

## Assessing the Effect of Staff Skills on Performance of Public Sector Donor-Funded Projects in the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS) in Lusaka District

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### Abstract

This study examined the influence of staff skills on the performance of donor-funded projects within the Zambian public sector, with specific reference to the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS) in Lusaka. Guided by Human Capital Theory, the Resource-Based View, and Project Cycle Management Theory, the specific objectives were to: analyze the relationship between staff skills and donor-funded project performance, examine the level of project planning and implementation skills among project performance, examine the level of project planning and implementation skills among project staff, and establish challenges hindering skill development and project performance at MCDSS. A mixed-methods research design was adopted. The target population comprised staff involved in donor-funded projects at MCDSS, selected using random and purposive sampling. Quantitative data were collected through 123 structured questionnaires, and qualitative data was collected through 15 interviews, all of which were returned, representing a 100 % response rate, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with key personnel. Findings for the first objective revealed a strong positive relationship between staff skills and project performance, particularly regarding timelines, achievement of objectives, output quality, and accountability. Findings for the second objective showed that although staff possessed moderate to high competencies in project planning and implementation, gaps existed in advanced monitoring, reporting, and risk management skills. The third objective noted limited access to specialized training, weak institutional learning systems, and high workloads as major constraints to skill development and project performance. The study concludes that staff skills significantly determine the success, accountability, and sustainability of donor-funded projects in Zambia's public sector context. The study recommends sustained investment in targeted training, strengthened monitoring and evaluation systems, enhanced stakeholder engagement frameworks, and institutionalization of knowledge management practices. These measures are essential for improving donor-funded project performance, ensuring accountability, and promoting long-term development outcomes in Zambia.

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, donor-funded initiatives have emerged as central mechanisms for advancing socioeconomic development, particularly in regions where domestic resources remain inadequate to address pressing social and economic challenge. Globally, donors continue to channel substantial financial and technical support toward critical sectors such as poverty reduction, healthcare, education, water and sanitation, infrastructure, and social protection (Nzioka, 2023). These interventions have provided an important safety net for vulnerable populations while simultaneously strengthening national development strategies. Yet, despite the scale of investment, the success and sustainability of such interventions often hinge less on financial inputs and more on the human capacity available to implement them effectively. The competencies, attitudes, and professional skills of staff tasked with managing these projects have increasingly been recognized as a decisive factor influencing their overall performance.

At the heart of this discourse are three interrelated themes that shape the outcomes of donor-financed projects. The first concerns staff capacity, encouraging technical expertise, managerial competence, and proficiency in monitoring and evaluation (M & E) practices. The second relates to project performance, which is typically measured through indicators such as efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, and developmental impact. The third involves the public sector context, which is influenced by bureaucratic structures, national policy frameworks, and the expectations of donor partners. These dimensions intersect in complex ways to determine whether projects succeed or fall short of their objectives. This significance resonates strongly in sub-Saharan Africa, where, despite billions of dollars in donor assistance, project failure rates remain troublingly high (Zulu et al., (2025). As a result, debates on aid effectiveness increasingly highlight the need to strengthen the human resource foundations of project implementation alongside financial and technical support.

From a socio-economic perspective, successful donor-funded projects can reduce poverty, enhance social protection, and empower marginalized communities. In Zambia, the Ministry of Community Development (MCD) is pivotal in implementing donor-supported initiatives in areas such as social protection, livelihood empowerment, and health-related community interventions. However, persistent challenges including inadequate staffing, limiting technical capacity, and weak monitoring structures have undermined the effectiveness of the interventions (Nyirongo, 2024; Luhanga, 2021).

This makes the current study significant both globally, in advancing debates on capacity building in aid management, and locally, in highlighting the role of staff skills in ensuring development outcomes for communities in Lusaka. Recent evidence shows that over 1.3 million households are being supported through the Social Cash Transfer (SCT) programme (Parliament of Zambia, 2022). Government allocations to SCT have also risen sharply. For example, the Social Cash Transfer programme was allocated about k5.2 billion under the 2024 revised budget to cater to top-ups and an expanding beneficiary base.

Furthermore, the importance of staff skills is magnified by the complexity of donor-funded projects. These projects often require compliance with both local regulations and donor-specific reporting frameworks, as well as technical proficiency in planning, procurement, data, management, and evaluation. The absence of adequately skilled personnel can lead to inefficiencies, duplication of efforts, and poor alignment with community needs. Recent global assessments of donor aid effectiveness indicate that even when resources are sufficient, capacity weaknesses at the human resource level can reduce impact by as much as 30% (World Bank, 2022). This highlights the relevance of focusing on staff as a determinant of project outcomes.

In addition, the introduction of new technologies and data-driven approaches to project monitoring has further raised the bar for staff competencies. Donor agencies increasingly demand evidence-based reporting, digital financial management, and participatory approaches that require strong analytical and communication skills. In Zambia's public sector, particularly in Lusaka where most donor projects are coordinated, the mismatch between required skills and available capacities has created systemic inefficiencies. As such, this study not only addresses a local challenge but also contributes to a wider global dialogue on strengthening institutional capacities in aid-dependent economies.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite substantial donor support, the performance of public sector projects in Zambia remains below expectations. The Ministry of Community Development, which oversees critical donor-supported programs such as social cash transfers, empowerment funds, and community welfare assistance, continues to face implementation challenges. Evidence suggests that up to 40% of donor-funded projects in the Zambian Ministry of Community Development fail to achieve their intended objectives or experience significant delays (Zulu et al, 2025). One of the key drivers of this problem is the inadequacy of staff skills ranging from weak project planning and financial management to limited M & E capacity (Nyirongo, 2024). Ideally, donor-funded projects should be managed by staff equipped with technical expertise, problem-solving abilities, and modern project management tools. This would ensure timely implementation, efficient resource utilization, and sustainable outcomes. However, in practice, project staff in Zambia often lack formal training in project cycle management, data analysis, and community engagement (Mwape, 2025). The results are poor service delivery, limited accountability, and wasted resources.

Recent studies highlight this skills gap. Luhanga (2021) found that donor-supported social projects in Lusaka lacked sustainability due to inadequate staff capacity. Nyirongo (2024) observed that weak fund management skills in local governments undermine equity and efficiency in service delivery. Zulu et al (2025) further established that delays in donor-funded agricultural projects were significantly associated with insufficient staff competencies. However, none of these studies specifically analyzed the Ministry of Community Development in Lusaka, nor did they comprehensively examine the direct effect of staff skills on donor project performance. The challenge is compounded by the expanding scale of donor-funded initiatives. For example, the Social Cash Transfer program has grown to cover more than a million households, yet staffing levels and training opportunities have not increased proportionately. This mismatch has stretched existing personnel, creating capacity bottlenecks that affect planning, monitoring, and service delivery. Without targeted skill development, the performance gap is likely to widen as program complexity increases (World Bank, 2020).

Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that donor confidence may already be under strain. Delayed project reports, mismanagement of funds, and weak monitoring systems have sometimes triggered donor concerns, resulting in funding suspensions or conditionalities. If this phenomenon is left unattended, donor confidence in Zambia's public sector could decline, jeopardizing future funding. More importantly, vulnerable communities may continue to face poverty, inequality, and poor social services due to ineffective project delivery. This study therefore, seeks to fill this gap by systematically assessing the effect of staff skills on the performance of donor-funded projects within the Ministry of Community Development in Lusaka.

## 1.3 Objectives

- To analyze the relationship between staff skills and the performance of donor-funded projects in the ministry of community development in Lusaka.
- To examine the level of skills in project planning and implementation possessed by staff who are managing donor-funded projects in the Ministry of Community Development.

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## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Relationship Between Staff Skills and the Performance of Donor-Funded Projects

Worldwide, research consistently demonstrates that staff skills are critical determinants of donor-funded project performance. The World Bank (2022) emphasizes that technical and managerial capacities directly influence the efficiency and sustainability of funded interventions, especially in social protection and health programs. Studies in Latin America and Southeast Asia reveal that donor-funded projects with well-trained and competent personnel achieve higher effectiveness, reflected in improved delivery of health, education, and poverty alleviation outcomes (UNDP, 2021). Conversely, skill gaps have been associated with delays, budget overruns, and weak sustainability structures (OECD, 2023). These findings illustrate the universal importance of aligning staff capacity with project goals.

In the African context, empirical research echoes similar conclusions. A study in Kenya found that donor-funded Constituency Development Fund projects performed poorly in areas where staff lacked strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) capacities, thereby undermining donor confidence and delaying disbursements (Nzioka, 2023). In Nigeria, Osei & Mensah (2022) identified a direct link between staff competencies in financial management and the ability of donor-supported education projects to meet their performance targets. The evidence suggests that inadequate training and weak technical skills compromise efficiency, leading to systemic inefficiencies in service and weak technical skills compromise efficiency, leading to systemic inefficiencies in service delivery. Thus, staff skills are not only an operational issue but also a strategic factor influencing donor perceptions and funding continuity across African contexts.

Within Zambia, the relationship between staff skills and project performance has been documented in several studies. Luhanga (2021) examined donor-funded orphanage projects in Lusaka and found that poor technical and managerial capacity among staff led to weak sustainability once donor support phased out. Similarly, Zulu et al, (2025) showed that agricultural donor-funded projects in Zambia were delayed due to staff lacking specialized project management competencies. These findings align with Akakubelya & Katongo (2025). Who reported that weak M&E capacities among local government staff undermined the impact of CDF projects in Mtendere, Lusaka. Taken together, these studies highlight a persistent skills-performance gap within Zambia's donor-funded projects, pointing to a systemic challenge that undermines intended socioeconomic benefits.

## 2.2 The Level of Skills in Project Planning and Implementation Possessed by Project Staff

Project planning and implementation skills are central to successful donor-funded interventions. OECD (2023) stresses that weak planning often results in cost overruns and delays, even when funding is adequate. In South Asia, studies have shown that projects with staff possessing strong planning competencies including risk assessment, budgeting, and stakeholder engagement were twice as likely to meet timelines and deliver outputs compared to those with staff lacking such skills (UNDP, 2021). Planning also facilitates adaptability, enabling projects to respond effectively to changing local conditions without compromising objectives. This stresses the pivotal role of staff skills in the initial phases of donor-funded project cycles.

Evidence reveals that deficiencies in planning and implementation skills remain a persistent challenge. For instance, Mwape (2025) found that weak application of project Cycle Management (PCM) in Zambia's CDF projects contributed to low community impact. In Tanzania, donor-funded health initiatives faced frequent breakdowns because staff lacked the capacity to integrate long-term sustainability strategies into project planning (Makoba, 2022). Similarly, South African donor-supported education programs showed that projects with staff trained in participatory planning achieved stronger community ownership and sustainability (Khumalo, 2023). The regional literature highlights how project planning and implementation skills are foundational to effectiveness and longevity of donor-funded interventions.

In addition, studies have documented widespread skill limitations in project planning within public institutions. Nyirongo (2024) reported that local government authorities in Zambia's Lusaka, Chongwe, and Kafue lacked adequately skills staff in project design, leading to inefficiencies in fund management. Zulu & Siakwilimba (2025) also identified significant delays in agriculture donor projects due to insufficient planning and scheduling expertise among staff. Within the Ministry of Community Development, anecdotal reports and donor assessments suggest that similar gaps exist, particularly in the planning of large-scale social protection programs. For instance, the Social Cash Transfer program, while covering over 1.3 million households by 2024, has often been criticized for delayed rollouts linked to weak planning structures (Luhanga, 2023). This raises important questions about whether current staff have the competencies needed to manage expanding program scales effectively. While studies confirm planning and implementation weaknesses across Zambia, there is limited systematic analysis of the specific skill levels within ministries such as Community Development.

## 2.3 Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of literature on donor-funded projects in Zambia and other developing countries, significant research gaps remain, particularly within the Ministry of Community Development. Previous studies have focused broadly on project sustainability challenges (Luhanga, 2021) or delays in agricultural donor-funded programs (Zulu et al, 2025), yet they have not adequately examined the direct link between staff skills and project performance in the community development sector. Similarly, studies have highlighted weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation capacities (Akakubellwa & Katongo, 2025) have not gone further to analyze how deficiencies in project planning, implementation, and reporting skills undermine donor confidence and program effectiveness. Moreover, while global and regional evidence highlight the importance of human resource capacity in developing outcomes, there is limited empirical evidence that specifically addresses the Zambian context, particularly within Lusaka's Ministry of Community Development, where donor-funded initiatives such as the Social Cash Transfer program operate t a large scale. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by systematically assessing the relationship between staff skills and the performance of donor-funded projects. Addressing these gaps will not only advance academic knowledge but also generate policy-relevant insights for enhancing project delivery and sustaining donor confidence in Zambia's public sector.

## 2.4 Theoretical Frameworks

This study was anchored on two theories, namely: The Human Capital Theory and The Project Cycle Management Theory:

### Human Capital Theory

Proposed by Becker (1994), Human Capital Theory posits that investment in education, training, and skill development enhance worker productivity and organizational performance. Applied to donor-funded projects, the theory suggests that staff competencies in technical, managerial, and M& E domains directly influence project effectiveness and sustainability. In this study, Human Capital Theory aligns closely with Objective 2, which seeks to examine the level of skills in project planning and implementation possessed by staff managing donor-funded projects. The theory provides the foundation to argue that higher levels of education, training, and professional development among staff will translate into improved delivery and better donor confidence.

### Project Cycle Management (PCM) Theory

PCM theory highlights the structured approach required in planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating development projects (European Commission, 2019). It highlights the need for staff competencies at each stage of the project cycle. Weaknesses in any stage particularly planning and M& E can compromise project success. Applying PCM to this study highlights the centrality of staff skills in managing donor-funded projects. This theory aligns strongly with Objective 2, which seeks to examine the level of skills in project planning and implementation possessed by staff who are managing donor-funded projects in the Ministry of Community Development. The PCM framework reveals that gaps in staff skills at any stage of the cycle, planning, implementation, monitoring, or evaluation are directly linked to inefficiencies and poor project outcomes. Thus, PCM provides the analytical framework to identify where skill gaps exist and how they impede effective project management.

### 3 Methodology

The study employed a descriptive and explanatory mixed research design, combining deductive and inductive elements. The deductive aspect involved testing the relationship between staff skills and project performance using quantitative data, while the inductive aspect will explore qualitative insights from interviews. Deductive reasoning refers to moving from general theories or principles to specific observations and testing hypothesis, making it suitable for this study as it seeks to empirically test the link between staff skills and donor-funded project outcomes (Bryman, 2016). The study determined its sample size using both Yamane's (1967) and Cochran's (1977) formulas at a 95% confidence level. From a population of 180 staff, 123 participants were selected for the quantitative component. For the qualitative component, at least 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with project managers and donor representatives, guided by the principle of data saturation to capture rich insights. Overall, the combined sample enabled adequate representation and effective triangulation of findings across data sources, balancing comprehensive analysis with practical constraints. Data analysis involved applying both statistical and interpretive techniques to examine the research data. Quantitative data was coded and analyzed using Excel, with descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies, and percentages used to summarize trends. Qualitative interview data was transcribed and analyzed thematically, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, contradictions, and unique insights related to staff skills and project performance. Using a convergent parallel design, both data types were integrated during interpretation, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence to provide a comprehensive understanding and support evidence-based recommendations.

## 4 Data Presentation and Analysis

### 4.1 Staff Skills in Project Planning and Implementation

This section presents quantitative findings from section B of the questionnaire which assessed staff skills in project planning and implementation using Likert  $\alpha$ -scale items.

#### Technical Skills for Project Planning

Table 1: shows respondents 'views on whether they possess' adequate technical skills for effective project planning.

Table 1: Technical Skills for Effective Project Planning

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	9	7.3
Disagree	18	14.6
Neutral	21	17.1
Agree	47	38.2
Strongly Agree	28	22.8
Total	123	100

Source: Field Data, 2025

The findings indicate that (75 out of 123) 61.0% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they possess adequate technical skills for project planning. This suggests that a majority of staff feel confident in their technical abilities. However, a notable proportion of respondents either disagreed or remained neutral, indicating potential gaps in technical capacity. Technical planning skills are essential for developing realistic work plans, budgets, and timelines. Weak technical skills may result in poorly designed projects and implementation challenges. Therefore, this variable is critical in understanding how staff competencies influence donor-funded project performance.

#### Managerial Skills for a Project Coordination

Table 2 presents respondents' perceptions of their managerial skills in coordinating donor-funded projects.

Table 2: Managerial Skills

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	7	5.7
Disagree	16	13.0
Neutral	19	15.4
Agree	52	42.3
Strongly Agree	29	23.6
Total	123	100

Source: Field Data, 2025

The results show that 81 out of 123 (65.9%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their managerial skills enable them to coordinate donor-funded projects efficiently. Effective managerial skills are vital for overseeing project teams, coordinating stakeholders, and ensuring adherence to donor requirements. The presence of neutral and negative responses suggests that not all staff feel adequately equipped in managerial competencies. This has implications for project coordination and overall performance. Managerial skills therefore play a significant role in determining the success of donor-funded projects.

#### Confidence in Developing Comprehensive Project Plans

Table 3 below presents respondents confidence in developing comprehensive project plans.

Table 3: Confidence in developing Project Plans

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	8	6.5
Disagree	17	13.8
Neutral	24	19.5
Agree	45	36.6
Strongly Agree	29	23.6
Total	123	100

Source: Field Data, 2025

The results indicate that 74 out of 100 (60.2%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they are confident in developing comprehensive project plans. This suggests moderate confidence levels among staff. Project planning competence is essential for aligning activities with objectives and donors, which can undermine institutional ownership. This variable is therefore central to understanding planning effectiveness in donor-funded projects.

#### Skills for Effective Project Implementation

Table 4 below presents respondents views on their ability to effectively implement project activities.

Table 4: Skills for Effective Project

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	6	4.9
Disagree	15	12.2
Neutral	22	17.9
Agree	51	41.5
Strongly Agree	29	23.6
Total	123	100

Source: Field Data, 2025

The findings show that 80 out 123 (65.1%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they have the necessary skills to implement project activities effectively. Effective implementation of skills is crucial for translating project plans into tangible outcomes. Staff lacking implementation skills may contribute to delays and inefficiencies. Therefore, this variable directly related to project performance.

#### Skills and Project Sustainability

Table 5 below presents respondents perceptions of the contribution of their skills to project sustainability.

Table 5: Skills and Project sustainability

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	10	8.1
Disagree	19	15.4
Neutral	27	22.0
Agree	44	35.8
Strongly Agree	23	18.7
Total	123	100

Source: Field Data, 2025

The results indicate that 67 out of 123 (54.5%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their skills contribute to the sustainability of donor-funded projects. This relatively lower proportion suggests sustainability remains a challenge. Sustainability skills are important for ensuring project benefits continue beyond donor funding. This variable is therefore critical in assessing long-term project performance.

## 4.2 Staff Skills and Project Performance

This section presents findings focussing on the relationship between staff skills and project performance of donor- funded projects at the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services.

#### Staff skills and Project Timelines

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement that staff skills influence the timely completion of donor-funded projects. As shown in Table 6 below, 45.55 of respondents (56 out 123) agreed with the statement, while 30.1% (37 out of 123) strongly agreed.

Table 6: Staff Skills and Project Timelines

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly Disagree	5	4.1
Disagree	11	8.9
Neutral	14	11.4
Agree	56	45.5
Strongly Agree	37	30.1
Total	123	100
Men score		4.0

Source: Field Data, 2025

This means that more than three-quarters of respondents recognized the importance of staff skills in ensuring projects are completed on schedule. Only a small proportion of respondents disagreed, suggesting limited opposition to this view. The presence of neutral responses indicates that some staff may perceive other factors, such as funding delays or procurement procedures, as equally influential. Nonetheless, the dominant trend highlights skills as a critical factor in project timeliness. Staff competencies in planning, coordination, and problem-solving are likely to reduce delays during implementation. Skilled personnel are also better positioned to anticipate risks and adjust project plans accordingly. The mean score of 4.0 further reinforces the high level of agreement among respondents. Hence, the findings suggest that enhancing staff skills could significantly improve adherence to project timelines.

### Staff Skills and Achievement of Project Objectives

Table 7 represents respondents' views on whether staff skills influence the achievement of donor-funded project objectives.

Table 7: Staff Skills and Achievement of Project Objectives

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	3	2.4
Disagree	9	7.3
Neutral	18	14.6
Agree	60	48.8
Strongly Agree	33	26.8
Total	123	100

Source: Field Data, 2025

The results show that 48.8% of respondents (60 out of 123) agreed and 26.8% (33 out of 123) strongly agreed that staff skills are critical to achieving project objectives. This indicates that a substantial majority of respondents associate successful project outcomes with the competencies of implementing staff. A relatively small proportion of respondents expressed disagreement, suggesting minimal resistance to this perspective. Neutral responses may reflect uncertainty or varied experiences across different projects. The findings imply that skilled staff are better able to align activities with project goals and donor expectations. Competencies in monitoring, reporting, and stakeholder engagement likely contribute to achieving intended outcomes. Skilled staff may also be more effective in addressing implementation challenges as they arise. The strong agreement observed emphasises the central role of human capacity in donor-funded project success. Thus, the results highlight staff skills as a key driver of project effectiveness and goal attainment.

## 4.3 Qualitative Results

### Technical and Professional Skills in Project Planning

Participants consistently emphasized that technical and professional skills are fundamental to effective project planning in donor-funded initiatives. Respondents noted that competencies such as needs assessment, logical framework development, budgeting, and proposal writing play a critical role in shaping realistic and fundable project plans. Several participants highlighted those inadequate technical skills at the planning stage often led to poorly designed projects that are difficult to implement successfully.

One respondent stated, "If you do not have the technical skills to design a project properly, the implementation becomes problematic because the objectives may not be realistic or aligned with donor requirements" (R3-PP-MCDSS). Another participant echoed this view by noting that "Donors expect clear plans with measurable outputs, and this requires staff who understand project design tools and reporting standards." (R7-PO-MCDSS).

Participants further indicated that skilled staff are better positioned to integrate cross-cutting issues such as gender, sustainability, and risk management into project plans. This was viewed as essential for meeting donor expectations and ensuring project relevance. As one interviewee explained, "Technical skills help us anticipate risks and plan mitigation measures early, which saves time during implementation". (R11-ME-MCDSS)

Generally, the findings suggest that technical competence in project planning enhances the quality, feasibility, and credibility of donor-funded projects, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful performance.

### Managerial and Coordination Skills in Planning Implementation

Another prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of managerial and coordination skills in project implementation. Participants reported that skills such as team leadership, communication, coordination with stakeholders, and decision-making significantly influence how effectively donor-funded projects are executed. Respondents indicated that projects often involve multiple stakeholders, including donors, government departments, implementing partners, and beneficiaries. Managing these relationships requires strong coordination skills. One participant noted, "Donor-funded projects are complex, and without proper coordination skills, activities can easily overlap or delay each other" (R2-CP-MCDSS).

Several interviewees emphasized that managerial skills help ensure that project teams remain focused on timelines and deliverables. A respondent stated, "A project manager with good leadership skills can motivate the team and keep everyone aligned with the project schedule" (R9-PM-MCDSS). Another added that "clear communication from skilled managers reduces misunderstandings and improves accountability among team members" (R5-FO-MCDSS).

Participants also highlight that effective coordination enhances collaboration with donors and improves compliance with reporting and procedural requirements. These findings highlight the central role of managerial skills in translating project plans into tangible outcomes.

### Staff Skills and Timely Completion of Donor-Funded Projects

Timelines emerged as a critical dimension of project performance influenced by staff skills. Participants indicated that skilled staff are better able to manage project schedules, anticipate bottlenecks, and respond proactively to implementation challenges. Many respondents attribute project delays to skill gaps rather than external constraints alone. One participant explained, “when staff lack planning and coordination skills, small issues quickly turn into major delays”, (R6-IM-MCDSS). Another respondent observed that “Experienced staff know how to adjust activities when there are procurement or funding delays, which helps the project on track” (R12-PL-MCDSS).

Participants further noted that skills in problem-solving and adaptive management are essential for maintaining project momentum. A respondent stated, “Donor-funded projects rarely go exactly as planned, so staff skills determine how fast we can respond and avoid delays” (R1-SM-MCDSS).

These insights suggest that staff skills play a decisive role in ensuring timely project completion by enabling effective scheduling, risk management, and adaptive implementation.

## 4.4 Discussion of Findings

### Staff Skills in Project Planning and Implementation

The findings demonstrate that staff technical and professional skills significantly influence the planning and implementation of donor-funded projects. Quantitative results showed high levels of agreement that staff possess the technical, managerial, and planning competencies required for effective project design and execution, a finding reinforced by qualitative evidence emphasizing skills such as needs assessment, logical framework development, and budgeting. This corroborates with Zulu et al. (2024) and Mwape & Zulu (2024) who found that technically competent staff enhance the effectiveness of donor-funded project planning and implementation in the Zambian public sector. This aligns with Human Capital Theory, which argues that investments in education and skills enhance productivity and performance (Kumar, 2018; Mwape & Zulu, 2024; IMF, 2023).

These findings are consistent with Human Capital Theory, which posits that investments in education, training, and experience improve worker productivity and organizational performance (Kumar, 2018; IMF, 2023). From a human Capital Theory perspective, the high proportion of respondents with tertiary education and substantial work experience suggests that the Ministry’s workforce represents a critical productive asset. Comparable evidence from Zambia and the wider African context shows that skilled public-sector personnel are essential for translating donor resources into viable development outcomes (Luhanga, 2021; Chikola & Banda, 2024; World Bank, 2023). The Resource-Based View further explains these findings by conceptualizing staff skills as strategic resources that are valuable and difficult to substitute. In donor-funded project environment, internal human capabilities enable institutions to comply with donor procedures, manage complexity, and sustain performance advantages (Mwape & Zulu, 2022).

The results further align with the Resource-Based View, which conceptualizes staff skills as strategic internal resources that are valuable, rare, and difficult to substitute. In donor-funded project environments, such internal human capabilities enable institutions to comply with complex donor procedures, manage project risks, and sustain performance advantages over time. This finding is supported by Mwape & Zulu et al. (2025) and Phiri & Chanda (2024), who emphasize that human resource capacity is a key determinant of project success in donor-dependent public institutions.

Within the Project Cycle Management framework, planning skills are most critical during the identification and formulation phases of the project cycle. Empirical studies in Zambia show that weaknesses at the planning stage often result in implementation delays and cost overruns (Mwape, 2025; Bobo, 2021; Agyemang & Boateng, 2024).

### Staff Skills and Timely Completion of Donor-Funded Projects

The study found a strong positive relationship between staff skills and the timely completion of donor-funded projects. Quantitative data indicated that more than three-quarters of respondents agreed that staff skills significantly influence adherence to project timelines, a finding supported by a high mean score. Qualitative insights further revealed that skilled staff are better able to anticipate risks, coordinate activities, and adapt to implementation challenges, thereby minimizing delays. This corroborates with Mwape & Zulu (2024), who found that staff technical competence significantly reduces project delays in donor-funded initiatives. Similar conclusions were also reported by Luhanga (2021) and Phiri & Chanda (2024), who emphasize the role of anticipatory planning and coordination skills in meeting project timelines.

These findings are consistent with Project Cycle Management theory, which emphasizes time management as a critical performance dimension throughout the implementation and monitoring phases. Skilled staff are better equipped to develop realistic schedules, manage dependencies between activities, and respond proactively to disruptions such as procurement delays or funding disbursements. Similar conclusions were reached by Muller & Lecoeuvre (2014), who found that managerial and coordination competencies are essential for maintaining schedule discipline in complex projects. This is further supported by Bobo (2021), Agyemang & Boateng (2024), and Mwape (2025), who demonstrate that weaknesses in planning and scheduling skills are a major cause of time overruns in donor-funded projects.

From a Human Capital Theory standpoint, timely project completion reflects the productive application of staff knowledge and experience. The findings suggest that accumulated experience enables staff to navigate bureaucratic processes more efficiently and make informed decisions under constraints. This aligns with empirical studies in Sub-Saharan Africa, which have shown that experienced project teams are more effective in managing donor-funded initiatives within resource-constrained public institutions (Ahsan & Gunawan, 2019). Comparable evidence from the Zambian public sector further corroborates this relationship (Chikola & Banda, 2024; World Bank, 2023; Zulu et al, 2025).

The Resource-Based view further interprets timely completion as an outcome of leveraging internal capabilities to manage external uncertainties. Donor-funded projects often operate within dynamic environments characterized by policy changes, stakeholder pressures, and administrative bottlenecks. Skilled staff function as adaptive resources that enable the organization to respond to these uncertainties without compromising project schedules. Thus, staff skills enhance not only operational efficiency but also organizational resilience. This interpretation is consistent with findings by Phiri & Chanda (2024), Mwape & Zulu (2024), and Kumar (2018), who highlights human skills as strategic assets for managing uncertainty in complex project environments.

### Staff skills and Achievement of Project Objectives

The findings indicate that staff skills play a central role in achieving donor-funded project objectives. A substantial majority of respondents agreed that

competencies in execution, monitoring, and stakeholder engagement directly influence project effectiveness and goal attainment. Qualitative evidence further illustrated that skilled staff are better able to align project activities with donor expectations and beneficiary needs, thereby enhancing outcome achievement. This corroborates with Dialla (2025), and Luhanga (2021), who found that staff competencies are critical for translating project inputs into meaningful development outcomes.

These results strongly support the Resource-Based View, which argues that organizational performance depends on the effective deployment of internal capabilities. In this study, staff skills enabled the Ministry to convert donor inputs into tangible outputs and outcomes, such as improved service delivery and community-level benefits. Similar findings have been reported by Zule et al. (2025), who demonstrated that human resource competence is a key determinant of development project success. Additional corroborating evidence is provided by Phiri & Chanda (2024), and World Bank (2023), who emphasize internal capacity as a driver of sustainable project performance.

Project Cycle Management theory further contextualizes these findings by emphasizing the importance of skills across all stages of the project cycle. Achievement of objectives depends on coherent linkages between planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Skilled staff ensure that these linkages are maintained, reducing the risk of scope drift and misalignment between activities and objectives. The findings therefore reinforce PCM's emphasis on capacity as a prerequisite for effective results-based management. This is consistent with empirical studies by Bobo (2021), Agyemang & Boateng (2024), and Mwape (2025), which demonstrate that insufficient staff capacity undermines results-Based management in donor-funded projects.

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## 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusions

The study concludes that staff skills are a critical determinant of donor-funded project performance, influencing planning quality, implementation efficiency, timeliness, achievement of objectives, and effective monitoring and reporting. Both quantitative and qualitative findings confirm that technical, managerial, and implementation skills enhance coordination, problem-solving, and stakeholder engagement, supporting Human Capital Theory that links skills to improved productivity and outcomes. However, skills require continuous development to remain relevant. From a Resource-Based View, staff skills are valuable strategic assets, but their effectiveness depends on strong institutional systems, procedures, and structures; without these, performance is constrained. Applying Project Cycle Management further shows that skills are essential at every stage, particularly in monitoring and reporting, which are vital for accountability and decision-making. Overall, the study emphasizes that optimal performance of donor-funded projects requires a balanced approach combining continuous staff capacity building with institutional strengthening to ensure efficiency, accountability, and sustainability.

### 5.2 Research Recommendations

**Strengthen Continuous Capacity Building and Enhance Institutional Capacity and Systems.** The Ministry should institutionalize continuous professional development programs focusing on project planning, implementation, monitoring, and reporting. Regular training and skills upgrading will ensure that staff competencies remain aligned with evolving donor requirements and project management best practices.

**Integrate Skills Development into Project Design.** Donor-funded projects should incorporate capacity-building components during the planning stage to enhance staff competencies throughout the project cycle.

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### Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they are not aware of any competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the work described in this document.

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### Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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