Teaching Case

JITTC

ICT for development: Evolving the WhatsApp project management office in Shomolu

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Abstract

This postgraduate-level teaching case explores the complexities of informal project governance in a digitally connected agricultural cooperative in Shomolu, Lagos, Nigeria. At the centre is Mrs. Doyin Adebajo, a seasoned poultry farmer and cooperative lead who coordinates a growing cluster of smallholder producers through WhatsApp. Without formal project management tools or institutional structures, the group relies on real-time messaging, interpersonal trust, and tacit routines to execute shared projects such as livestock health interventions and school feeding contracts. As the group expands across value chains and localities, the limitations of informal coordination become increasingly evident. A crisis involving a delayed veterinary response triggers reflection on the group's accountability structures, timing failures, and governance capacity. Doyin must decide whether to formalise the WhatsApp PMO into a cooperative-led project structure with defined roles and escalation mechanisms and how, or to preserve its flexible and inclusive format despite growing inefficiencies.

Keywords

entrepreneurship, IS development, IS in developing countries, IS management and governance, IS strategy and alignment, IT services, Mobile, Operational IT, Project management

Learning objectives

By the end of the case discussion, students will be able to:

(1) Evaluate how coordination, decision-making, and accountability function in informal, low-resource environments lacking formal project management infrastructure.
(2) Assess the benefits and limitations of digital coordination tools in grassroots enterprise settings, by examining how mobile applications like WhatsApp and Telegram support or constrain project execution, communication, and stakeholder engagement in contexts with minimal formal structures.
(3) Explore what is gained and lost when transitioning from informal, trust-based systems to structured governance models within small and medium enterprise clusters.
(4) Apply stakeholder analysis and governance theory to community-based project contexts to assess how roles, influence, and accountability are distributed in the case.
(5) Develop adaptive strategies for improving project delivery in informal or resource-constrained settings and propose context-appropriate interventions that enhance coordination without excluding marginalised participants.

Introduction: Governance without a plan

Mrs. Doyin Adebajo had never called herself a project manager. In fact, she would not even have called what she did 'project governance'. She was, in her words, a poultry farmer – one with decades of experience, but anyone observing her work over the last 5 years might have used a different term entirely. Through a growing network of WhatsApp groups, informal partnerships, and ad-hoc coordination calls, Doyin had become the central node in a web of smallholder farmers coordinating breeding cycles, procurement, feed deliveries, disease control, and joint marketing. Without ever setting out to do so, she had become the anchor of what some jokingly referred to as 'the WhatsApp PMO'.

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It started simply. In the early 1990s, Doyin began rearing chickens in her compound in Bariga. Her business was modest but consistent. Over time, she expanded into turkeys and rabbits, establishing herself as a reliable supplier to local markets and individual buyers. By the early 2000s, she had become active in the Poultry Association of Nigeria's Shomolu chapter. As younger women and new farmers entered the trade, she was the one they often turned to for advice because she had stayed in the business while others had fallen off. She had survived feed price shocks, bird flu scares, power cuts, and customer defaults. She understood the terrain.

In 2015, when a few younger members suggested forming a WhatsApp group to coordinate feed purchases and share disease alerts, Doyin agreed, cautiously. She was not a fan of too much talking, and she did not understand emojis. But the initiative worked. Group prices on feed were more affordable. Sick birds were flagged early. Buyers were easier to reach. When the government rolled out the school feeding programme in Lagos and needed suppliers who could deliver large volumes of poultry products, the WhatsApp group became a rapid-response coordination channel. Members pooled resources to meet demand – some handling the production, others focussing on processing, and a few, like Doyin, serving as the informal glue.

Over time, the group expanded beyond poultry. Catfish farmers from Somolu's Fish Farmers Association were added in. So were cow and goat rearers from Gbogbo Eleran Isale. There was no formal constitution or charter, but somehow it worked. Farmers posted updates, organised bulk purchases, flagged risks, and coordinated deliveries through voice notes, emojis, and threads. Project planning happened in real time: a member would float an idea, others would respond, and a plan – if it could be called that – would take shape.

Yet for all its vibrancy, the WhatsApp PMO was increasingly under strain. As the group expanded, so did the complexity of managing it. Messages got buried, disagreements about schedules and shared responsibilities flared up, and feed orders were occasionally duplicated or missed entirely. There were no agreed timelines, no clear escalation paths, and no shared tracking documents. Sometimes, no one knew who was responsible for what. In one instance, a bulk order of feed was delivered 2 days late because two members thought the other had confirmed it. In another, a training promised by an extension officer was missed because the date change was not forwarded to all sub-groups. While these mistakes did not collapse the group, they signalled a growing inefficiency. Formalising the system was not straightforward either. The strength of the WhatsApp PMO lay in its informality. Members could speak freely, offer help when they had time, and withdraw without consequence. There were no fixed rules or fees. People participated based on mutual interest and respect. The flexibility made the group accessible to older farmers who had limited digital skills and to women balancing farming with caregiving. Formalising into a registered cooperative with official roles, budgets, and schedules could bring efficiency, but it might also exclude those who thrived in the current arrangement.

Doyin, as the unofficial lead, bore the brunt of these contradictions. Her phone rang constantly. She was the one people called when the vet did not show up, when the feed did not arrive, or when a disagreement spiralled. She was not paid for this work, but people trusted her – and perhaps more importantly, expected her to fix things. Increasingly, she was managing people, processes, expectations, and crises – all without any formal authority or administrative tools. Still, there was something uniquely empowering about what the group had built. It illustrated how digital platforms like WhatsApp could substitute for physical infrastructure. It revealed how a community of agricultural SMEs, often under-resourced and poorly served by conventional project management training, could innovate their own governance systems out of necessity and mutual aid. This was not 'best practice' in the textbook sense, but it was practice anyway. As 2024 approached, the group had begun planning a major production drive to meet anticipated demand for Ramadan. With the rainy season also approaching, feed prices were volatile, and animal health risks were high. Coordinating procurement, veterinary schedules, and sales logistics across multiple commodities and clusters would require tighter controls. Some members pushed for formalisation, proposing a constitution, elected officers, and integration with agricultural extension services. Others feared this would create hierarchy, stifle spontaneity, and marginalise less tech-savvy members.

Doyin stood at a crossroads. She could push for a transition to formal governance, perhaps turning the WhatsApp PMO into a legally recognised cooperative with clearer accountability, access to funding, and more structured project oversight. Or she could double down on the informal model, refining internal norms and using low-tech solutions like weekly voice note check-ins, delegation via emoji tagging, and informal mentorships to manage complexity.

Digital coordination in informal agriculture

The WhatsApp PMO in Shomolu was a bottom-up innovation responding to chronic coordination failures in a fragmented agricultural landscape. For smallholder farmers scattered across Bariga, Akoka, and the densely populated wards of Shomolu, mobile messaging offered something they had never had before: a common space. A space to make announcements, confirm schedules, manage scarcity, and solve problems in real time. At the centre of this system was a device most members already owned a smartphone. WhatsApp, with its low data consumption and ubiquity, was the natural platform. It was already being used for family

chats, church groups, and informal savings clubs. What changed was its purpose: it evolved from a place of social chatter to a node for enterprise coordination. Farmers began to organise not just their social lives but their production cycles through the app.

Each commodity group – poultry, catfish, and livestock – maintained its own cluster, but they also fed into a larger, cross-cutting coordination group where broader issues were discussed. These groups were not merely repositories of information; they were sites of negotiation. When the poultry group considered adjusting their feed supplier, they conducted a poll in the chat. When the catfish farmers debated whether to participate in the school feeding contract, opinions were solicited through voice notes, many of them recorded at odd hours, between chores or during feeding time. Members used emojis as shorthand: a thumbs-up to signal agreement, a fish emoji to confirm stock availability, a red exclamation mark to flag urgency. These improvisations created a digital language that reduced friction and increased clarity – at least in the beginning. Messages were pinned for easy access. Templates for joint procurement orders were circulated in PDF form. Photos of diseased birds or water-logged pens were posted for group diagnosis. In lieu of formal documentation, the group operated on memory, digital trace, and mutual observation.

The lack of central infrastructure did not seem to matter much – not when trust was strong and response time quick. But as membership grew and activities multiplied, cracks in the system began to show. Coordination started to take more than just a few emojis and a phone call. It required sequencing, tracking, and follow-through-elements that WhatsApp, as a tool, could not reliably sustain without external discipline. There was also the problem of information overload. In any given week, the WhatsApp group could host over 300 messages-many of them unrelated to project coordination. A message about feed pickup might be buried under jokes, greetings, or a prayer chain. Important updates often went unnoticed, especially by older members who checked their phones infrequently or struggled with text-based interfaces. While some suggested migrating key discussions to Telegram, where folders and bots offered better structure, others resisted. They were used to WhatsApp and wary of overcomplication.

These limitations were compounded by the absence of clear boundaries between communication and governance. The group was a space for both – yet the norms of one did not always support the other. When a poultry vaccination schedule was proposed for the week of a religious festival, pushback came not through formal objection but through silence and noncompliance. No one said no, but no one showed up either. Plans collapsed not through active conflict, but through passive drift. In the absence of formal roles, coordination defaulted to the most active members – usually Doyin and a few others who had built reputational capital over time. These de facto organisers had no formal mandate

but carried disproportionate weight in guiding decisions. While this allowed for responsiveness, it also masked power imbalances. Some members began to feel that a few voices dominated discussions, while others were routinely ignored.

Coordination across value chains also posed unique challenges. For instance, when the poultry and aquaculture groups attempted to synchronise logistics for bulk feed delivery, timing conflicts emerged. Catfish farmers preferred early morning deliveries to avoid mid-day heat, while poultry farmers opted for afternoons when more members were available. With no formal calendar or project manager to arbitrate, resolution depended on goodwill and compromise – both of which were in short supply during high-stress periods. Digital tools helped bridge gaps, but they could not resolve deeper structural issues. Take, for instance, the failed attempt to coordinate a joint marketing initiative for festive sales.

The plan was simple: members would aggregate supply and market under a single brand to local retailers and food vendors, but the execution faltered. Members disagreed on pricing strategy, some withheld stock, and others failed to meet quality thresholds. The WhatsApp group became a battleground of thinly veiled accusations and apologies. In the end, the project dissolved quietly, its remains scattered across archived chat threads. Still, not all outcomes were negative. The very existence of the WhatsApp clusters allowed for a level of responsiveness and solidarity that traditional cooperatives struggled to match. When one member reported a security breach at her pen, three others mobilised a night patrol rotation. When a young farmer posted a photo of malformed chicks, she received five different responses – including a contact for a nearby vet and an offer of discounted antibiotics. In moments like these, digital coordination worked – not as a replacement for formal project management but as a vernacular system of care, knowledge exchange, and crisis response.

What emerged from this ecosystem was a set of evolving digital habits adapted to the particularities of informal agricultural life. There was no single app or framework, rather, there were only tools in use: WhatsApp, Telegram, phone calls, and voice notes; plus shared memory, emotional labour, and community ties. By mid-2024, members began floating new ideas. A few had heard about farm management apps being piloted in Ogun State. Others spoke of Google Forms for inventory or using Facebook Live for market visibility. Yet, even as these ideas circulated, adoption remained low. The core group remained anchored to the platform they knew best – WhatsApp – not because it was the most efficient, but because it was familiar, relational, and embedded in daily life. The limitations, however, were no longer theoretical. Coordination lapses now carried real costs. A botched feed schedule led to a wave of underweight broilers. A missed vet appointment triggered preventable losses. Delays in confirming project participation made the group ineligible for a donor-sponsored training on value

chain integration. As these failures accumulated, the question grew sharper: could the group continue to rely on its current digital practices, or did it need a new system – one that imposed structure, clarified roles, and enabled scale?

Tools, trust, and timing

The effectiveness of the WhatsApp PMO rested on interpersonal trust and a tacit sense of obligation. In the absence of conventional project management frameworks such as work breakdown structures, Gantt charts, and stakeholder registers, Doyin and her cluster relied on instinctive coordination. These elements had carried them this far, but they were beginning to show strain. Tools were minimal by formal standards. WhatsApp was the mainstay, sometimes supplemented by Telegram for larger file sharing. Voice calls filled in the gaps when text failed. Occasionally, a member might create a simple spreadsheet to track feed orders or bird mortality, but these were rarely standardised or shared beyond immediate collaborators. Most records lived in phones – not in the cloud. Decisions, meanwhile, were stored in memory, or in the residue of message threads, poorly archived and difficult to retrieve during disagreements.

No one had set up a calendar system, not even using WhatsApp's newer Business features. Reminders were ad hoc. A decision made on Wednesday might be forgotten by Saturday if no one reposted it. The group had tried using pinned messages, but frequent chatter would push key items out of visibility. Most members were familiar with the rhythm of the group – morning check-ins, mid-day updates, late-night questions – but this rhythm was intuitive, not regulated. Project timing, as a result, was unpredictable. A joint delivery scheduled 'for the weekend' could mean anything from Friday afternoon to Sunday evening, depending on who interpreted it. For all its flaws, this system ran on the expectation that people would show up, respond, and do their part. In the early years, this worked because the group was smaller, more homogeneous, and anchored in prior relationships. Many members knew each other outside the digital space – they had traded feed, shared transport, or attended the same church. But as new members joined from neighbouring clusters and local government areas, the shared history that had sustained this trust began to fragment.

The cracks showed in subtle ways. When a member delayed a payment for a shared purchase, others hesitated to confront them directly. No formal consequence system existed. Doyin would usually call privately to mediate, appealing to good faith. But good faith did not pay suppliers. On one occasion, the delay in settling a group feed order led to a supplier suspending credit for all members, affecting their ability to rear birds in time for Easter. The group absorbed the shock, but tensions lingered.

Trust also became a problem when roles were assumed but never defined. Because there were no formal assignments, certain members – often older women – took on recurring tasks: following up with vendors, aggregating stock counts, reminding the vet. But this reliance blurred into expectation, and then into resentment. When one such member became ill and dropped off the group temporarily, several coordination functions stalled. No one knew who would pick up the slack, or even whether it was appropriate to ask. Timing failures accumulated. In one case, a training on poultry vaccination – sponsored by an NGO – was missed entirely. The invitation had been sent via email, but no one was officially designated to check the cooperative's inbox. By the time Doyin stumbled upon the message and posted it in the group, the deadline had passed. Members grumbled, but no changes were made to the coordination process.

Efforts to create structure had been sporadic. A younger member once proposed using Google Calendar to track shared activities, but the idea fell flat. 'It's not that we do not want to use tools', one farmer explained during a phone call, 'it's that we do not have time to learn them, and no one here is paid to coordinate'. The problem was not just digital literacy; it was labour. Coordinating was work, and it was unpaid. Doyin's role as the informal point person had grown heavy, and she was beginning to feel the cost – not just in hours lost, but in rising emotional fatigue. The tools available could not enforce accountability. Messages could be read and ignored. Deadlines could be mentioned and missed. WhatsApp's double ticks did not guarantee commitment. At one point, Doyin tried to institute a soft deadline system using colour-coded messages – green for confirmed, yellow for pending, red for urgent. But members forgot, or coloured wrongly, or skipped the codes altogether. A poll function was added later to gauge consensus before major group decisions. Still, only a fraction of the group regularly participated.

There were moments when the system worked beautifully – when everything clicked despite the fragility. A joint vaccination exercise conducted across four farms went smoothly after two members synchronised timing in the group and arranged for a bulk discount with a vet. On another occasion, fish farmers in Somolu shared water testing results in real time, adjusting their feeding schedule to avoid stock losses. But these wins were episodic, not systemic. They depended on individual initiative, not institutionalised processes. The lack of documented roles, expectations, and escalation mechanisms made it hard to manage failure.

When someone did not deliver, it was unclear whether they had overpromised, misunderstood, or simply failed. In a formal project setting, this would warrant a review or corrective action. In the WhatsApp PMO, it typically ended in silence or private complaint. Doyin found herself constantly improvising – calling people privately to follow up, forwarding messages again, interpreting vague updates,

absorbing frustration. She had become the project's unofficial buffer. Her name was not on any title, but her phone was the frontline of every conflict, delay, and miscommunication. Over time, she began to keep a small notebook to track who had promised what. It was not elegant, but it helped her remember. As the group faced larger opportunities – partnerships, grants, contracts – these coordination gaps began to cost them more than just time. Donors asked for reports. Partners wanted progress updates. Local government officials requested records. There were no dashboards to show, no metrics to report. The group's digital traces – scattered across phones and memory – were insufficient.

A few members argued for formalising roles: project leads per value chain, a part-time communications officer, perhaps even a rotating coordination schedule. But formal roles required commitment, and commitment implied accountability – something not all members were ready to accept. Others suggested creating a central shared drive, or even forming a hybrid model where WhatsApp remained the coordination space, but reporting and planning were handled through Google Docs or hardcopy records maintained by a small secretariat. These proposals were promising but untested. Doyin was cautious. Any tool adopted had to work across age, device type, and data affordability. Any role formalised had to be matched with willingness and reward. The question remained: could a trust-based, tool-light system evolve into something more robust without becoming bureaucratic or burdensome?

When the vet does not reply

It began with a voice note just after sunrise.

'Good morning everyone… I need urgent help. My birds are shaking and not eating. I think it's Newcastle. I've called the vet, no response. Please, what should I do?'

The message came from Amaka, a relatively new member of the poultry cluster. Her tone was calm but edged with panic. Within minutes, several members viewed the message. One responded with a prayer. Another forwarded a contact for antibiotics. But no one could reach the vet. Not Doyin, not the more experienced farmers, not even the supplier who usually coordinated vaccinations. The vet, who had been reliable for over a year, simply did not pick up. By midday, Amaka had lost 14 birds. By evening, it was 27. The cluster buzzed with frustration. This was not the first time someone had been let down by slow response. But something about this case – the silence, the helplessness, the preventability – lingered.

The WhatsApp PMO had always operated in this manner. If someone had a problem, others would respond. Whether it was feed issues, predator attacks, or vaccine shortages, someone in the group would have an answer, or know someone who did. But this time, the silence felt structural. No one had been assigned responsibility. No reminder system was in place. There were no backups. The vet had not even promised to attend – members just assumed he would.

After the incident, Amaka posted again.

'I'm not blaming anyone, but this thing is getting out of hand. If we say we are a team, we can not keep losing birds like this. If there is no one to respond when it matters, what is the point of this group?'

Some members defended the vet. Others pointed out that everyone had the same number – anyone could have called. Doyin tried to ease the tension with a conciliatory message: 'Let us be patient. We'll review what went wrong and try to improve our emergency response'.

But even she knew the issue was larger than one sick flock. There was no emergency protocol, escalation pathway, no agreed timeframe within which a query must be answered. The WhatsApp PMO operated on goodwill and moral pressure. No one was accountable. And as more members joined, the gaps widened. The incident prompted a wider reckoning. If something as basic as veterinary coordination could break down, what else was fragile? The group began reviewing its own practices.

One member suggested creating a shared vet rota: a list of known practitioners with their specialities, coverage areas, and available hours. But who would maintain the list? How would it be updated? And would vets, most of whom operated independently, be willing to commit to group schedules? Another farmer proposed a dedicated emergency subgroup with only the core project contacts – a space for crisis escalation, separate from the daily banter of the main cluster. But this raised issues of hierarchy and exclusion. Who got to be in that group? Who decided what counted as an 'emergency'?

The debate exposed deeper fault lines. Older farmers preferred to rely on their long-standing relationships. 'Call him again', one said of the vet. 'He'll respond if he sees it's me'. Younger members wanted systems, not favours. 'We cannot plan projects on vibes', Amaka later wrote. Doyin found herself at the centre of the blame and the burden. The vet had been her contact. She had introduced him to the group. Though unpaid, she felt responsible. In a phone call with another cooperative lead from Gbogbo Eleran Isale, she admitted: 'I did not think we needed all this structure. I thought we could handle it. But now I see… we've grown beyond what we can manage informally'. This was not an isolated incident. Over the past year, there had been other near-misses. A feed order was delayed because the supplier required upfront payment and no one followed up to confirm. A promised vaccination training never materialised because the invite got lost in the chat. A grant application failed because the group could not produce a formal record of past projects.

Each time, someone absorbed the cost. A few birds lost. A training missed. A grant delayed. But those costs were accumulating – not just in money, but in confidence. Members were beginning to doubt the group's capacity to

support them when it mattered most. After the vet episode, a subgroup held an impromptu voice call. It was a mix of catfish farmers, poultry rearers, and livestock handlers. The tone was tense but productive. Some argued for formalising roles – even if unpaid. 'Let's have coordinators for each segment', one said. 'Just so we know who's in charge of what'. Others called for digital tools – Google Forms, a shared contact list, even basic CRM apps for small teams. But every suggestion came with a counterpoint: Who would implement it? Who would train the members? Who would manage the tools? The answers were vague.

Doyin remained quiet for most of the call. Toward the end, she spoke. 'I hear what everyone is saying. I agree that we need to do better. But we need to ask ourselves: are we ready to become something more formal? If we start assigning roles, demanding responses, keeping records… it changes who we are'. There was a pause. No one disagreed – but no one knew what the alternative was. Amaka's birds eventually recovered, though she lost nearly a third of her flock. The vet never gave a full explanation. 'He had a family emergency', someone said. Others were not so sure. But by then, the issue had moved on – to feed shortages, to market access, to another missed training.

Still, the question was, if a single missed response could jeopardise an entire farm cycle, what kind of system was the WhatsApp PMO – and what kind did it need to become?

Discussion questions

(1) To what extent can informal coordination platforms like WhatsApp function as effective project management systems in low-resource, community-based settings? Consider both the enabling conditions and the structural limitations of such tools.

(2) How should Mrs. Doyin Adebajo evaluate the trade-offs between formalising the WhatsApp PMO and maintaining its current flexible structure? In doing so, how should she consider adapting more advanced project management techniques and tools?

(3) What mechanisms could be introduced to improve accountability, role clarity, and responsiveness in the absence of formal project structures? Are there examples of 'light-touch' governance that might suit this context?

(4) How do trust and social capital substitute (or fail to substitute) for formal project planning tools and documentation in this case? Evaluate this through the lens of informal institutions and relational contracting.

(5) What are the risks of scaling coordination without redesigning governance structures in community-led agricultural clusters? Analyse how issues of timing, communication overload, and failure escalation manifest in the case.

(6) If Doyin were to transition the group into a formal cooperative-led project office, what change management strategies would she need to adopt to ensure inclusive participation and ownership? Consider models of participatory governance, resistance to formalisation, and digital equity.

(7) What does this case reveal about the intersection of technology, gendered leadership, and unpaid co-ordination labour in community enterprise contexts? Reflect on Doyin's role and its implications for sustainable project leadership.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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