi-collinearity problem as the values above were below the recommended threshold of $VIF < 5$; Tolerance value > 0.2 ; and Condition Index of < 30 [67].

4 RESULTS

Two hundred and twelve (212) Local Governments out of 302 responded indicating a response rate of 70.1 per cent. The majority of Local Governments that responded were District Councils, constituting 39 per cent, followed by Sub County Councils 38 per cent, and Town Councils with 20 per cent. Municipal Division Councils with 2 per cent and finally Municipal Councils with 1.4 per cent. The majority of Local Governments (73.6 per cent) had existed for more than 9 years, 18.9 percent between 5 to 9 years, while 7.5 per cent had existed for less than 4 years (1-4). The majority of respondents were males constituting (65%) and female comprised 35 per cent.

In order to explore and test the theoretical structure of the study area, besides the necessity to reduce our data to manageable levels, we performed factor analysis with Principal Component Analysis (PCA) [67]. Items were inter-correlated and rotated using varimax rotation method because of its ability to produce autonomous factors [67]. The analysis above produced two factors for communication practice (Formal and informal communication practices) explaining 61.9 per cent of the total variance. Similarly, the Kaiser Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure of Sampling Adequacy of (.80) and the Bartlett's test of Sphericity which was significant ($p < 0.01$) indicated that the data structure was likely to factor well. For quality service delivery, the analysis generated five factors (reliability, empathy, responsiveness, deliverables and tangibles) accounting for 65 per cent of the total variance. Similarly, the (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy of (.93) and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at ($p < .000$). Both diagnostic tests therefore allude to the view that the data were likely to factor well.

4.1 CORRELATION AND REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Pearson's bi-variate correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between the independent variable: communication practice (formal and informal) and the dependent variable quality service delivery. The results of analysis are displayed in the table II below:

Table 2. Zero-order correlation between communication practices (formal and informal) and Quality Service Delivery

		1	2	3
1	Formal Communication	1.00		
2	Informal Communication	0.198**	1.00	
3	Quality Service Delivery	0.451**	0.250**	1.00
N = 212; Note: ** correlation is significant to less than 0.01 level (2.tailed).				

Table 3. OLS regression results of formal and informal communication practice on Quality Service Delivery

	Variable	unstandardized		B	Model F	R ²	Adjusted R ²	ΔR ²
		B	SE B					
Model 1	Intercept(constant)	-.062	0.097		.185	0.002	-.008	0.002
	LG type	.004	0.011	.022				
	LG tenure	.017	0.033	.037				
Model 2	Intercept (constant)	-.956	0.149		18.431**	0.210	.199	0.208
	LG type	.013	0.010	0.077				
	LG Tenure	.012	0.029	0.026				
	Formal comm. practice	.200	0.027	0.460				
Model 3	Intercept(constant)	-1.309	0.199		15.956**	0.236	.221	0.026
	LG type	.011	0.010	0.066				
	LG tenure	.014	0.029	0.031				
	Formal comm. practice	.185	0.027	0.426				
	Informal comm. practice	.084	0.032	0.164				
N = 212; **p < .01; *p < .05 LG type = Local Government type; LG Tenure = Local Government Tenure								

The results in Table II above indicate that formal communication practices have a positive and significant relationship with the quality of services that Local Governments deliver ($r = 0.451, p < 0.01$) thus providing support to (H_1). Further, the multivariate regression analysis in Table III indicate that 20.8 per cent of the total variance in the quality of services that Local Governments deliver is explained by formal communication practices ($R^2 = 0.208, p < 0.01$). These results therefore support (H_1). Further, a positive and significant relationship was established between informal communication practices and quality of service delivered by the Local governments in Uganda ($r = 0.250; p < 0.01$). This finding is supported by multiple regression results that revealed that 2.6 percent of the total variation in the quality of services that local Governments deliver is accounted for by informal communication practices thus supporting (H_2).

5 DISCUSSION

This study examined the extent to which independent variables: formal and informal communication practices, jointly and individually predicted quality service delivering within Uganda's Local Governments. The findings of this study demonstrated that both formal and informal communication practices are positive, and significantly predicted the quality of services that Local Governments deliver in Uganda. The findings further revealed that about 24 percent of the unique variance in the quality of services that Local Governments deliver is jointly accounted for, by a linear combination of both formal and informal communication practices. These findings are in tandem with those of Berger [15], Nardi [14], Johnson et al [55], & Canary, [13], who established significant predictive power of both formal and informal communication practices on organizations' capacity to meet their mandates (quality service delivery) in the context of this study.

The results further revealed that whereas both communication practices are essential in the delivery of quality services, the effect of formal patterns of communication was stronger ($r = 0.451, p < 0.01; R^2 = 0.208; p < 0.01$) than informal communication practices ($r = 0.250, p < 0.01; R^2 = 0.026; p < 0.01$) indicating that formal communication practices has had an

edge in easing, the local governments' capacity to deliver quality services than informal communication, as it allows accurate and detailed information flow among Local Government stakeholders. Based on this pattern of communication, periodic service delivery circulars, service delivery manuals, and invitation letters to heads of department to attend Technical Planning Committee meetings have been issued from time to time and these have been instrumental in aiding Local Governments to deliver quality services. These documents act as reference points to those tasked with service delivery responsibility, thereby facilitating their work.

Despite the low predictive power of informal communication practices on the quality of services that Local Governments deliver, the findings revealed that informal communication practices are handy, and therefore complement formal communication patterns in aiding quality service delivery in local governments. This mode of communication is particularly useful considering the fact the majority of the masses are illiterate, yet they need to be regularly consulted to ensure that services that local governments deliver are demand driven rather, than being supply led. Informal patterns of communication also ensure harmony, considering the view that it evolves along social networks. This is therefore not in variance with Canary [13], when he noted that informal communication is necessary specifically for easing the process of coordination among employees within the organisation.

Consequently, lateral information flow permits units or departments and individuals to work together, and in harmony which is a critical factor to the delivery of quality services to the people. Finally, these results demonstrated that reforming communication practices (formal & informal) provided opportunities for the Local Government stakeholders particularly staff to execute their tasks with ease and in co-ordinated manner, which is a key precursor to better service delivery.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that communication practices (formal and informal) positively and significantly influence the quality of services that Local Governments deliver. It however revealed that while both patterns of communication are relevant in the delivery of quality services, the role of formal communication practice was so immense within Uganda's Local Government context. In view of this, Local Government authorities ought to streamline their formal communication systems, but without necessarily abandoning the informal structure if only they are to realise their mandate of quality service delivery.

7 IMPLICATIONS

The study findings suggest important aspects that require consideration by Local Government managers and researchers. The implication of these findings is that the significance of both formal and informal communication practices should be tackled or considered by both academic scholars and Local Government practitioners if quality service delivery decisions are to be appropriately derived. In this regard, these findings permit Local Government authorities to have a deeper and thoughtful understanding of how communication practices enhance quality service delivery. Thus, Local Government authorities should be enlightened about the benefits to be achieved from reforming communication practices in Local Government.

8 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study acknowledges the following limitations. Firstly, the study measures communication practices and quality service deliver in a single moment thereby rendering causal links difficult to ascertain. Future studies could therefore consider employing longitudinal approach so as do overcome this glaring limitation. Secondly the study employed a unitary methodological approach. Therefore future studies should also consider use of qualitative approach (interviews) to form a basis for triangulation. Finally, this empirical study concerns a single Country Uganda, thereby making generalisation of results to other setting difficult given the fact that quality service delivery approaches and communication practices vary from country to country. Our service delivery model therefore needs to be tested in other countries to ascertain its functionality.

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