

Energy Sector Rationalisation: Experiences from a Developing Economy

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Abstract

In the ever-changing environment, economies, both developed and developing, are ever in search of means of achieving cost and service efficiency in order to serve their people. This relates to the Uganda Public Service, which has undergone several reforms, including the liberalisation of the energy sector. This study unravels the experiences of the Ugandan government's turnaround initiative to rationalise (mainstream) the hitherto semi-autonomous government agency (Rural Electrification Agency [REA]), housing it in the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development (MEMD). We preferred a constructionist view, where the storyline is constructed between the researcher and the participants to gain in-depth individual and group experiences. Views from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were galvanised with document review. Key results indicated that the rationalisation efforts faced the challenge of poor employee adaptability. Furthermore, the government anchored its decision to rationalise REA on the cost-saving parameter. However, the government will likely lose more in the long run since staff output and efficiency levels declined. We recommend that the government urgently improve the general terms and conditions of the mainstream public service for rationalisation to succeed.

Keywords: Energy sector; Employee adaptability; Mainstream public service; Government agency; Public sector rationalisation.

Introduction

The public sector in Uganda has undergone several reforms, the most significant of which were the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s that were initiated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Konadu-Agyemang, 2018). The SAPs aimed to reduce government spending by downsizing and merging government agencies and departments (Ould-Mey, 2018; International Monetary Fund, Uganda, 1997). Notably, the state did not slim

down since functions that were hitherto carried out by the government ministries were merely taken over by parallel agencies, such as the Rural Electrification Agency. Supported by donor funding, the agencies' staff were simply offered better terms and conditions of service (Economic Policy Research Centre Uganda, 2015).

With the enactment of the Electricity Act 1999, the energy sector was liberalised, paving the way for the unbundling of Uganda Electricity Board (UEB), which, hitherto, had the mandate to generate, transmit, distribute, and sell electricity. Liberalisation of the energy sector was crucial for opening it up for private investment (Public Enterprises Reform and Divestiture Act, 1993; Kayizzi-Mugerwa & Arne Bigsten, 2011; Mawejje, Munyambonera & Bategeka, 2012; Meyer, Eberhard, Gratwick, 2018). Kapika and Eberhard (2013) and the World Bank (2017) report that following the liberalisation of the energy sector, power losses declined, revenue collections improved, there was greater private and donor investment, connections and access rates increased by an estimated 20%.

The current drive to rationalise or mainstream formerly semi-autonomous agencies into the parent public service ministries was meant to remove duplication, reduce government expenditure, and, as a reaction to reduced donor funding (Karuru & Bakibinga, 2021; Ministry of Public Service, 2018). The rationalisation drive led to the apparent change in the ministry's structure, roles and job descriptions to accommodate REA staff and systems (Sony & Mekoth, 2022). Ashta, Stokes and Hughes (2018) note that organisational rationalisation often involves significant roles, responsibilities, and work processes shifts. Thus, to ensure successful rationalisation, the Ugandan government substantially invested in re-culturing and diversity training, created a representative Change Committee, and developed detailed guidelines (Van Dam & Meulders, 2020; Weiss & Merrigan, 2021). When employees feel included, valued, and supported in the change process, they are more likely to embrace and support rationalisation efforts, leading to higher levels of commitment and success (Ziaei-Nafchi & Mohelská, 2020). The mainstay of this study was to investigate the experiences of cultural adaptability, technological adaptability and possible challenges during the rationalisation of REA into MEMD. It suffices to contextualise the term 'rationalisation' to mean incorporating the staff, systems and structure of former REA into the parent ministry by the existing terms and conditions of the mainstream public service.

Research Methodology

Given the constructionist interpretivist stance of the researchers, the preferred design for the study was the single case study with a focus on the merger of REA and MEMD (Yin, 2018). In addition to facilitating a qualitative approach, the case study design provided an opportunity for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Sibona, Walczak, & White Baker, 2020). In-depth interviews were conducted with senior staff who participated in the rationalisation process either as part of the Rationalisation Committee or Heads of Departments, in which former REA staff were incorporated. The purposive selection of participants was based on the general understanding that target participants were privy to key information regarding the rationalisation exercise in the ministry (Denieffe, 2020; Sibona, Walczak & White Baker, 2020). Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with staff who formally worked with REA. The aim was to obtain responses that would easily be verified (Mollaei et al., 2023). Documentary review analysis involves the identification, verification, and consideration of documents related to the rationalisation exercise (Rapley & Rees, 2018). Documents that were reviewed include the Rationalisation of Government Agencies, Public Expenditure Reports, MEMD Reports, and the Activity Guide for phase one of the rationalisation of the government agencies and public expenditure, among others (The Republic of Uganda, 2021; The Republic of Uganda Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development, 2002). This helped triangulate with information from participants to ensure trustworthiness and truthfulness of the data.

Content and thematic analysis approaches were used to make sense of the data (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Assarroudi et al., 2018; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Data analysis involved the systematic and interpretive processes of searching, organising, and transforming data into meaningful insights, patterns, and themes. The rigorous and iterative process aimed at uncovering the underlying meanings, perspectives, and contextual underpinnings embedded in qualitative data (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Assarroudi et al., 2018; Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

Discussion of Results

Though without an apparent dichotomy, we attempt to align results with the study objectives. Sabuhari, Djabid and Rajak (2021) intimate that rationalisation takes different forms, including mergers. In the current study, REA was mainstreamed into the parent ministry, MEMD. Mainstreaming or rationalisation meant job fitting as guided by education levels, job descriptions, and the offer of mainstream public service terms and conditions of service that were, in most measures, less favourable than the agency rates. The government's decision to merge former REA staff on poorer terms and conditions resonates with the primary drive to reduce government expenditure. However, The government decision is inexplicable since, in the first place, the government introduced agencies to reduce the inefficiency of UEB and attract private sector investment following the Liberalisation Act (1991). Bringing in the private sector led to a reduction in energy losses from 40% to about 17%, expansion in generation, the refurbishment of stations, and an increase in revenue collection to more than 75%, accompanied by a substantial reduction in load shedding (The World Bank, 2017). Reverting to the earlier era where the ministry had more control over generation, transmission and expansion of access to electricity under UEB, compared to a liberalised and more aggressive private sector business approach, without prior evaluation, is yet another hurdle. This contradicts Karen's (2009) advocacy for an organisational diagnosis to be carried out before rationalisation.

It is widely held that organisations that recognise and nurture employee adaptability are more likely to experience smoother transitions and better change management outcomes (Sabuhari, Djabid & Rajak, 2021). Karen (2009), on her part, posits that employee adaptability enhances the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and perspectives during the organisational rationalisation process. Moreover, employee adaptability initiatives promote open dialogue, reduce misunderstandings, and foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment, which can positively impact the implementation of rationalisation. For the purpose of successful rationalisation, the government has put in place counselling services, training, and a representative committee to coordinate the change effort. Reports indicate that adequate planning was done with clear activities, such as validation of human resources (HR) processes, and qualifications assessment for suitability to be placed where competencies fit. Whereas such structures were established, an analysis of the findings indicated inadequate arrangements. For instance, trainings and workshops were few and hurriedly implemented, covering only a few topics, thus not effectively addressing the concerns of especially former REA employees. Bason (2018) found similar results in a study that revealed that government ministries faced challenges in providing adequate training and skill development opportunities to employees during rationalisation. This was due to budgetary constraints, lack of skill, and time constraints, which hindered efforts to enhance employee skills and adaptability (Bason, 2018; Barnett, Henriques & Husted-Corregan, 2018).

Managing relationships, addressing concerns, and ensuring open communication channels with stakeholders were critical for successful rationalisation efforts. In their study findings, Klein, Ramos and Deutz (2022) indicate that unclear communication can lead to confusion, anxiety, and decreased employee adaptability. Whereas the rationalisation committee carried out trainings, besides providing counselling services to REA staff, such efforts on the

committee's part were treated with scepticism. One of the participants intimated that the efforts were meant to 'sweet-talk' them into accepting the terms on offer at MEMD, but not to expose them to the bare truth. As such, it was inconceivable that even with the best arrangement and communication, staff from REA would easily adapt to the ministry culture, systems and processes, in the face of the gross reduction in remuneration. Furthermore, representation on the Change Committee would only be meaningful if the parties were equally empowered, unlike the top-heavy arrangement where ministry officials had more say. Kai-Liao (2021) rightly notes that it may be difficult, if not impossible, to have all parties involved in a rationalisation exercise to be satisfied. This is true of the divergent views about the rationalisation exercise since it involved losses and gains on the part of either party.

Rajak Sabuhari, Djabid, and Rajak (2021) emphasise that for effective rationalisation to take place, there is a need to prepare for cultural adaptability. In support of Rajak (2021), Hakanson and Roodhooft (2019) argue that employees with higher employee cultural adaptability are more likely to support and engage in change processes. This augments the contention by Diamantidis and Chatzoglou (2019) that organisational cultures are understood uniquely by the parties involved in the rationalisation. The findings indicated that former REA employees found it a challenge to appreciate the systems, respect, and effectively interact with staff at MEMD. While at REA, communication to superiors was less bureaucratic; at the ministry, gaining access to bosses who made decisions was fraught with difficulty and, thus, frustrating since there were several layers to go through before a decision was made. REA was results-oriented, the opposite of the emphasis on processes at the ministry. This had the net effect of not working under pressure, thus fewer outputs and lower productivity.

Like any other change effort, Uganda's energy sector rationalisation registered several challenges. The challenges were rooted in the unique characteristics of the public sector, including bureaucratic structures, regulatory requirements, limited resources, and complex stakeholder dynamics (Ingusci et al., 2019). Setyanto et al (2019) state that government organisations often have well-established bureaucratic cultures that can resist change and innovation, and that this culture may emphasise adherence to rules and procedures, unlike the more flexible and results-oriented agency, which has a parastatal culture. As such, the agency staff found it a challenge to adapt to the new work processes.

Rasool, Warraich and Sajid (2021) observe that foundational technological awareness is fundamental in technological change and overall rationalisation efforts. A related study by Miladi and Ben-Dhaou (2018) observed that the ability to adapt to technological changes quickly supported organisational resilience and agility to achieve the desired outcomes of organisational rationalisation. On a positive note, the findings indicated that there were no challenges with technology adaptability, given that the REA team was relatively young and could easily adapt to technology. In addition, REA had higher-level technologies since they were communicating with the World Bank, making it easy to adapt to the technology systems at MEMD. As advised by Karim and Khan (2020), technological adaptability is crucial, and in the face of competing technologies, it is important that parties decide on what will work best. It is, however, unfortunate that rationalisation may sometimes adopt the inferior version of technology. In this case, the IT systems formerly used by REA and rated at the level of the WB could not be adopted, since MEMD was already linked to a public service-wide system. This points to the possible challenge of disrupted continuity in communicating with international funders and contractors.

Relatedly, Abdul Hamid (2022) argues that employee technology adaptability involves being open to technological advancements, continuously updating one's skills, and embracing digital tools and systems to perform work-related tasks. Employee technology adaptability

encompasses the technical skills required to use specific technologies and the mindset of being receptive to change and innovation in the digital landscape (Abdul Hamid, 2022). Technologically adaptable employees demonstrate the willingness and ability to quickly learn and adapt to new digital tools, systems, and processes introduced during rationalisation efforts and can efficiently navigate software and the reporting system, as well as utilise digital platforms for collaboration and communication, besides embracing automation and data-driven decision-making (Rasool, Warraich & Sajid, 2022). Technologically adaptable employees contribute to the successful implementation of rationalisation initiatives by effectively leveraging technology to streamline workflows, enhance productivity, and drive innovation. However, a dearth of the required resources, such as Local Area Network (LAN), as well as office email accounts for staff and pay for storage, could disrupt continuity and effective communication with contractors.

As part of the plans for rationalisation, the Change Committee developed a new structure to absorb REA staff. Bason (2018) avers that having clear guidelines and structures for rationalisation is one thing, but it is another to follow them. In most cases, these may change due to different interests, thus frustrating the goals for the change. The findings indicated that some approved guidelines and organograms to effect the rationalisation were not followed. A case in point was where the REA board had approved a retirement package – a ‘golden handshake’ – and a certificate of service in the event of reform, which ‘gestures’ were not taken to implement. This could point to the government's inability to pay higher retirement rates to former REA staff.

Notably, REA was merged into the mainstream MEMD as a department. Thus, the final structure mainly catered for technical staff/engineers, leaving out support service staff, i.e. IT, finance, and registry. The final structure and rationalisation guidelines merged, eliminated, and/or re-profiled positions, leading to job losses and regrading. Therefore, it is no wonder that the staff from REA exhibited passive resistance to the rationalisation efforts. Mwaura and Gitari (2019) revealed that, similar to other change initiatives, employees within government ministries may resist the changes brought about by rationalisation. The resistance may stem from a reluctance to let go of established work processes, uncertainties about new roles and responsibilities, or concerns about the impact of the changes. Most of the senior staff were rationalised at lower levels in the ministry. The adopted lean structure also denied MEMD the expertise of staff in finance and programmes central to developing proposals for funding. Moreover, the IT server from REA could not be installed since all former IT REA staff had been restructured out.

Harb and Sidani (2019) revealed that changes in government leadership or administrative transitions can disrupt organisational rationalisation efforts. The current study reported that leadership was changed at political and top administrative levels, thus shifting priorities, resulting in policy changes and focus, leading to uncertainty and a loss of momentum. There was an apparent need for the new leadership to build resilience and agility to navigate the transition. Addressing these challenges required a comprehensive approach that included change management strategies tailored to the public sector, proactive leadership, stakeholder engagement, investment in employee development, and an organisational culture that values adaptability and rationalisation. By overcoming these challenges, MEMD could enhance their ability to succeed in the change efforts.

On a positive note, participants reported job security and pensionable terms as advantages of working in the mainstream public service. Currently, the government pays a pension to a retired civil servant till death, unlike contract gratuity. Other benefits included loan guarantees of up to 84 months since they were on permanent terms in government, unlike on

short-term contracts. There was also a likelihood for career growth in government, unlike within the former REA structure, which hardly had any positions for growth. Moreover, some individuals were placed in higher positions due to their qualifications. However, those who did not meet the qualification standards of the public service were placed in lower positions. In some cases, the first and master's degrees were not relevant to the positions applied for, nor to the public service scheme; thus, the applicants could not be offered the higher positions. This is in line with Khan, Durrani, Afzal, Malghani, and Sajid's (2025) assertion that an enabling environment will lead to appreciation of a change effort and thus greater success in implementation.

Conclusion

Whereas the term 'rationalisation' could gain differing meanings depending on the use and context, the current study refers to a merger or mainstreaming of REA with the mother ministry, MEMD. In addition, since REA was being merged with MEMD as a department, REA staff had to take on the terms and conditions of MEMD. The underpinning questions centred on cultural adaptability, technological adaptability and lived experiences.

There were apparent challenges with cultural adaptability. The public sector predominantly operates a bureaucratic system, emphasising processes and hierarchical structures to make decisions. On the other hand, the agency operated a business model approach underscoring the results-oriented management style, with a flatter decision-making structure. Given the apparent cultural dichotomy between the agency and the mainstream public sector, it was challenging to imagine quick acceptance of the change by the former REA staff. Given the low commitment and possible retention challenges, it is also very unlikely that the government will meet the cost efficiency goal.

Rationalisation of technology and adaptability seems to have had fewer challenges. Staff from REA were technology-smart and thus did not experience challenges in adapting to the new normal. The challenge was that MEMD preferred the inferior public service-wide system over one linked with the World Bank. Reports further indicated the scarcity of technology facilities such as WIFI, computers, official emails, and payment for storage, which were privy to senior staff.

Moreover, the rationalisation or merger meant that the benefits of liberalisation, such as attracting private investment to the energy sector, were also lost, since the government was to take over funding. Liberalisation and private investment had guaranteed resources that were used to expand services and provide better terms and conditions of service to the REA staff. Relegating REA staff to lower and poorer terms led to demotivation and a decline in outputs and poor cultural adaptability. In such a situation, claims of cost-cutting as the reason for rationalisation do not hold water.

We conclude that the government should urgently review the performance of the energy sector before liberalisation, during liberalisation and post-rationalisation to adopt the good tenets of each. This will inform the government on whether to rationalise other government agencies.

The government also needs to create a belief system or positive mindset for rationalisation to succeed. This is done through adequate preparations such as coming up with an appropriate time frame, communicating change, providing training, holding workshops, and providing counselling services. In addition, the government should improve the general terms and conditions of service of the mainstream public service for the agency staff not to feel downgraded.

Limitations

This study focuses on only one former government agency that was rationalised, yet others, such as Uganda Coffee Development Authority and Uganda Road Authority, were equally mainstreamed into parent ministries. We could not cover other former agencies due to budget limitations.

Declarations

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Conflict of interest

The researchers declare that there is no conflict of interest. Though one of the researchers worked with the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development, we used independent data assistants to collect data.

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