

RESEARCH INSIGHT

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How do management practices in government change over time? Evidence from Ghana



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The challenge

How effectively are government bureaucracies managed? How much variation is there in management practices across organizations? These are basic questions about the day-to-day bureaucratic processes of governance on which little systematic evidence exists, especially in low- and middle-income countries. And despite the immense effort and expenditure that is poured into improving the quality of government bureaucracies, we have almost no large-scale evidence of perhaps the most important question of all: **How does the quality of management change over time?**

Our approach

In 2014, Ghana's Head of Civil Service, Nana Agyekum-Dwamena, invited us to collaborate with the Office of the Head of Civil Service (OHCS) to study these questions. In 2015, we worked with OHCS to conduct a survey of the universe of professional-grade officers in Ghana's central government – nearly 3,000

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individuals across 46 organizations. We used an adapted version of the World Management Survey² to rigorously measure the quality of a range of management practices in each organization. We've written previously about the findings of this survey³.

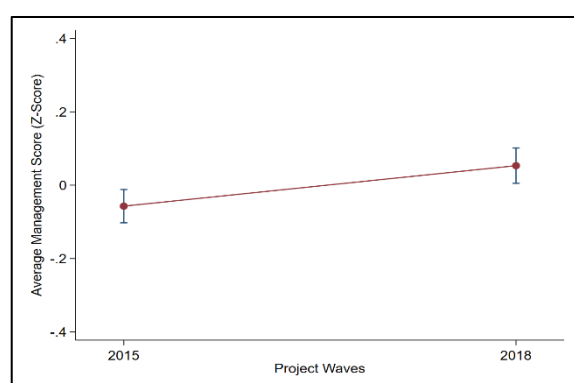
In 2018, we repeated the survey at the same scale. This repeated data collection exercise has allowed us to get a unique insight into the daily work lives of the administrators and policymakers that drive the core functions of government. Most importantly, it lets us see whether three years of effort poured into management improvement by OHCS and ordinary civil servants across government have yielded measurable results.

Our findings

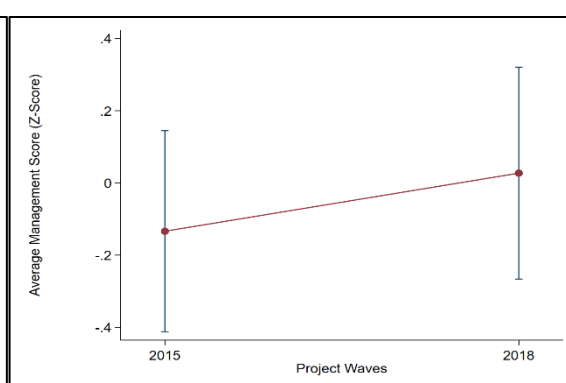
Using a measure of management derived from individual responses to our survey, we found that there has been a small improvement in the quality of management practices in Ghana's Civil Service. This is statistically significant at the one percent level. The average quality of management practices in 2018 was between 0.11 and 0.17 standard deviations higher than it was in 2015, depending on exactly how we measure it. (The improvement was about the same measured using organization-averages of the individual responses, though the substantially smaller sample reduced our power to detect the change.) To our knowledge, Ghana is the first country in Africa to be able to rigorously demonstrate an improvement in management quality in this manner.

Overall Improvement in Management, 2015-18

a) Measured at individual level



b) Measured at organizational level



What should we make of this finding? Some people might be disappointed that the improvement has been relatively small compared to the vast need for improvement and scale of challenges facing Ghana, and it is certainly true that the Civil Service is certainly far from transformed from where it was in 2015. An alternative perspective is that institutional change everywhere in the world tends to take place across decades or even centuries, so by historical standards an improvement of 0.11-0.17 standard deviations in just three years is remarkable. Perhaps most importantly, documenting a tangible change in something as complex as bureaucratic quality – with all its political, economic, social, legal, cultural, and idiosyncratic influences – stands as a small but meaningful demonstration that all the effort poured into improving the Service has had real, measurable benefits.

² For further details of the World Management Survey and its applications see: <https://worldmanagementsurvey.org/> and <https://voxeu.org/article/management-practices-and-productivity>

³ See articles: [Autonomy, incentives, and the effectiveness of bureaucrats](#) (published by VoxDev) and [Management and bureaucratic effectiveness](#) (IGC Policy Brief)

We then dug deeper into the data, to see how this small overall increase was distributed across the various ministries and departments that make up Ghana’s Civil Service. What we found was surprising. There is a huge amount of variation in the change in organizational management quality between 2015 and 2018, despite our careful measurement efforts (using the same core team of enumerators, the same sampling approach, and so on). Some organizations made vast improvements, others deteriorated dramatically. The average absolute change in management practices for each organization was about 1.1 standard deviations – almost ten times larger than the overall average change! There is essentially zero correlation between the measured quality of organizational management practices in 2015 and 2018.

This extreme heterogeneity puts a different spin on the overall results: the slow-but-steady average improvement appears to be masking huge churn at the organizational level. Some organizations are improving rapidly and others are worsening nearly as rapidly, but the overall improvements in some agencies slightly outweigh the declines in others.

The figure below plots each organization’s management score in 2015 (horizontal axis) against its management score in 2018 (vertical axis). The 23 organizations above the red diagonal line saw their management improve over this three-year period, while the 23 organizations below it saw their management deteriorate over the period. This figure reveals some interesting patterns in terms of stability and change in organizational management. There are 9 organizations that had above-average management quality in both years (top-right quadrant), and another 9 organizations that were below-average in both years (bottom-left). However, there were 16 organizations that had below-average management in 2015 but improved to above average in 2018 (top-left). While this is encouraging, there were also 12 organizations that had above-average management in 2015 but below-average in 2018 (bottom-right).

Changes in Organizational Management Quality, 2015-18



These mixed results at organizational level paint a picture that is simultaneously more optimistic and more pessimistic than that of the overall improvement. One might be more optimistic, because it shows that more rapid progress is possible, if the right ingredients can be found and combined. But one might also be more pessimistic, because it shows that progress is not automatic – indeed, deterioration is almost as likely as improvement. This makes concerted and sustained effort to improve performance even more important.

Of course, it is important to keep in mind that these data have some limitations. First, management quality is not a variable with a natural scale, and so we have to measure changes in relative terms. This means that it is

hard to say whether the changes we see are large or small in an absolute sense – although we benchmark our management quality scores to quality data, and are confident that they do represent meaningful changes. Second, some organizations have to be above average and others below average, so heterogeneous changes at organization-level are not themselves unexpected – but we do find this extent of heterogeneity surprising. Finally, management quality is an important ingredient in improvements in service delivery, but it is not the only ingredient, nor does it necessarily translate directly – as our other work has shown⁴.

Research implications and impacts

What next for the research, and for Ghana's Civil Service? We are working together closely to feed this information back into the Civil Service, by standard dissemination methods like policy briefs and workshops, but also via WhatsApp, presentations to ministry management by OHCS, and even [a cartoon](#). In addition, we have also collaborated to design and implement a randomized training intervention in 2017-18 that aimed to directly improve management and performance. We are now working to put in place the final pieces of data necessary to evaluate this rigorously.

Our research collaboration has so far demonstrated that it is possible to improve management in government bureaucracies. The crucial next steps – for us, and for governments and researchers worldwide – is to understand more about exactly how those improvements can be brought about, and then to implement them as widely as possible.

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⁴ [Management and Bureaucratic Effectiveness : Evidence from the Ghanaian Civil Service](#) (World Bank)