

Assessment of the Performance Appraisal System in Afghanistan's Public Sector

Sebghatullah Mujadidi

Research Scholar, Department of Public Administration, Punjabi University, Patiala

Abstract

This paper evaluates the performance appraisal system in Afghanistan's public sector. It reviews the current regulatory system of performance appraisal and also highlights its key components and shortcomings. Appraisal systems have evolved from traditional and subjective methods towards modern and objective methods aimed at enhancing transparency and capacity in organizations. Public administration reforms implemented in Afghanistan in the post-2001 period focused on restructuring the system and improving organizational capacity. It also created a performance appraisal system to cope with challenges such as favouritism, weak feedback mechanisms, and limited institutional capacity. However, political turbulence and government change in the country affected the public administration system, and the reform process was abandoned before reaching the desired goals. In the current scenario, the lack of a rational regulatory framework is a key challenge to creating and improving an objective performance appraisal system. To establish a functional system responsive to the needs of the country, commitment to the reform initiatives is crucial.

Keywords: Performance Appraisal, Performance Management, Human Resource Management, Civil Service, Afghanistan.

Introduction

Water Dill Scott introduced the concept of performance appraisal after World War I as a technique for merit rating and evaluation of hourly and daily paid workers. During the 1950s, both private and public sector organizations adopted a performance appraisal system to evaluate technical, skilled, professional, and managerial personnel as part of training for executive development programmes. This was a change not only in the nomenclature of the concept but also in its scope of application. Initially, performance appraisal was subjective and focused on the personal traits of the employees, such as their honesty, loyalty, initiative, courage and drive but later it adopted a more objective approach focusing on the enhancement of accountability, improvement in efficiency, effectiveness and speed of operation in the management of public sector organizations (Ekpe, Daniel, & Ekpe, 2013).

Performance appraisal is an important aspect of every organization's management and administration. As the operations and activities of organizations are getting complicated in a

*Corresponding Author Email: Mujadidi.sebghat@gmail.com

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competitive environment and the need for efficiency and effectiveness is growing, it is crucial to look for innovative methods to keep the human element actively involved in the productivity of organizations. According to Dangol (2021), performance appraisal is a regular action conducted by an organization to assess the improvement and progress of the employees in their work and job roles. She also suggests that performance appraisal can positively influence employees' performance and motivation if it is conducted regularly, accurately, and according to the job description (Dangol, 2021). Wang et al. (2019) studied the impact of contextual factors such as politic, culture, and institutions on the performance appraisal system and its practices in Chinese Public Administration. They argue that context is a key factor in the formulation and application of theories in human resource management. Study of Chinese Public Administration shows that the way administrators and public organization's employees behave in managing and executing performance appraisal system is hugely influenced by the political, cultural, and institutional realities of the country showing why and how context is affecting performance appraisal system. they also suggest that a context-sensitive approach could be used to research on performance appraisal systems of the countries that are located in unique political, institutional and cultural contexts. (Wang, Zhu, Mayson, & Chen, 2019). Daoanis (2012) describes performance appraisal as an important tool for measuring employees' performance and their contribution to realizing organizational goals. By using this tool, managers can learn about employees' strengths and weaknesses and take corrective actions accordingly to increase an organization's productivity and improve the workforce's capacity. The data collected through this assessment can also be used for strategic planning and policymaking in the future. It is therefore recommended that an appraisal system must have a sense of direction, employees should be involved in the creation of appraisal criteria and the result must be assessed and analyzed for development and classification of competencies (Daoanis, 2012).

Acceptance of performance appraisal by employees depends on factors such as how employees perceive performance appraisal, developmental goals of appraisal, employee relations with their supervisors, and the involvement of employees in the criteria setting for appraisal. Despite doubts regarding the efficiency of performance appraisal, expressed by employees and managers, there is no better alternative for performance appraisal. Organizations need to focus on improving this management tool and making it more effective rather than replacing it with any other technique. Considering the importance of performance appraisal in public organizations and its impact on employees' performance and the overall productivity of the government apparatus, this HRM tool is also applied in the civil service system in Afghanistan. In this paper, the mechanism and process of performance appraisal in the Afghanistan civil service system are described. This paper also evaluates the effectiveness of the appraisal system and suggests possible changes and modifications for the improvement of the system. As discussed earlier, the goal of performance appraisal is not only to examine how well civil servants are performing their duties, but to make it a tool for capacity building and reform.

Performance Management

Performance management has been turned to a topic of interest in recent decades due to the complexity of service delivery and the importance of productivity and efficiency in public

organisations. It has been strongly perceived and supported by many studies that performance management and performance measurement are key drivers of government accountability and responsiveness. Good governance cannot be implemented without understanding the actual performance of government employees in the ground and measuring their performance. Despite the understanding regarding the significance of performance management, it is yet to be properly adopted and implemented by many government organizations due to institutional, financial, economic and social problems (Sole 2009). All organizations aim to achieve their strategic goals effectively and efficiently. This would not be possible without developing a sound system of performance management in which the activities of employees are regularly monitored, analyzed, and aligned with organizational objectives. Therefore, managers review the performance of their subordinates according to predetermined standards and acknowledge their achievements by providing timely feedback to motivate them to perform better on a daily basis (Mishra, 2022).

In a general view, performance appraisal is an important element of performance management, which involves a systematic assessment of an employee's performance over a specific period of time. The importance of performance appraisal originates from its potential of evaluating employee efficiency, skill gap, assessing training and development needs and informed administrative decisions such as promotion, reward and retention. Performance appraisal is key factor for ensuring accountability meritocracy, and transparency in administrative processes in the context of public sector in Afghanistan. Public administration in the country faces challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiency, favouritism, limited institutional capacity, and a lack of financial resources. To cope with these challenges, a well-structured appraisal system can contribute to improving civil servants' motivation, enhancing service delivery, and fostering people's trust in government agencies. Considering Afghanistan's special situation and its political and legal conditions, it is important to have more insight into how this situation is affecting the practices of the performance appraisal system

Civil Services in Afghanistan

Herman Finer characterizes civil services as a group of proficient, permanent, and compensated officials. They serve as the primary means for carrying out the state's intentions as manifested in public policy. Essential to the operation of a contemporary state, civil services undertake various duties, particularly as the state's role shifts from laissez-faire to social welfare, encompassing a wide array of responsibilities. The basic task of civil servants is to change policies into actions. Also, they give advice and assist policy makers while formulating policies wherever it is required. It is to provide valuable social and economic services to the people; through multiple functions they are assigned to perform (Baghel and Kumar 2005). Afghanistan Civil Servants Law defines civil service as the "executive and administrative activities of the state which are done by employees of the civil service" (art. 3)

Throughout the temporary history of Afghanistan, many events disrupted the development of an effective civil service and caused discontinuity due to wars and conflicts which made the civil service weak and politicized rather than professional and technical (Hashimi and Lauth 2016). When the first phase of the Taliban regime fell in Afghanistan, several reform programs were conducted to rebuild the public administration of the country. These reforms aimed to

create an efficient, transparent, and accountable civil service system. The Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission IARCSC was built and later modified in 2003 to act as a central body responsible for designing and implementing reforms. Its mission was to improve professionalism and bring a merit-based system in which civil servants are recruited through competitive examination, accountability is its core value, and capacity building is a daily task. Key units of the IARCSC were the Independent Appointment Board and the Appeal Board which was responsible for ensuring transparency and fairness in the recruitment and promotion processes. Its overall vision was to develop a modern, self-reliant, and citizen-oriented administration capable of delivering effective services while maintaining neutrality and adherence to the rule of law. Main reform which were later designed and implemented by the commission and with coordination of ministries and other government organizations included the Priority Reform and Restructuring (PRR), Public Administration Reform (PAR), and Pay and Grading (P&G) initiatives. The main goals of PRR which was introduced in 2003 were restructuring of key central administrative units, establishing a merit-based system and improvement of efficiency to cope with limited financial and institutional capacities. To achieve these goals the PRR worked on human resource management, creating job descriptions, and improving local government. To create a fair and unified pay structure in the civil service system, P&G program was conducted in 2009. This program linked salaries to job responsibilities and performance and removed the previous system of seniority. All these efforts were to rationalize administrative structures, improve performance and reduce administrative corruption. To support these reforms, several capacity-building programs were introduced, including the Afghan Expatriate Program (AEP) and Lateral Entry Program (LEP) (2001–2007), Management Capacity Program (MCP) (2007–2012), and Capacity Building for Results (CBR) (2012–2018) (Hashimi & Lauth, 2016).

But the system restructuring was not the only focus of administrative reform. There was a dire need for capacity building as well. Therefore, several capacity-building programs were initiated to bridge the gap and improve the effectiveness of the system. Afghan Expatriate Program (AEP), Lateral Entry Program (LEP), Management by Capacity Program (MCP) and Capacity Building for Results (CBR) were important capacity-building programs implemented by the government with the help and support of the international community in Afghanistan. These initiatives sought to address the shortage of skilled professionals by recruiting qualified Afghans—often from the diaspora—into key government positions with donor-funded salaries. However, implementation of these programs was affected by several challenges such as political interference, favouritism, corruption, and lack of sustainability. Also, due to financial instability, once the foreign funding stopped, the programs also remained unfinished. Despite these challenges, the post-2001 reform era laid the foundation for Afghanistan's civil service modernisation, even though implementation gaps and governance weaknesses continued to hinder its effectiveness (Nasery, 2019).

Performance Appraisal System in the Public Sector of Afghanistan

Organisations follow different types and techniques of performance appraisal. Some important methods include the Ranking Method, Critical Incident, and Narrative Essays are considered traditional methods. In the Ranking Method, employees are ranked from best to worst based

on certain traits. While in Critical Incidents, the behaviour of an employee is recorded during crucial duties and compared systematically with predetermined criteria. In Narrative Essays, evaluators write a detailed description of the weaknesses and strengths of employees' past performance and suggest possible measures for their improvement. On the other hand, Management by Objectives (MOB), 360-degree, and 720-degree are some of the important modern appraisal methods. In the Management by Objective Method, results are compared with formulated objectives to determine to what extent the employee has accomplished the goals. In 360-degree, performance is evaluated by supervisors, subordinates, and clients, while in a 720-degree the process is done twice, when the 360-Degree appraisal is done, then the performance of the employee is evaluated and having a good feedback mechanism, the boss sits down with the employee again a second time and gives him feedback and tips on achieving the set targets (Aggarwal & Mitra Thakur, 2013). Public agencies in Afghanistan mostly adopt MBO as a method to evaluate civil servants' performance. According to the provisions of the Afghanistan Civil Servant Law, the performance of civil servants is evaluated according to their job description, work plan, annual performance report, and code of conduct. If a civil servant meets the specified criteria during the annual performance evaluation, he/she will be promoted to a higher step within the position. If a civil service employee fails to meet the specified criteria, the following actions will be taken, depending on the circumstances:

- Introduction to capacity-building programs to learn the necessary skills.
- Continuing to work in the previous position without promotion to a higher step.
- An employee who is not satisfied with the results of the performance evaluation can file a complaint with the competent authorities¹.

A recent decree issued by the office of the Taliban's head of the Council of Ministers determines that the competent person for conducting performance appraisal is the immediate supervisor. It also adds that a representative of the Civil Service Office will supervise the process technically. In the context of Afghanistan, a recent study (Stanikzai, Jawad, and Lawraand, 2024) of private universities and institutions suggests that the level of awareness among the employees regarding the performance appraisal system is high, and the conduct of performance appraisal is affecting employees' performance. Though the study also highlighted challenges in providing feedback, which is necessary for improvement of the system of appraisal and enhancement of performance (Stanikzai & Lawraad, 2024).

In the public sector, Azizi (2023) highlighted that the effectiveness of performance management is often undermined by systemic issues such as favoritism, conflicts of interest, and the appointment of inexperienced personnel to key positions. However, there is no empirical evidence to gauge the success rate of the overall system and determine possible associated factors (Azizi, 2023).

Challenges in the Current Appraisal System

Despite the recognition of performance appraisal practices within Afghanistan's public sector,

¹ Afghanistan Civil Servants Law, 2008.

there exists only a weak correlation between these appraisals and overall organizational performance. This weak correlation suggests that the implementation of appraisal systems may be hindered by issues such as an absence of timely feedback and a lack of objective evaluation, rather than by a measurable failure of the appraisal system itself (Saeed, Maiwandwal, & Khaliqi, 2020). The reforms conducted by the previous government aimed to improve the system, but there was no continuity, and the current government is not willing to complete those reforms. Besides, the future of the regulatory system is uncertain in the current situation. Those regulations which were dealing with the civil services issues and structures have been abandoned or are not practically implemented, and they have not been replaced by new regulations as well. The MBO system requires detailed policies outlining specific goals and measurable targets. The current system of performance appraisal is subjective, and mainly personal views of the supervisors are taking the place of logical and objective criteria.

Conclusion

The analysis indicates the significant role of performance appraisal systems within Afghanistan's public sector amidst various challenges. The establishment of a more transparent and equitable appraisal framework is essential for enhancing the overall efficacy of public administration. It is recommended that efforts be made to address existing shortcomings by regulating the system to make it more objective by setting clear criteria and fostering a culture of transparent feedback. It is important to ensure that appraisal processes are aligned with the principles of merit-based governance. Future research should focus on the long-term impacts of implemented reforms and explore innovative approaches to performance evaluation that cater to the unique context of Afghanistan. The literature offers several recommendations to improve performance appraisal systems in the public sector:

Timely and Constructive Feedback: Providing prompt and constructive feedback can help employees identify their strengths and areas for improvement. **Objective and Transparent Processes:** Ensuring objectivity in the appraisal process can build trust and fairness among the workforce, potentially mitigating issues such as favoritism and conflicts of interest. **Training and Development Opportunities:** Aligning training with appraisal outcomes can promote career development and address performance lapses. **Addressing Systemic Challenges:** Tackling systemic issues is essential for enhancing the overall effectiveness of performance management systems.

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