

POLICY BRIEF 2016-3

Improving Coordination Among Government Ministries in Afghanistan

By Moein Daqiq

Abstract

Good coordination is essential to the operations of government, businesses and not-for-profit organisations. A lack of effective coordination increases a venture's operational costs and creates a competitive, rather than cooperative environment. In Afghanistan, the effect of ineffective coordination is seen in development initiatives that are frequently misaligned with the capacity of the state budget, and inter-ministerial activities that are either duplicated or improperly organised. As a result of poor coordination between responsible parties, cross-cutting areas such as environment, infrastructure, gender and institutional capacity building are insufficiently addressed. Bilateral agreements and strategic partnerships signed with other countries are also poorly implemented due to ineffective cooperation between Afghanistan's ministries. The purpose of this brief is to reflect on the main challenges and obstacles caused by inadequate coordination and cooperation between the government ministries of Afghanistan and to propose solutions to mitigate these challenges.

Problem Statement

Coordination is the mechanism through which policies, strategies, plans, peoples, systems, and tools are brought together to achieve a particular goal. Through the effective coordination of two or more institutions, organisations and individuals can unify efforts to achieve a goal that benefits all parties involved. The main purposes of coordination are to remove distrust, avoid duplications and unnecessary competition and reduce costs, which in turn will improve efficiency and effectiveness at all levels. Thus, improving coordination between government ministries in Afghanistan will result in better outcomes and higher quality services for the people. The provision of better services is the mandate of government, and without proper coordination this mandate cannot be carried out.

Government services are often cross-sectional, interlinked and complementary particularly in the areas of agriculture, education, trade and mining. One particular service or service provider functioning improperly will affect the entire system. An individual's financial condition will not improve if he or she lacks access to quality education and healthcare. On a larger scale, a productive agricultural sector is impossible if the irrigation system is broken. Thus, it is important to value the interconnectivity of the system at all levels.

Poor coordination has existed between Afghanistan's government ministries for years, and the prolonged conflict in the country was not conducive to improving the situation. Existing coordination is informal and involves only the most rudimentary exchange of information and division of labor among actors (Stockton, 2002, and Donini, 1996). The Ministry of Finance of Afghanistan, however, was a pioneer in addressing this challenge by cooperating with other ministries to identify national priorities and securing aid from the international donor community. For example, the Ministry of Finance established six Development Councils (DCs) across government ministries for each priority area of development, including: infrastructure; governance and justice; human capital; land and water; economic development; and connectivity and regional cooperation. As a result, most of the national priorities were identified and key national priority programmes developed across ministries and independent organisations functioning within the government framework, such as the Independent Directorate for Local Governance, the Independent Human Rights Commission and the Independent Reform Civil Service Commission.

Nonetheless poor cooperation persists, resulting in the following challenges:

1. Certain government initiatives are duplicated and costly. For example: the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation Development are both responsible for constructing irrigation systems, but neither ministry is responsible for their maintenance.
2. The rate of government budget spending is very low, which delays the provision of services. The budget execution rate across the ministries was 27% as of 11 June 2016.
3. Capacity building efforts are often duplicated and/or inconsistently applied across ministries. One state employee may receive two or three similar trainings while another employee receives none.
4. There is minimal improvement in cross-cutting areas such as environment, infrastructure, gender and capacity building across the ministries. For example: despite having no large factories, Kabul is one of the top ten most polluted cities in the world (Smith, 2015); the environment is not given priority in development efforts.
5. Bilateral agreements and strategic partnerships signed with other countries are inadequately administered and thus fail to deliver the promised benefits.

Recommendations

The following three actions are proposed to address the challenges of poor coordination:

1. Establish an online software system with multiple entries from different ministries;
2. Designate a coordinating ministry tasked solely with managing inter-ministerial relations;
3. Establish a regulatory framework to promote inter-ministerial coordination.

Recommendation 1: Establish an online software system with multiple entries from different ministries

The first option of establishing an interactive online IT system is innovative to this context. The system would connect both the technical and high-level decision-makers at the capital and provinces of a particular ministry with their counterparts from another ministry. Such a system would also harmonise the efforts of different departments within one ministry by allowing policymakers to develop policies jointly through interactive tools. The system will provide access for three purposes: the first type of user will be able to read and download documents only; another group of users will be able to edit the newly developed documents; and a third group of users will authorize and approve the edited documents in whole or part.

Furthermore, this system would accumulate all necessary and relevant documents, guidelines and procedures for the effective operation of government affairs both locally and centrally. The system would automatically send emails and text message reminders about upcoming events and deadlines for completing a particular task. The system would be a coordination and cooperation hub across government ministries. All current initiatives and past programmes would be listed in the system to avoid future duplication.

Recommendation 2: Establish a coordinating ministry tasked solely with managing inter-ministerial relations

The second option of establishing a coordinating ministry is also promising, since the government body would coordinate plans, policies, programmes and activities between the ministries. This new organisation would monitor the work of all ministries. However, establishing a new organisation just for coordination purposes is very costly for the government of Afghanistan, and could run the risk of adding an additional layer of bureaucracy that actually impedes the ease of inter-ministerial cooperation.

It is worth noting that the Office of the President, the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Finance are currently working to harmonise communication and documentation between different ministries of Afghanistan through isolated mechanisms. However this is not sufficient to meet the public's enormous demand and service needs. Thus establishing a new ministry may reduce this burden to some extent and would be very helpful to monitor and evaluate the activities of the ministries along with enhancing coordination and cooperation. It would not be as effective as the first option for Afghanistan. However,

Singapore has an experience in this regard, and could serve as a model for policy design (Saad 2015).

Recommendation 3: Establish a regulatory framework to promote inter-ministerial coordination in the existing context

The third option is to establish a regulatory framework designed to enhance coordination among government bodies. A legislative regulation to improve coordination would be drafted and passed, and all ministries would be tasked with its implementation for coordination purposes. This regulation would target the areas where lapses or duplications occur and would encourage ministries to work together.

It is worth mentioning that a similar regulation was prepared by the justice sector aimed at harmonizing the efforts of the Ministry of Justice, the Attorney General's Office and the Supreme Court. However some organizations were unable to implement the reform due to various reasons, including a lack of capacity and an inability to understand the provisions of the new regulation. Thus there is no guarantee that a new regulation, designed to cover more organizations within a broader scope, would be successful.

The following table outlines the advantages and disadvantages of each option:

Solutions	Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Establishing an online IT system for interactive cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy for relevant actors to implement and use • Cost-effective as almost all ministries are equipped with technology and internet • Easy access to information • Connects people both inside and outside of the country • All participants can make relevant changes and develop documents according to their capacity • All information will be available on the system and downloadable from anywhere, preventing information gaps among ministries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant civil servants will require training to use the system

Solutions	Advantages	Disadvantages
2. Establishing a new coordinating ministry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates new jobs • Governance is properly planned, monitored, and evaluated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires significant investment • Difficult to implement; possible legal challenges • Information gaps • Possibility of creating another layer of bureaucracy • Poses the possible threat of abuse of power
3. Establishing a regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost-effective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to implement and assure results • Civil servants cannot be engaged when they are outside of the office or the country. • Possibility of information gaps

Conclusion

Poor coordination between the government ministries of Afghanistan is a major obstacle to the effective administration of state services. The three options proposed above seek to address this challenge, with the creation of an IT system for interactive cooperation appearing to have the greatest potential impact. All interested parties would have access to such a system and would have the authority to generate greater buy-in and create incentives for ministry officials to cooperate. In addition to promoting awareness and cooperation by announcing upcoming events, the system would also accumulate important documents, policies, agendas and minutes to offer greater transparency and provide a repository for past interventions to inform future actions. Most importantly, this option is cost effective and easy to implement, with software that can be modified to meet the demands of a particular ministry.

Sources

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