



The Manager in COVID-19 Era

*Policy needs for sustenance of institutional structures
and human resource productivity in Uganda*

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Preamble to the Policy Brief

This Policy brief is a product of the Partnership between the Africa Leadership Institute (AFLI) and the Uganda Management Institute (UMI). In this Partnership, AFLI, UMI, Cabinet Secretariat and other partner institutions and individuals conduct the quarterly national Policy Forum under the umbrella of Uganda Policy Development Management Forum (UPDMF) to dialogue on topical matters of policy nature. Through the Parliament business tracker, a topical matter of national concern discussed in a quarter is picked and research commissioned whose findings are presented at the Policy Forum and policy proposals presented in form of a policy brief to influence the policy agenda. In the third quarter of the year 2021, a National Policy Dialogue was conducted via zoom on the September 24th 2020 under the theme “the Manager in COVID-19 era”. The topic was selected because COVID-19 continued to occupy the national debate in Parliament and in the press and many institutions were struggling to cope with the pandemic and to adjust their operations to suit the new normal. Below are extracts from Parliament that influenced the selection of the topic:

On 2nd July 2020, the Rt. Honorable Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga informed the house under the chairperson’s address that she had received another petition from the citizens under Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP), seeking for Parliament support to complete the Sexual Offenses Bill, 2019. This was because during this COVID-19 era, there was evidence of very high levels of domestic violence including sexual violence. A number of MPs raised similar concerns occasioned by COVID-19 and these MPs included: Godfrey Macho of Busia Municipality, Latiff Ssebaggala of Kawempe North, Hon. Zaitun Drawaru the Yumbe District Women Representative, Hon. Jessica Ababiku the Adjumani



The Speaker of Parliament chairs a session in Parliament on 2nd July 2020, informing the House that she had received another petition from the citizens under Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP)

Women Representative, Hon. David Bahati the Minister of State for Planning, and Hon. Vincent Waboya the Budadiri East MP. On the same day, the Ministry of Trade through Minister Michael Werikhe Kafabusa presented a statement on how the Ministry was responding to concerns of Tobacco farmers in the Pandemic.

On the 7th July 2020, Hon. Lucy Akello (FDC, Women district representative Amuru district) during matters of National concern raised the matter of increased COVID-19 infections in Elegu which needed national attention. On a similar note, MP Godfrey Macho of Busia Municipality blamed the increase of infections in Busia on distorted communication by the Ministry of Information and National guidance. Minister Bahati on the same day presented Government plans to ease life for borrowers in COVID-19 by informing the house that Government had reached a deal with banks to allow borrowers pay in installments. Meanwhile the expected statement by the ministry of health on the deplorable condition of the COVID-19 quarantine Centre in Busia was not presented with apologies from the Hon. Moses Ali the Deputy Leader of Government business in Parliament and he promised that it would be tabled the next week. On the same day, the Minister of gender, labour and Social Development Hon. Frank Tumwebaze in a statement informed the house that the ministry had delayed disbursement of the SAGE funds to the elderly because of COVID-19.

On July 8th, Hon. Ouma George (Bukooli Islands) informed the house about new COVID-19 cases in Namayingo district while Hon. Monica Amoding (Kumi Woman district representative) urged Ugandans to pray and observe the national motto "For God and my Country" to fight COVID-19. Hon. Jovia Kamateka decried the increase in domestic violence while Hon. Moses Ali defended the Government efforts in managing COVID-19.

On 9th July the Rt. Hon. Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga allowed Hon. James Waluswaka (Bunyole West) and Hon. Grace Namukhula an opportunity to make statements on findings of the committee on COVID-19 on various interventions during COVID-19. Hon. Grace Namukhula informed the house that they had travelled in the country side and the pandemic had affected the health sector as well as schools that were in sorry state. Hon. Waluswaka informed the house that whereas parliament had done its part by appropriating money to the Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI), the ministry of finance had not disbursed funds to an institution which is so central in the fight against COVID-19. MP Waluswaka's statement attracted response from the responsible ministry represented by Hon. Bahati.

A brief of the above proceedings as extracted from the Hansard and the subject COVID-19 dominated the quarter with discussions from various aspects of COVID-19. These influenced the selection of the topic and hence this policy brief presents recommendations that can guide Government and individual institutions in making them adapt to conditions of COVID-19.

Introduction

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic as declared by WHO on March 11, 2020 has overturned conventional practice across professions and careers as humanity grapples with the Standard Operation Procedures to prevent spread of the virus across the globe. COVID-19 is a highly virulent member of the wider family of corona viruses that cause illnesses ranging from the common cold, blood clots and infection of the lungs leading to failure of breath and death. Other corona viruses include MERS-CoV and SARS (Cov). The challenge for managers

of organizations is on how to sustain productivity of institutions without losing life of workers. The WHO guidelines for prevention of the viruses sharply contradict with conventional human behavior at the workplace and require revision of policy framework guiding human resource management and cohesion of institutional structures. Organizational change has hitherto called for institutional adjustments far below the rigor occasioned by the SOPs for prevention of COVID-19 as prescribed by WHO. Personnel are expected to keep a minimum of one meter from each other, wear face masks, work online as opposed to face to face interaction, wash hands regularly and keep indoors in intermittent lockdowns. This was meant to avert spreading of the virus which was documented to be spreading through close contact between people, droplets from exhaled breath, human and surface touch and interaction with infected fluid. Although most infected people have mild symptoms and recover, many experience more serious illness, need hospital care and die. The death rate in Uganda has been registered at 2.7% which is within global mortality. Uganda has been lucky not to register high infections so far but this remains possible if the population does not acculturate to accommodate the SOPs in their day to day life. The fear of COVID-19 is largely because of its capacity to overwhelm the healthcare system, leading to massive deaths. The equipment required for treatment of COVID-19 patients is in short supply across the country and the implication is that most patients infected with the virus may die not due to the virility of the virus but for lack of equipment and oxygen to treat them. The vulnerable population was initially people aged 50 years and above but this has been adjusted to include young people and children, further raising the threat to the highly productive age-group.



The COVID-19 era organisations: personnel working online via zoom as opposed to face to face interaction to avert spreading of the virus which was documented to be spreading through close contact between people



Vaccinating the vulnerable population that was initially people aged 50 years and above but this has been adjusted to include young people

Rationale

COVID-19 is virulent, with potential to wipe out whole communities if not prevented from spreading and the WHO guidelines for prevention contradict the conventional practice, calling for a technical review of workplace and human resource management policy to be followed by practitioners to align institutional management to the “new normal”. There has been minimal policy response to the human resource management challenges across the globe. In Uganda, National level response to the COVID-19 threat has been largely contingent, aimed at temporary measures with the hope that this pandemic will fizzle out in a short while like the previous corona viruses. However, COVID-19 has proved consistent and threatens to be persistent, making it necessary for profiling and review of the current policy framework to sustainably secure institutions and personnel required to keep them productive.

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Methodology

This policy investigation presentation focused on the manager in the COVID-19, but digs deeper to address institutional structure and Human Resource issues emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Information that aided the research was obtained by; document review of information related to the subject of presentation, documented personal experiences shared by personnel and managers across the globe, informal conversations shared with other practitioners, and participant observation at institutions and Government behavior in Uganda.

These methods were most appropriate considering the minimal social research conducted on COVID-19 so far. The absence of adequate literature on the subject and the urgent need to address this topic required triangulation of document review with conversations and observations across the Institutions and Human Resource Management spectrum.

Findings

Threat:

Clinicians and WHO report that the incubation period of COVID-19 is between 2 and 14 days, making it a fast spreading illness. This coupled with the doubts on whether it is airborne and moves along surfaces touched by humans imply high vulnerability to infection. The common symptoms including high temperature, continuous cough, loss of sense of smell impact highly on the productivity of personnel and call for highly effective prevention measures which inevitably affect productivity of the personnel. The virility of the virus is not in question considering that it has spread to all the continents in over 216 countries and territories in space of less than one year. As of 22nd September 2020, the World Health Organization had reported 31,132,906 confirmed cases of COVID-19 globally with 962,008 deaths. In Uganda, the Ministry of Health had reported 6,468 confirmed cases, 2,731 cumulative recoveries and 63 deaths as of 22nd September 2020. The statistics have since risen to millions...



The Minister of Health Hon. Jane Ruth Aceng receives a donation of vaccines from the American Government, handed over by the U.S. Ambassador to Uganda Natalie E. Brown to help control rising cases of COVID-19.



Security forces enforcing the lockdown in the COVID-19 pandemic causing disruptions of the work places

Impact:

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis, but has also caused massive human, economic and social impacts. The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak and subsequent announcements of containment measures including lockdowns by Governments has occasioned an economic crisis and organizations in all areas of service are struggling to achieve their mandates. Institutions have had to adjust to new forms of delivery to which most are not accustomed including virtual working, delayed achievement of planned outputs and targets, adjustment of budgets to cater for the heightened focus on occupation health and safety at work places, decline in implementation of learning and development interventions; Shift in communication and feedback mechanisms and additional cost to acquire relevant ICT infrastructure to support business continuity. There has been a drastic increase in use of emails, and tools like Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts and even WhatsApp tool to conduct meetings and communicate assignments to employees.

Organizations have had to grapple with legal challenges of keeping personnel at work which inadvertently exposes them to infection, impromptu procurement of equipment like computers for staff to work in virtual space, reduction of the workforce to 30% as prescribed by SOPs, difficult movement of produced goods, limited training opportunities for staff due to flight restrictions among others.

The costs of occupational health and safety in organization has increased, occasioned by employers' need to be proactive in managing the risk of infection to staff and ensuring business continuity. The need to buy Personal Protective Equipment's - PPEs (Face masks, temperature measurement guns, sanitizers, increased hand washing facilities, and disinfecting prem-

ises) has come at a high cost to organizations because they had not been planned for and the processes for their acquisition had legal implications.

There has therefore been massive disruption at the work place in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic, a result of which most organizations could not realize their planned outputs and targets.

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) indicate that learning and development in organizations has been de-prioritized by employers and business stakeholders since the pandemic, dropping from 42% before the crisis to 24% during the crisis. The lock-down implied closure of training institutions, ban on foreign travels, and big gatherings led to organizations in Uganda calling off many planned capacity building interventions for their staff.

Organizations have had to adjust their equipment especially in the IT departments to working remotely from home by staff requires additional ICT infrastructure if business continuity processes are to be realized. This meant acquisition of new ICT infrastructure including; virtual servers, mobile devices like laptops, tablets or smart phones, airtime in terms of voice and data, access to cloud-based and web-based software and some competence in the users. This has led to incurring costs that were unplanned for.

Recommendations

This research indicated a need for policy adjustment to cater for sustainable productivity and personnel growth in capacity to work and produce as desired by the market and beneficiaries of their services.

Flexible working:

For a long time, working from home/ flexible working was an option for a relatively limited number of workers, often those in high status, high paying roles. Many others are not afforded the option to work at home yet this highly reduces the incidence rate of illness in case of COVID-19. Although this has been realized with the pandemic SOPs, it needs to be documented and organizations need to be guided to draft procedures for staff to work from outside designated office space without disrupting projected output.

Adaption of digital technologies to support working from home

There should be policy adjustments to enable governments to facilitate organizations to shift to use of digital technologies including virtual servers, mobile devices like laptops, tablets or smart phones, airtime in terms of voice and data, access to cloud-based and web-based software, chat and conferencing through subsidies and deliberate training of potential users.

Efforts to digitize HR business processes, systems and practices have been ongoing but moving at a slow pace and highly optional for employers. The “New Normal” of remote working has occasioned the need for organizations to speed up on the effort to catch up with the digital gap and indicated the need for the state to legalize digital workspaces wherever they are needed.



Adaption of digital technologies to enable remote working under the "New Normal" in the COVID-19 era

Innovation and collaboration:

Government needs to move fast to enforce collaboration and integration of functions across MDAs to pull resources and personnel together and ease business operation among related institutions. There should be a policy enabled paradigm shift in management of institutions and personnel encouraging mergers and horizontal management of entities. Currently, mergers are minimally addressed in policy framework and enforcement is still informed by individual opinion of bureaucrats rather than a policy obligation.

Review of work place policies:

The new ways of working in organizations will require legislative review of policies, guidelines and procedures to redesign national legal regimes and protocols that will efficiently optimize physical structures and human resource available for production of materials and services for human wellbeing and psychosocial support.

Alignment with the workers compensation Insurance:

Government of Uganda should revisit the policy for Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) to guarantee employee coverage by instituting appropriate safety guidelines for employees to include insurance for COVID-19 and other vicious illnesses and accidents. Engaging the insurance providers about these arrangements may be advisable to avoid jeopardizing the workers compensation insurance policy.

Risk management and business continuity subsidies:

COVID-19 Pandemic calls for Government and the business community to have robust Risk Management and Business Continuity plans and frameworks. Considering the high collapse of business during COVID-19 outbreak it is crucial that legislation is made to support Government to facilitate business community to manage their human resource to fund document and implement risk management approaches and implement business continuity plans. By considering these courses of action, Government will be helping managers to reinforce their value to the organizations and to lay the groundwork for continuity of work despite COVID-19 and other highly debilitating illnesses that may emerge in future.

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