

THE QUALITY OF SERVICE DELIVERY IN ZIMBABWEAN URBAN COUNCILS: A CASE STUDY OF BINDURA MUNICIPALITY 2009 TO 2011

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to assess the quality of service delivery in Zimbabwean urban councils using Bindura Municipality as a case study. The objectives of the study were to establish the levels of service quality, determine the challenges that hindered quality service delivery, analyse the service quality management strategies and propose suitable strategies Bindura municipality can adopt to enhance service quality delivery. A descriptive survey design was used and questionnaires and structured interviews were used as data collection instruments. A sample of 300 households was drawn from the municipality rate payers' data base. The population was stratified into low, medium and high density residents. Systematic random sampling was used to draw the participants in each stratum. Ten interviews were conducted with senior management using convenience sampling and documentary evidence was generated from menus, minutes and reports.

The major findings were that the quality of service delivery was generally poor. This was mainly attributed to inadequate and disintegrated service delivery and management strategies. In addition human resource issues, poor governance structures and political interferences were causes of concern.

It was concluded that the quality of service delivery by Bindura Municipality fell far short of residents' expectations. The study recommended that for effective service delivery the municipality should among other strategies, adopt blue printing and total quality management.

JEL CLASSIFICATION & KEYWORDS

■ H25 ■ M89 ■ I01 ■ Service ■ Quality ■ Urban ■ Bindura

INTRODUCTION

The study sought to highlight the state of quality of service delivery at Bindura Municipality in Mashona land Central Province, Zimbabwe for the period 2009 to 2011 (after dollarization). The effective delivery and management of infrastructure services is a pre-requisite for productive investment and economic growth in urban areas (World Bank 2000). Effective services delivery can be achieved when service provision responds to effective demand and all residents have access to services provided. Efficient service quality delivery and management ensures that the level and mix of services provided match the effective demand of all consumers, (Dellinger 1993).

Access to and the quality of urban services in most cities and towns in Zimbabwe has been deteriorating, constraining productivity and the government's efforts to improve living conditions. This has been exacerbated by the poor management of municipal services and the structure of central-local fiscal relations which affects the adequacy of resources or incentives for improving infrastructure and services (World Bank, 2000).

From the year 2000 to around 2008 Bindura municipality, like all other urban councils, suffered from a setback of the hostile economic environment that prevailed in the country. During this period the country experienced social, economic

and political crises. For example, the unemployment rate was in excess of 80 percent while hyperinflation reached a staggering 300 million percent and growth rate was a negative 12.5% in 2007. On the international arena the country was also under sanctions and this was worsened by suspension from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that effectively closed the lines of credit to the country (RBZ Monetary Policy 2008).

As a result of the above developments most urban councils in Zimbabwe were forced to operate with leaner budgets putting a major handicap on their ability to provide quality service to their clients. Urban councils also suffered from shortages of skilled manpower due to massive brain drain. The situation was compounded by shortages of foreign currency, a valueless Zimbabwe dollar and a harsh political climate. This made it very difficult for local authorities to procure the essential inputs like chemicals for water treatment, new trucks for refuse collection and also drugs for the clinics. The result was that most urban councils found it difficult to meet the expectations of their clients as they lacked the power and resources to provide quality services.

The free fall in economic activity came to a standstill in 2009 when the Zimbabwean government officially introduced multi currency system to replace the Zimbabwe dollar. This development ushered in significant stability to the country particularly with respect to inflation which was effectively reduced to below zero.

In light of the relative economic stability brought about by the introduction of the multi currency system in 2009, stakeholders' expectations were that service delivery by urban councils would significantly improve. However this was not the case in most urban councils in Zimbabwe. It was against this background that this research sought to assess the quality of service delivery in urban councils using Bindura Municipality as a case study with a view to proffer possible policy recommendations to enhance the quality of service provided by urban councils.

Research questions

This paper sought to provide answers to the following questions:

- What is the current quality level of services delivered by Bindura Municipality?
- What could be the major challenges that hinder quality service delivery by Bindura Municipality?
- What are the current service quality management strategies being used by Bindura municipality?
- What suitable strategies can Bindura Municipality adopt to enhance service delivery?

Literature review

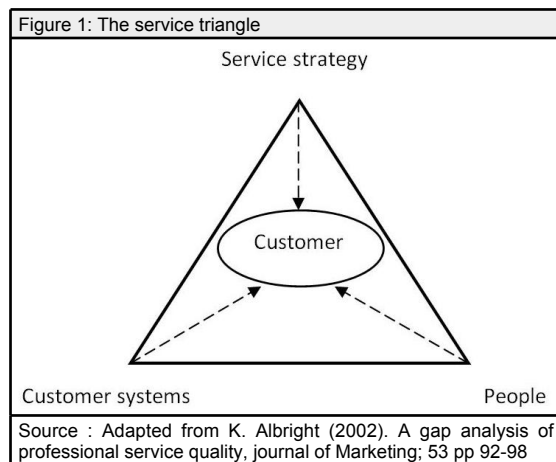
Many municipalities in African countries face serious challenges in implementing service delivery options that will enhance existing structure in the sphere of local government. The need to strategically assess and plan the most appropriate forms of service delivery cannot be overemphasized. According to Carmel, J. (2002) apartheid in South Africa created huge infrastructure backlogs for the

majority of the population. The provision of infrastructure services such as water, sanitation, electricity, roads, storm drainage and solid waste disposal were some of the challenges that most South African municipalities were facing (Carmel *ibid*). To alleviate these challenges, the South African government partnered with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), a nongovernmental organization to develop a capacity building programme. Zimbabwean urban councils have been experiencing service delivery challenges since the year 2000. In February 2009, the country adopted the multi-currency system which was expected to be a panacea to the constraints in service delivery. As a result urban councils were expected to take advantage of this and design mechanisms to improve service delivery to enhance the quality of life of the residents.

Services

According to Lovelock (1992, Ferguson et. al 1999), services are deeds, performances and processes. The core service is the basic reason for the business to be in the market and represents the organization's basic competency in creating value in the first instance.

Albright (2002) states that an important conceptual model that helps in the understanding of services is the service triangle shown in figure 1 below:



The diagram above shows that the aim of the service provider should be to delight the customer and to achieve this, there is need to properly manage the relationship variables that impact on service quality which are the service strategy, customer systems and people.

The service profit chain

The service profit chain establishes relationships between profitability, customer loyalty and employee productivity (Lovelock et. al, 2001). This view is shared by Kotler (1998) who states that leaders who understand the service profit chain develop and maintain a corporate culture anchored around service to customers and fellow employees.

To provide quality services there is therefore need to manage these relationships by constantly checking on the level of customer and employee satisfaction. It is clear from these relationships that customer satisfaction is a function of employee satisfaction.

Service quality management techniques

Flow charting

Lovelock, Paterson and Walker (2001), Carbone and Haeckel (1999) define flowcharting as a technique used to

understand customer experiences. Bitner (1993) adds on by pointing to the fact that analysis of flowcharting assists in the identification of the problem steps prone to service failure. As noted by Garvin (1988) some fail points may be acknowledged and deliberately not dealt with yet these should not be omitted. From the above analysis it can be concluded that an effective flow chart analysis requires managers to substitute their own perceptions of the service delivery for the way customers experience that delivery.

Blueprinting and some new techniques

Shostack (1984) and Kingman-Brundage, (1989) extended flowcharting to blueprinting by including the interaction with the customer in the front stage, distinguished from the invisible (to the customer) back stage. Semans (2001) criticises blueprinting and argues that there are more recent techniques depicting the service process from a customer perspective which include service mapping, sequential incident analysis and walk-through audits. Kingman and Brundage (*ibid*) define service mapping as a management tool depicting the chronology of task and activities undertaken by consumers, front line and support teams in the performance of work. Sequential incident analysis congregates the positives blueprinting with the limitations of critical incident techniques, producing an account of a customer's experience that is narrowed down to the transactions that the consumer remembers and finds worthy of note (Strauss and Weinlich 1997, Bitner and Tetreault 1990). According to Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (1994) the walk through audit is based on a questionnaire to customers allowing a systematic evaluation of selected issues of the service provided.

It is clear that all these techniques attempt to include the customers' perspective in the steps of the service delivery process. However the challenge is to effectively capture customers' experiences. This can be done by researching customers' experiences and using information gathered to construct a comprehensive flowchart depicting customers' participation. Thereafter there is need to evaluate every step such that critical positive steps, that is, those adding to the customer experience and fail points, those which detract from that experience are noted. It is crucial to ensure that critical positive steps are consistently performed during service delivery, while fail points are improved upon.

Total quality management

According to Kotler (1999) and Carbone and Haeckel (1999) one of the principal ways in which service providers can differentiate themselves is by delivering consistently higher quality than ever before. However, according to Devlin and Dong (1994), it is difficult to quantify service quality because of its intangibility.

Since service quality for service organizations is difficult to measure, in practice, the provider has to determine how customers perceive quality. Studies suggest that customer assessments of service quality are the result of a comparison of what they expect with what they experience (Shostak 1987). Any mismatch between the two is a quality gap. The service quality manager's goal therefore should be to narrow this quality gap.

Strategies for service quality management

People strategy

According to Kotler (1999), successful service organizations focus their attention on both their employees and customers. In addition, they understand the service profit chain which links the service firms' profits with employees and customers satisfaction.

Internal marketing

Bailey (1994) says that internal marketing involves marketing by a service firm to train and effectively motivate its customer-contact employees and all respective supporting staff to work as one team in order to provide customer satisfaction. In the same vein Bitner et. al (1994) supports the above view by arguing that for the firm to deliver consistently high service quality every employee must not only be customer-oriented but a marketer as well.

Interactive marketing

Brady and Cronin (2001) define interactive marketing as marketing by a service organization that recognizes that perceived service quality depends heavily on the quality of service provider-customer interaction. Thus professionals must not assume that they will satisfy the client by simply providing good technical service (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons 1994).

Pricing Strategy

Pricing approaches

Kotler (1999) propounded that a proper pricing strategy must be one that allows the firm to offer the service at a profit and at an affordable price to the customer.

There are basically three approaches to the pricing of services. According to Lovelock (1998) these are the Disney World pricing, transactions only pricing and the two tier pricing structure. The Disney World pricing offers customers an opportunity to make a one-off entrance payment and services consumed thereafter will be for free McCathy (2000). On the other hand, Kotler (1999) defines the single transaction pricing strategy as that approach where customers pay for every single service that they consume which forces them to economise. The third pricing strategy is the two tier tariff system which combines the foregoing two systems.

In the two tier tariff system, there is a basic charge for the service and then a charge based on use is applied for all units consumed. The basic charge takes care of the administration costs and other costs and the system is preferable where individuals do not have competing alternatives (McDonalds 1996).

Methodology

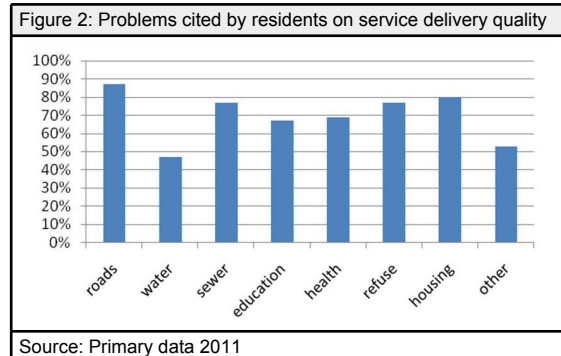
The research adopted a descriptive research design where questionnaires and structured interview guides were used as the main data collection instruments. The population was stratified into low, medium and high density residential areas represented by Shashi, Aerodrome and Chipadze respectively. These areas had a total population of 3020 ratepayers according to the municipality register. A sample of 302 ratepayers was drawn on a proportional basis. Systematic random sampling was then used to draw the participants in each stratum as follows: Shashi (47), Aerodrome (102) and Chipadze (153).

Bindura municipality was chosen not only for its proximity to the researchers but that it had been in public media limelight on allegations of poor service delivery. Ten interviews were conducted with senior management of Bindura municipality which were chosen using convenience sampling. Questionnaires were sent to the 302 households and documentary evidence was gathered from memoranda, minutes, circulars and other relevant documents. Validity and reliability was ensured by sending interview guides in advance while questionnaires were pretested on 10 households. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics.

Results

Clients' rating of Bindura Municipality service delivery system

The results revealed that the level of service delivery was a cause for concern to the municipality's clients with 61% saying that service quality needed urgent attention while only 11% rated the municipality as doing well. The remaining 28% were indifferent about service quality at Bindura Municipality.



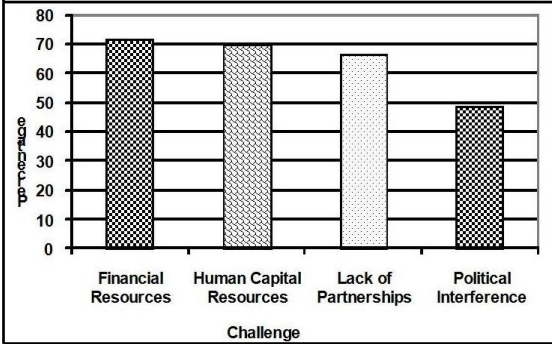
The major areas of concern were roads, housing, sewerage, refuse removal, health, education and water supplies. Residents' ranking of services in the order of dissatisfaction was: 87% for roads, 80% for housing while sewerage and refuse collection were tied up at 77%. Health, education and water on the other hand had dissatisfaction rankings of 69%, 67% and 47% respectively. According to the residents, the roads were in bad state with a lot of pot holes making it difficult to navigate and raw effluent was flowing from burst sewer pipes everywhere, posing a health hazard to the community. In addition, refuse collection was almost non-existent with mounds of garbage lying everywhere remaining uncollected for months. The education system was of poor quality with the pupil-teacher ratio as high as 50:1. Furthermore, the health delivery system faced an acute shortage of drugs and provision of housing was characterized by over 10 year backlogs. Water supply was rated at 47% because the council itself could supply twice a day (2 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the evening) and during the day residents could access it from the bore holes drilled by UNICEF to alleviate the problem.

Management's responses to service delivery ratings

From the interviews, 83% of management cited low revenue collections and they attributed this to low disposable incomes earned by most of the clients. Another 74% of management respondents said the municipality was failing to enter into strategic partnerships with sister municipalities in foreign countries. In addition 65% of management respondents attributed failure to attract strategic partners to political factors with the result that management did not have any powers to make strategic decisions.

Fig 3 below shows challenges from management perspective. Based on the interviews conducted, 71.2% of management cited shortage of financial resources as the major factor that hindered service quality. In addition, another challenge cited was lack of partnerships with 66.7% of the management respondents of the view that, Bindura Municipality was failing to enter into strategic public-private partnerships (PPP) arrangements which other municipalities were engaging in. There was also an indication that the municipality was taking long in making twinning arrangements

Figure 3: Management view on Major challenges hindering service delivery

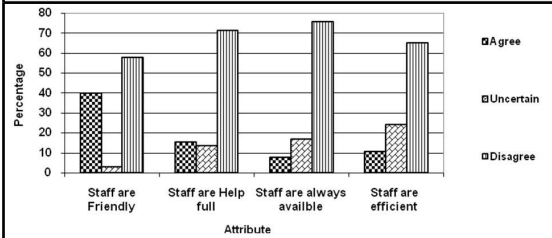


Source: Interview data 2011

with foreign municipalities – a venture from which the municipality greatly stands to benefit from like the Harare municipality is doing. Furthermore, 49% said they were not able to make important decisions due to political interference and human capital resources were rated 69.7%. According to interview results, the municipality had a lot of unskilled manpower due to brain drain and key personnel were leaving the council to join other organizations for better remuneration.

The survey revealed that the majority of the residents were not satisfied with the competence of the municipality staff as depicted in the graph below.

Figure 4: Resident's rating of Bindura Municipality staff competence



Source :Survey Data 2011

Fig 4 shows residents' ratings of Bindura Municipality staff competence in terms of friendliness, helpfulness, availability and efficiency.

75.8% of the residents rated the staff as not always available most of the time. It was also noted that staff were unfriendly, unhelpful and inefficient. Residents complained that they did not get help on issues that they wanted clarity on, for instance, the billing criteria and why residents were experiencing chronic water shortage. Furthermore, complaints were cited that council was failing to collect refuse on time yet residents were being charged for the service. In addition some survey respondents said they would find the staff in the Housing Inspectorate Department out of office each time they wanted their housing plans approved. The housing department was also cited as inefficient as some survey respondents said they had been on the waiting list for over ten years.

Management opinion with regard to staff competence

The interview results showed that 60% of the managers stated that council offices were being run by unqualified staff due to brain drain.

Another 80% of the managers cited frontline workforce as demotivated since they had gone for several months without getting their salaries.

Management view on current Bindura Municipality service strategies

Pricing strategies

The interview conducted indicated that 83% of management revealed that council had no proper pricing strategy for most services. Upon further scrutiny of documentary evidence, it was established that the pricing strategy in place for water was somehow close to the two tier pricing strategy. In the case of other services like sewerage reticulation, refuse collection, health and educational facilities, 74% of the managers indicated that there was no clear pricing strategy in place to ensure that enough revenue was collected.

People strategy

93% of management pointed that there was a missing cog in Bindura municipality's service profit chain. 80% of management said employees in the council had not been paid decent salaries since the introduction of the multi currency system. This had resulted in workers threatening industrial action on several occasions. In addition to the above 86% of management respondents said the organization was doing very little internal marketing.

Promotion strategy

The survey showed that 87% of the respondents had never witnessed any promotional campaigns by the municipality. 73% of management said the council was operating without a public relations office to spearhead promotional strategies.

Service strategies that can be adopted by Bindura Municipality

Pricing strategy

There are three pricing strategies that Bindura Municipality could use and these include Disney World pricing, transaction pricing and two tier pricing. The study recommended that council should adopt the transaction pricing strategy which allows it to ration its resources while customers are encouraged to economise.

People strategy

The council could be successful if it focused attention on both employees and customers. In addition, it should understand the service profit-chain and do internal marketing. This implies that council must train and motivate its customer-contact employees and all supporting service people to work as a team to provide customer satisfaction.

Promotion strategy

Council should have a functional public relations department and carry out intensive promotional activities to educate clients on the nature of services to be expected from the municipality.

Techniques for improving service delivery

Partnering and twinning arrangements

Bindura Municipality should consider partnership and cooperation with other sister municipalities in foreign countries. Considerable synergies and resources like technology, skills transfer and financial assistance can be gained from these arrangements.

Benchmarking

To improve on their service quality, Bindura Municipality should consider benchmarking their products, services and processes against other reputable municipalities. Benchmarking ensures one does not lag behind and become irrelevant to the ever changing customer demands.

Flowcharting and Blue-printing

The municipality was failing to identify problems in the service delivery chain hence it became prone to service failure. Through flowcharting, management could substitute its own perceptions of service delivery for the way customers experience that delivery. Further to that blueprints need to be developed based on the analysis of flowcharts. Using the above techniques the municipality should be able to:

- Research customer experiences.
- Use the information gathered to construct a comprehensive step by step flow chart depicting customers' participation.
- Analyse every step by identifying critical positive steps and fail points.
- Ensure that critical positive steps are consistently performed during service delivery.

Total quality management

To stay competitive, the municipality should consider adopting Total Quality Management. Continuously improving services will help the municipality to increase client satisfaction and thus become a model of service delivery in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

The study had the following objectives: to assess the current quality level of services, to identify the major challenges that hinder quality service delivery, to establish the management strategies to achieve service quality and to recommend suitable strategies that Bindura Municipality can adopt to enhance service delivery.

The results revealed that service delivery was not meeting customers' expectations and that council faced many service delivery challenges. This was because there were not properly defined service strategies and the study recommended that council should adopt Blue Printing and Total management Techniques as service delivery management techniques.

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