Global Scientific JOURNALS

An establishment of public sector stakeholder perceptions in relation to public sector performance and reputation in Zimbabwe.

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Introduction

The aim of the study was to establish the perceptions of public sector stakeholders towards the performance of selected public institutions in Zimbabwe. The bulk of the research in the field of public administration has mainly focused on bureaucratic reputation and less on public sector performance. The current scholarship, therefore, sought to address this gap through establishing stakeholder perceptions on public sector performance as well as determining how these perceptions influence the reputation of the same institutions.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The performance of public sector institutions is an important area to research because it influences and is determined by the perceptions of stakeholders. Different stakeholders may have different perceptions regarding an organisation, based on their differing contexts and interpretation of the information received (Marquina & Bahamonde, 2014; Christensen & Lodge, 2016; Davies & Miles, 2016). The government is the supplier of public services while clients are considered as part of its stakeholders and are the main source of taxes (Marquina et al., 2014; Olsson, 2014; Goodchild, 2015; Christensen & Lodge, 2016). Reputation relates to deeds hence consist of different characteristics such as credibility, reliability, responsibility, and trustworthiness among others (Deat, 2016; Satøen & Wæraas, 2016; Sridhar & Mehta, 2018). Deat (2016) posit that in addition to the complexity of administering policies and public programs, public agencies have to deal with disparate stakeholders who have some interest towards the organisation. Such interest compel these public organisations to be more accountable, improve performance, and transparency as well as being collaborative.

The stakeholder theory was selected as the theoretical framework guiding the current study. It takes cognisance of the relationships that exists between an organisation and its various stakeholders. Stakeholders determine the success or failure of organisations through their actions (Chapman & Lindner, 2016; Kraaij-Dirkzwager et al., 2017; Viennet & Pont, 2017). For example, if not satisfied with certain decisions made by the management they can choose between approaching the management or finding alternative service providers. This is critical in private institutions where profit-maximisation and customer-retention are the key objectives. Public institutions on the other hand, while offering homogeneous products and services, considers stakeholders important in building their reputation which can be used to attract funding (Feigl, 2016; Alakwi, 2017; Tsun Hoe et al., 2018).

Research Methodology

The research site for this study was Makombe Government Complex in Zimbabwe's Harare Metropolitan province and Murehwa District in Mashonaland East province. Harare is an urban setting and the capital city of Zimbabwe while Murehwa is a rural setting. A pragmatic approach that triangulated data collection and analysis was adopted in the current scholarship. This was aimed at establishing stakeholders' actual experiences regarding the performance of the selected public institutions emanating from the consistency of the implemented policies. The population size consisted of 454 000 public sector employees according to the Zimbabwean Salaries Services Bureau (SSB, 2018). Using 95% level of confidence, 5% margin of error and assumed 50% response rate, a sample of 266 respondents was selected. The researcher however, increased the sample to 280 in order to cover up for non-response or spoilt questionnaires. Accordingly, a stratified sample of 278 interviewees responded to personal interviews conducted through both structured and semi-structured questionnaires. The statistical data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS) Version 2.0 and AMOS. Qualitative data were analysed using the NVivo software package.

Findings and discussion on stakeholder perceptions in relation to public sector reputation and performance

The stakeholder perceptions (SP) construct was measured with 13 items, all of which loaded successfully. The internal consistency was Cronbach Alpha (α) 0.964, signifying a very strong measure. This denotes that the majority of the respondents disagreed with the notion that policy implementation positively affects the performance and reputation of Zimbabwean public sector institutions.

The RG clients expressed negative perceptions regarding the performance of the department as a result of the various policies implemented. This was substantiated by the sentiments of Key Respondent 1 (KR01- RG clients) who outlined that the mobile registration for civil documents is only conducted towards elections periods yet events that require civil registration such as deaths, births and stolen documents are a daily occurrence. This concurred with ZEC respondents who attributed the implementation of policies in public sector institutions to political ambitions. They outlined that politicians only visit their respective constituencies towards election period with the intention of assisting in the registration of eligible voters with lost or no identity particulars. The respondents highlighted that these politicians even go an

extra mile of providing the registrants with transport to the registration centres. However, once the elections are over, the parliamentarians rarely return to the people who would have voted for them.

Further findings of the research revealed that flow of communication within the selected public institutions was biased. Respondents expressed that the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) engages stakeholders on the implementation of some policies but does not provide a feedback platform to establish their perceptions regarding the implemented policy. They further substantiated that the dissemination of information between the selected public institutions being researched and their stakeholders was not clear. This negatively impacted on the efficient provision of civil and voter registration services since every time they visit these institutions, they face new requirements. This is illustrated by the qualitative findings in Fig 1.1.

Figure 1.1: Word cloud ZEC comments
Source NVivo 12 (2020)

According to the word cloud in Fig 1.1, the word '*new*' had the highest frequency rating. It was mentioned seven (7) times throughout the interview sessions conducted with ZEC respondents. The word *'every'* was mentioned four (4) times while the words '*requirements, time and elections*' were mentioned three (3) times each. The expressions of these words are reflected in the text search in Fig 1.2.

Figure 1.2: Text search expressions
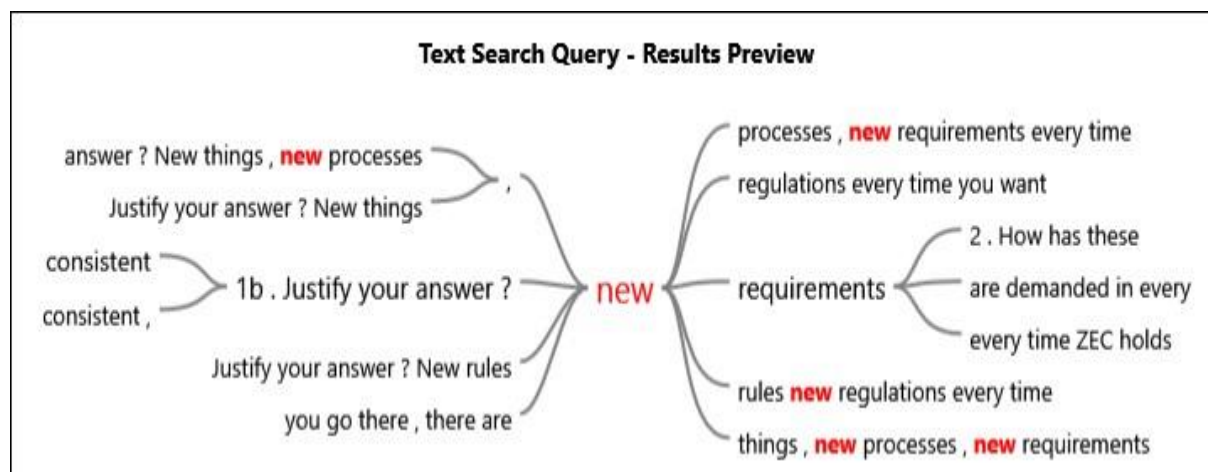
Source Survey Data NVivo 12 (2020)

As outlined in Fig 1.2, the word 'new' dominated the text search. According to Key Respondent 1 (KR01- ZEC), the various amendments implemented in the electoral laws resulted in new requirements and regulations every time ZEC conduct voter registration exercises. Asked if they were aware of the government objective behind the BVR exercise, all of the five respondents indicated that they were not. Three out of the five respondents perceived the programme as the usual voter registration exercise which the government conducts prior to elections. Key Respondent 03 (KR03- ZEC) expressed that they had noted that the requirements for BVR exercise differed from the previous voter registration exercises. The respondent outlined that there amendments to the citizenship requirements for one to participate in the registration exercise.

Key Respondent 4 (KR04-Clients) cited conflict of interests between stakeholders and the RG department. The respondent argued that the department accommodates all the clients when they submit their applications and collects payment from them thereby maximising its revenue. However, these applications, especially travelling documents, are not processed within the stipulated time thereby greatly inconveniencing clients.

Pertaining to the performance of public sector institutions, Key Respondent 03 (KR03-Management) argued that the since nature of their duties was regulatory in nature, it was normal for stakeholders to negatively perceive their performance. The respondent outlined that some of the decisions they were forced to make are so unpopular to such an extent that they raise the ire of the stakeholders thereby negatively affecting their reputation. Employees, however, outlined that their performance was characterised by an environment of fear and threats from their superiors. Any perceived form of failure to perform, misconduct or complaint from a

client resulted in these officers either being dismissed from service or being transferred to some remote offices. Key Respondent 2 (KR02- employees) outlined that the top-down relationship prevailing in these institutions do not accord public sector officers the opportunity to defend themselves.

The employees also cited socio-cultural factors as influencing stakeholder perceptions. Key Respondent 5 (KR05-Employees) narrated an experience in one of Zimbabwe's remote districts, Binga, in Matabeleland North province during a mobile registration exercise whereby residents had fled their homes leaving the registration teams with no one to register. As a result, the registration teams had to engage the traditional local leadership to encourage their communities to cooperate.

Corruption emerged as a factor influencing the performance of the selected public sector institutions. Key Respondent 01 (KR01-Clients) outlined that although the RG department is very strict on its requirements for civil registration, one can easily sail through if they '*negotiate well*' with the personnel. The respondent explained that these '*negotiations*' were in the form of bribes to ensure the processing of documents. These sentiments were substantiated by increased cases of public sector employees being charged with criminal abuse of office as well as soliciting for bribes.

Conclusion

In line with the findings, the study concluded that the continual amendment and subsequent implementation of both civil registration policies and electoral reforms had negative consequences on some of the stakeholders. Some of the amended policies stripped certain rights from the stakeholders thereby deterring them from participating in national events such as the harmonised and presidential elections. This resulted in legal petitions being filed against both the government and the public institution in question. In most cases, the complainants emerged as winners with government incurring all the costs for the court proceedings. For a developing country like Zimbabwe and its cash-strapped economy, incurring unnecessary costs should be avoided at all costs. Moreover, such developments result in lack of trust between the government and its stakeholders. Trust is a key determinant in reputation formation hence its absence brings the performance of these institutions into disrepute.

The study also concluded that conflict of interests between management and employees compromise both the performance and reputation of public sector institutions. Research

findings pointed to inadequate communication between management and their subordinates regarding the implementation of amended policies. This resulted in the personnel hesitantly executing their mandate amid fears of being charged with insurbodination. In line with the findings and conclusions of the current scholarship, it is recommended that stakeholder engagement should embraced in the formulation and implementation of public policies, particularly in developing countries. The study also recommends post-analysis of the implemented policies and their impact on stakeholders.

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