



EFFECT OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT SOFT SKILLS ON THE PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS. A CASE OF VISION 2020 UMURENGE PROGRAM (VUP) IN RULINDO DISTRICT, RWANDA (2015-2020)

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to assess the effect of Project management soft skills on project effectiveness. To assess the validity of study objectives and provide an answer to the questions stated in the study both primary and secondary data were used. Secondary data were collected using documentary search and primary data were collected from 340 beneficiaries of VUP in Rulindo District, 66 Socio-Economic Development Officers at cell level, and 18 VUP managers at sector and District level. Collection of data was made using documentation, interview guide and using a questionnaire. Data analysis was made in form of descriptive statistics and inferential statistics with support of SPSS version 20. The findings are the following: Reference to the 1st objective of the study, study finds that VUP managers are considering beneficiaries' needs from planning stage (4.26 mean). They are not communicating well or on time the program activities to stakeholders (2.67 mean), and they collaborate with the stakeholders to set priorities of the program (3.90 mean). On the 2nd objective, findings confirm that VUP management effectively receive and respond to beneficiaries' concerns (4.07 mean), they also organize meetings for solving people's problems (4.38 mean) and they ensure regular risk assessment (3.74 mean). 3rd objective assessment led to the results confirming that, VUP management

shares the program vision to the stakeholders (3.59 mean), they ensure good decisions on the program activities (4.37), and they ensure transfer of unsolved problems to other authorities (4.23). This is the outcome of leadership skills of VUP management authorities. In the 4th of last objective assessment, the findings confirm that, VUP managers ensure data analysis before taking decision (4.52 mean), they ensure stakeholder engagement in decision making (3.96) and they are effectively managing program risks (3.75%). All the VUP management or staff are effectively using soft category of skills of communication of the information, problem resolution, leadership and skills for proper decision-making to make VUP more effective vis a vis poverty reduction of the Rwandans or beneficiaries in Rulindo District. Based on the study findings, VUP managers and beneficiaries are recommended the followings: Managers are recommended to way of communication, by ensuring timely reports to beneficiaries and all other VUP stakeholders (this the area found with less effort), beneficiaries also could ensure improved use of VUP benefits for poverty reduction mainly by use of VUP income to increase investments and savings. In other case, VUP managers could organize training to keep their performance in soft skills use toward VUP effectiveness in changing people's wellbeing.

Key Words: *Effect; Project management soft skills; effectiveness of the program; VUP*

1. Introduction

Today, Project management soft skills play a very important role in their effectiveness. Skills related to project management are essential for team improved performance within the project implementation process and quality ensured as well as time managed [5]. The findings of the research conducted by a lecturer in Michigan University (Prof. Achyuta) [29] analyzing the implication of acquired soft skills and its significance on Project Effectiveness indicated that a single training on soft skills can make 256% Return on Investments because of increase of production. In other case, reference to the Program Management University of Boston (Boston University), “Successful Program implementors are always required to have special skills which could help them to achieve their activities with maximum productivity and quality [32].”

2. Statement of the Problem

VUP is one among home grown solution create by government to ensure that poverty is alleviated mainly in rural areas and ensure social protection. VUP is financed by Rwandan Government and NGOs as well as other financial agencies [9]. It is led by the Ministry of Local Government, Good Governance, Community Development and Social Affairs (MINALOC) and supported by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning [12]. Despite its objective and target, still 38.2% of Rwandans are under poverty line [17].

VUP has faced challenges of poor selection of beneficiaries where local administration’s failure to choose proper beneficiaries, corruption for being selected, poor use of VUP funds, beneficiaries who are using VUP income for non-developing spending and poor coordination [27]. There is no available data about the significance of management of soft skills towards effectiveness of VUP in Rwanda. Various studies (here below) have been conducted for other contents scope [30]. For instance, [14] conducted a study aimed to identify and test the influence of soft skills of program managers on success of a program in Rwanda. The study results revealed that organizations need to give attention to the soft skills of a program managers or staff (implementors) [14].

Nevertheless, there is also no study conducted on the effect of Project management soft skills on the project effectiveness. Moreover, no specific study was conducted in Rulindo district to assess the effectiveness of VUP as outcome of management soft skills [31]. The challenges which Vision 2020 Umurenge program faced in Rulindo district during its implementation have been identified on every components namely Public Works (programs aimed at creating off-farm employment infrastructure, through paid activities), Direct Support (unconditional cash transfer to poor household heads with no members qualifying for Public Works) and Financial Services component (which focuses on increasing access to financial services for the poor through credits) in the annual report by the district [22]. The purpose of this study was to cover this gap and provide information on the effect of management soft skills toward VUP effectiveness [2].

3. Empirical Review

Reference to the study conducted by [13] the term soft skills is traditionally used to describe interpersonal and subjective skills such as leadership, communication, and emotional intelligence. The study addresses a further explanation of soft skills, their relation to Program management, Program management education, and the highlighted differences between a transactional leader and a transformational leader [11]. Program management has often been defined as the making of schedules/tasks; but more importantly providing the inspiration, motivation, and facilitator of great minds to produce innovative ideas [15]. Because of the sheer necessity for human interaction within the Program management profession, soft skills are of crucial concern [8]. Although mastering soft skills is a heavily weighted aspect of the profession, the current education of program managers is lacking the proper emphasis on soft skills [24]. A further case study was analyzed comparing three program managers and their skill sets based on objective and subjective evaluations of their hard and soft skills. Hypothesizing that the soft skills of the program managers was rated significantly higher than the objective evaluations of their hard skills. Proving that the currently education of only hard skills is not sufficient for successful program managers [13].

The study conducted by [3] on Soft Skills for IT project effectiveness: A Systematic Literature Review, the inspiration was taken from the fact that, IT programs continue to fail at a high rate, and this represents losses in both money and opportunity organizations. This leads her to continue studying success factors in programs. The aim of her study is present a systematic literature review focused on soft skills for the IT project effectiveness. The literature search was conducted using the electronic databases and the primary articles from 2010 to 2017 [15]. The results show that a high number of studies are theoretical, conceptual, or based on experience and there are no models that explain the causal relationship between soft skills and project effectiveness [6]. All studies agree about the relevance of the program manager soft skills for programs effectiveness. The results show that the most influence soft skills for programs effectiveness are communication, leadership, and conflict resolution skills [3].

4. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Assessment of literature shows that Project management soft skills are positively impacting project effectiveness, as it is increasing indicators measures for the program. However, the assessed studies have a common space gap. Researchers has ensured focus to multiple programs and mainly business programs [20]. This study intends to fill this gap by assessing the importance of Project management soft skills in the context of project effectiveness rates on a single program which is VUP in Rulindo district, Rulindo District 2015-2020 [25]. Study population also include local administration staff members in charge of socio-economic development in Rulindo Districts' cells and VUP beneficiaries distributed in Rulindo sectors. And more specifically this study is intending to fill a gap of contents where it focusses not on business programs but on a public interest program (because VUP is

not for making profit, but form making socio-economic development of poor families these in 1st and 2nd Ubudehe social categories) [21].

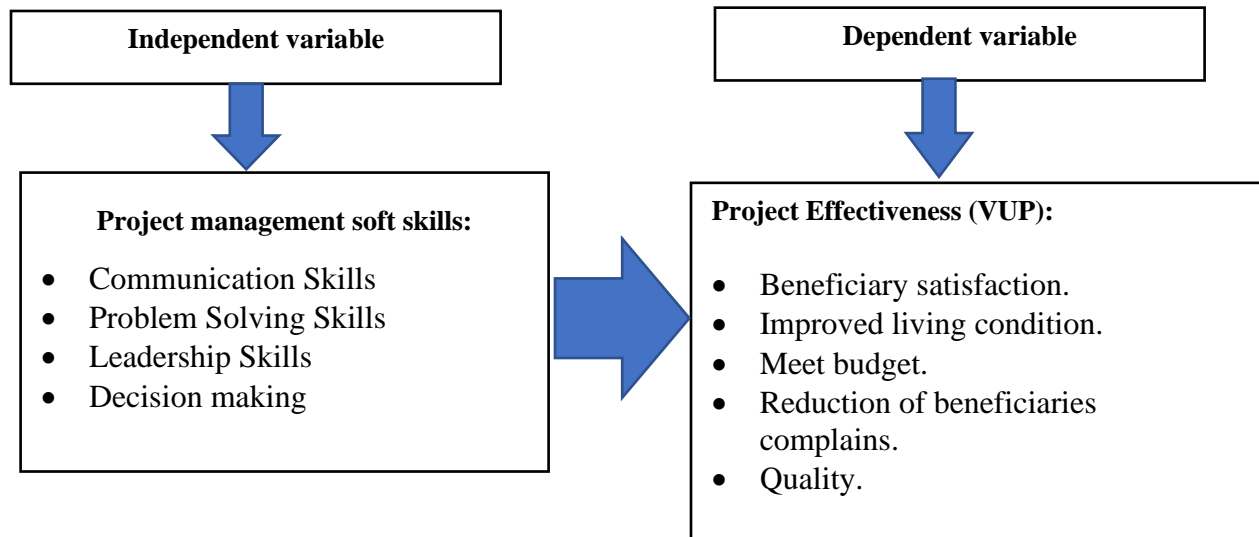


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

5. Methodology

To assess the validity of study objectives and provide answer to the questions stated in the study and has used both primary and secondary data [7]. Secondary data were collected using documentary search and primary data were collected from 340 beneficiaries of VUP in Rulindo District, 66 Socio-Economic Development Officers at cell level, and 18 VUP managers at sector and District level. Collection of data was made using documentation, interview guide and using a questionnaire. Data analysis was made in form of descriptive statistics and inferential statistics with support of SPSS version 20 [28].

Table 1: Sample size and sample selection methods used.

Category	Total number	Sample size	Sample selection technique
Beneficiaries of VUP	2,900	340	Simple random +stratified
SEDOs	66	66	Census
VUP Staff at sector level	18	17	Purposive
VUP Staff at District Level	1	1	Census
Total	2,985	424	N/A

Source: Rulindo District, June 2020

The researcher has used Krejcie, R. V., & Morgan, D.W, [19] and sample size is 340 VUP beneficiaries, 66 Cells Socio-Economic Development Officers (SEDOs). This also added to 17 staffs heading VUP at sectors and 1 staff heading VUP at district level. The total sample is 424 respondents.

6. Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study was to assess the effect of Project management soft skills on the project effectiveness.

The specific objectives of this study are in four folds:

- 1) To assess the effect of communication skills used in program management on VUP effectiveness in Rulindo district.
- 2) To examine how problem-solving skills in program management affect effectiveness of VUP in Rulindo district.
- 3) To determine how leadership skills and use of customer feedback affect VUP effectiveness in Rulindo district; and

7. Findings

This section gives summary of findings as descriptive statistics and inferential statistics:

7.1 Socio-demographic profile of respondents

Respondents were defined based on their ages, sex, age, marital status, education level, benefit category, and experience as beneficiary in the VUP service category [4]. All these characteristics are necessary for assessing and evaluating the effect of Project management soft skills on the project effectiveness. This is because, from one person to another perception, observation, experience, and performance is different [19].

Table 2: General Background of respondents

Characteristics of Respondents	Frequency	Percent
Ages		
Between 21-29	25	7.4
Between 30- 39	50	14.7
Between 40- 49	101	29.7
Between 50- 59	126	37.1
Above 60	38	11.2
Total	340	100.0
Sex		
Male	151	44.4
Female	189	55.6
Total	340	100.0
Marital Status		
Single	51	15.0
Married	202	59.4
Widowed	87	25.6
Total	340	100.0
Level of Education		
Secondary	76	22.4
Bachelor's degree	25	7.4

Characteristics of Respondents	Frequency	Percent
Primary	151	44.4
Non formal	37	10.9
VTC	51	15.0
Total	340	100.0
VUP Beneficiary Categories		
Direct Support	26	7.6
Public Works	138	40.6
Financial Services	176	51.8
Total	340	100.0
Experience using VUP Service category (as beneficiary)		
Less than or 1 Year	50	14.7
Between 2- 4	215	63.2
Between 5- 7	75	22.1
Total	340	100.0

Source: Primary data, 2021

As seen from the table 2, from 340 assessed people beneficiaries of VUP in Rulindo District 37.1% are aged between 50-59 years, 29.7% are aged 40-49 years, 14.7% aged between 30-39 years, 11.2% aged 60 years and above and 7.4% are aged between 21-29 years [16]. By sex 55.6% were females and 44.4% were males. By marital status 59.4% were married, 25.6% widowed and 15% single. By level of education, 44.4% attended or completed primary education, 22.4% were attended or completed secondary education, 15% attended or completed VTC, 10.9% were not attended any formal education, and 7.4% were attended or completed bachelor's degree. By VUP beneficiary's category, 51.8% are benefiting from VUP financial services, 40.6% are benefiting from VUP public works and 7.6% are benefiting from VUP direct support opportunity [26].

7.2 Effective use of Project management soft skills by VUP implementors in Rulindo district.

In this section, the researcher has examined the extent to which VUP management or staffs has ensured effective use of communication skills, problem solving skills, leadership and use of customer feedback skills, and decision-making skills for leading VUP to achieve beneficiary's satisfaction, improved living conditions, effective use of budget, reduction of complaints, and to achieve or improve program quality. The assessment was made by capturing perception of respondent per each item assessed [10].

Table 3: Effective use of Project management soft skills by VUP implementors in Rulindo district

Communication skills use and practices	N	Min	Max	Mean	Stdv.	Comments
VUP Management or staffs clearly understand the needs of beneficiaries during programs planning and implementation.	340	2	5	4.26	1.075	Strong Heterogeneity
VUP a management or staffs communicate timely the plan and activities to all stakeholders.	340	1	4	2.67	0.714	Moderate Heterogeneity
VUP management and staffs knows well and work under the objective of the program with by setting priorities and collaboration with all stakeholders.	340	2	5	3.9	0.873	Strong Heterogeneity
Problem solving skills use and practices	N	Min	Max	Mean	Stdv.	Comments

VUP Management or staffs encourage beneficiaries to bring their concerns and ensure that each concern received is responded.	340	2	5	4.07	0.77	Strong Heterogeneity
VUP management or staffs received and solve the public possible problems during the regular meetings.	340	2	5	4.38	0.944	Strong Heterogeneity
VUP management or staffs have clear process for risks assessment and mitigation.	340	2	5	3.74	1	Strong Heterogeneity
Leadership skills use and practices	N	Min	Max	Mean	Stdv.	Comments
Management of VUP or staffs share its vision and mission with all stakeholders in systematic way.	340	2	5	3.59	0.999	Strong Heterogeneity
VUP management or staffs are competent in their works, and they are taking good decision (that meeting the needs of majority).	340	4	5	4.37	0.484	Strong Homogeneity
VUP Management or staffs solve all problems of beneficiaries, ensure timely reports and where necessary, transfer unsolved problems.	340	2	5	4.23	0.912	Strong Heterogeneity
Decision Making skills use and practices	N	Min	Max	Mean	Stdv.	Comments
VUP management learn from the experience and analyses available information before taking a decision.	340	4	5	4.52	0.5	Strong Heterogeneity
VUP Management ensure that, also team has participated in decision making (team of stakeholders or beneficiaries).	340	3	5	3.96	0.637	Strong Heterogeneity
VUP Managers or staff's manager risks effectively.	340	2	5	3.75	0.967	Strong Heterogeneity

Source: Primary data, April 2021

Legend: SA: Strongly Agree (code 5); A: Agree (code 4); NS: Not Sure (code 5); D: Disagree (code 2); SD: Strongly Disagree (code 1); fi: Frequency; %: Percentage; Stdv.: Standard Deviation. Mean ranged 1.00-2.49: Weak mean; 2.50-3.49: Moderate; 3.50-5.00: Strong. Standard deviation categories <0.5: Homogeneity and 0.5 and more: Heterogeneity standard deviation.

The general assessment has shown good performance (strong mean) but not excellent (heterogeneity standard deviation) of VUP management for communication skills use, problem solving skills, beneficiaries feedback use, leadership skills, and decision making for making VUP beneficiary satisfied, living conditions improved, VUP budget used efficiently, complaints reduced and quality improved [23]. Interviews with various key informants regarding the effect of decision-making skills on programme performance, one of the interviewees said that decision making process in VUP activities implementation and budget management is continuous and indispensable component. Decisions are made to sustain the activities of VUP to the beneficiaries. The respondents confirmed that, VUP staffs are good decision taker mainly while selecting beneficiaries and while managing them through various VUP function categories (direct support, public works, and financial services).

7.3 Effectiveness of VUP implementation in Rulindo District

In this section, the researcher has evaluated the extents to which VUP is effectively implemented and productive to the beneficiaries. This was made by evaluating the level of beneficiary's satisfaction, living conditions improvement for the beneficiaries, budget effective use, reduction of beneficiary complaints and the overall quality of VUP. The rates category was used where one may confirm strongly agree (5), agree (4), not sure (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). The project effectiveness is evaluated based on how program is significant

or made changes to living conditions of beneficiaries and how it was qualitatively implemented, vis a vis its basic mission and goals.

Table 4: Effectiveness of VUP implementation in Rulindo District

Satisfaction level of VUP beneficiaries	N	Min	Max	Mean	Stdv.	Comments
VUP beneficiary (the respondent) have get 100% of what they expect from VUP.	340	3	5	4.63	0.727	Strong Heterogeneity
VUP has facilitate vulnerable and poor people to get opinion.	340	2	5	3.88	0.997	Moderate Heterogeneity
VUP objectives, mission and vision were meet counted from the beneficiary (reference to the respondent proving cases).	340	2	5	3.93	1.019	Strong Heterogeneity
Living conditions improvement of VUP beneficiaries	N	Min	Max	Mean	Stdv.	Comments
With VUP benefits, the beneficiary (respondent) has capacity of feeding the household at least two times per day, pay health insurance and facilitate children's education.	340	2	5	3.75	1.076	Strong Heterogeneity
With VUP benefits, the beneficiary (respondent) has access to improved sanitation and shelter.	340	2	5	4	1.159	Strong Heterogeneity
With VUP benefits, the beneficiary (respondent) has access to income and savings were increased.	340	2	5	3.74	1.113	Strong Heterogeneity
Effective use of VUP Budget	N	Min	Max	Mean	Stdv.	Comments
Since 2015 to Now (April 2021) VUP has not reported any fraud of budget or misuse.	340	2	5	3.78	0.919	Strong Heterogeneity
VUP management ensure budget plan with consultation to the public and there is no corruption.	340	2	5	4.33	0.946	Strong Heterogeneity
Each year since 2015, VUP use the budget for all planned activities and close with the plan.	340	2	5	4.04	0.79	Strong Heterogeneity
Reduced Complaints of VUP beneficiaries	N	Min	Max	Mean	Stdv.	Comments
Each complaint raised by the beneficiary to VUP management is recorded, processed, handled, and filed.	340	2	5	3.56	0.918	Strong Heterogeneity
No complaints raised by the beneficiary in last 6 years which goes beyond the capacity of VUP management (all were solved).	340	2	5	3.92	1.023	Strong Heterogeneity
VUP Management use consultation meetings and public participation for solving beneficiary's complaints.	340	2	5	3.97	1.139	Strong Heterogeneity

Source: Primary data, April 2021

Overall study findings show that, use of Project management soft skills made by the VUP management in Rulindo district has share of contribution rated at 17.9% to the effectiveness of VUP vis a vis changes it brought to the living conditions of beneficiaries and its performance in achieving national priorities or targets. This is confirm the existing literature [1], as identified listening, communication, conceptual skills, conflict management, human resource management, team management, human skills, leadership skills, motivation skills, negotiation skills, people skills, political and cultural awareness, professionalism, and ethics. These skills are critical towards program success; however, it is also identified that soft skills and hard skills, both work in

conjunction with each other to attain success. And concluded that, for making program success, Project management soft skills could play a greater role and could be taken as one among tools to be used.

7.4 Test of correlations and significance

Test of correlation was made using Bivariate correlation analysis. Results of bivariate correlation analysis are measured by two parameters such as Pearson correlation (r) and P-value (Sig. (2-tailed)). The researcher has used mean all items assessed as indicators for independent variable with a comparison to the mean of data obtained from indicators assessed for dependent variable. The following table gives test outputs achieved using SPSS:

Table 51: Test of correlation significance between Project management soft skills and project effectiveness (case of VUP).

		Project management soft skills	Project Effectiveness (VUP)
Project management soft skills	Pearson Correlation	1	.179**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	340	340
Project Effectiveness (VUP)	Pearson Correlation	.179**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	340	340

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: *Primary data, April 2021*

As seen from the table 5, the analysis shows a Pearson correlation (r) value which is equal to 0.179 and p-value or Sig. (2-tailed) which is equal to 0.001. With reference to the table 3.4 (in chapter three), the value of obtained for correlation is ranged between $0 < 0.179 < 0.5$ which signify a positive weak correlation between tested variables (Project management soft skills and project effectiveness (VUP)), and this correlation is statistically significant as the p-value is less than 0.05 (level of significant 5%). This confirm that, there is positive weak correlation between Project management soft skills and project effectiveness (VUP) and this correlation is statistically significant where for improving or increasing effectiveness of programs there is a need to develop and make much more emphasize on Project management soft skills. In other words, Project management soft skills contribute 17.9% to the effectiveness of program a case of VUP in Rwanda.

8. Conclusion

The study assessment was based on the effect of Project management soft skills (communication skills, problem solving skills, use of beneficiary feedback skills, leadership skills, and decision-making skills) on project effectiveness (VUP) (measured from beneficiary satisfaction, improved living conditions, effective use of budget, reduced complaints of beneficiaries, and program quality). The findings show strong mean for all except one item assessed with heterogeneity standard deviation which confirm that VUP management are effectively applying Project management soft skills however their level need some improvements and the entire program (VUP) is well performing but also not attended its goal 100%. All in all, learning from VUP beneficiaries and staffs in Rulindo District, Project management soft skills use affect effectiveness of the program at 17.9% level. Other factors are beyond this study scope.

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