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Customer complaints management in South Africa: A quest for service excellence

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Background: The poor resolution of customer complaints in the domain of public service is often attributed to a lack of accountability, transparency, communication, leadership, competent personnel, and well-defined complaint-management policies.

Aim: This article examined the efficacy and efficiency of the processes and procedures used to carry out the customer complaints management policy within the public service.

Setting: The study focused on the Department of Employment and Labour in the Free State province.

Methods: A qualitative study design was adopted, with self-administered questionnaires used to collect data from 20 purposefully selected participants from the Department of Employment and Labour – Free State province.

Results: The research revealed several key findings. Firstly, there was a lack of consequences for subpar performance. Secondly, inadequate communication and coordination hindered the timely resolution of customer complaints, and minimal frontline staff training on the customer complaints management policy. Thirdly, it was discovered that a lack of capacity resulted in underreporting of complaints, which has a detrimental impact on how quickly and effectively customer complaints are handled.

Conclusion and contribution: The implications of this study, therefore, draw attention to redress mechanisms as a vehicle to turn around and improve public service delivery. The study recommends that the Department of Employment and Labour should consider increasing the capacity of staff in handling customer complaints, developing appropriate customer complaints management training manuals, and establishing a business unit or directorate that deals with customer complaints.

Keywords: accountability; 7-Cs protocol; customer complaints; complaints management; policy implementation; public service; redress; service delivery; transparency.

Introduction

Through the Presidential Hotline introduced by the South African government in 2009, data collected up until 2013 show that there has been an improvement in the resolution rate of customer complaints from 39% up to 89% of the 154 549 cases recorded. However, there is a disconnect, because the government believes that they have put adequate systems to deal with customer complaints based on the data and that the system is performing very well. Yet citizens do not hold the same view, they lack awareness of complaint procedures. Rising service protests, citizen complaints, and less government control resulted in accountability challenges, transparency gaps, communication issues, and poor leadership in citizen interactions.

When fully and effectively implemented, the redress mechanism can be a turning point in improving service delivery as accountability, consequence management, and ethical conduct within the public service can be improved. Customer complaints management within the sphere of public service should be viewed as an opportunity for policymakers and implementers to review service delivery strategies, to promote accountability and transparency. With the South African government moving towards the professionalisation of the public service, it is expected that all public service institutions will promote high professional ethics and adequately address service delivery complaints received from the citizens. Of equal importance, is the existence of mechanisms that promote accessibility, speed, fairness, visibility, confidentiality, and accountability in the complaints management process.

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The research conducted in South Africa points to the importance of understanding how to design and implement a system that is effective and efficient in addressing in citizen's complaints. According to the study on the principle of redress conducted by Ngidi and Dorasamy (2014:19) at the Department of Home Affairs in South Africa it was found that '57% of the respondents were uncertain about the effectiveness and efficiency of complaints and mechanisms, policies and procedures'. On the one hand, a study by Crous (2004:583) on Statistics South Africa's implementation of the *Batho Pele* principles, especially on the principles of remedying mistakes and failures found that 48.1% of the employees believe that the institution is able to measure customer satisfaction and that 55.5% confirmed that Statistics South Africa has a system in place to handle and register complaints. However, this study could not provide evidence on how effective the system was. Then again, a study on the implementation of the *Batho Pele* principles in a public hospital from the patients experience conducted by Khoza, Du Toit and Roos (2010:66) indicated that 90% of respondents who were not happy or dissatisfied with the services they received and did not file official complaints, which could be because of a lack of awareness about their rights as customers, or perhaps ineffective implementation of the complaints management system.

Hadiyati (2014:108) says that if institutions try to cover up problems, it will only make the problems worse. Instead, institutions should be honest about their problems and work to solve them. Ha and Lee (2010:1164) also recommend that institutions should conduct surveys to learn about their customers and use that information to improve their services.

The Department of Employment and Labour (DEL) in 2014–2015 highlighted a significant issue: 78% of clients lacked awareness about the procedure for lodging complaints when dissatisfied with service delivery. Although the DEL has initiated efforts aligned with the *Batho Pele* principles, not all these principles have been fully put into practice. Furthermore, a survey in the DEL Free State Province during 2016–2017 revealed that 75% of clients were unaware of their ability to lodge complaints regarding unsatisfactory DEL services. This lack of policy awareness is a critical concern, as it has the potential to impede policy success. Effective communication channels are vital for enhancing service delivery and ensuring the proper implementation of policies. Therefore, this study examines the processes and the procedures for effective implementation of the complaints management system within the Department of Labour – Free State province.

This article argues that within the South African public service, the main hindrance to quality and reliable public service delivery revolves around poor implementation of the policies by policy implementers as well as failure to apply redress mechanisms as stipulated in the *Batho Pele* principles. 'Public grievance redress mechanism rating model requires a sound grievance redress system operating in a manner that leaves the citizen more satisfied with how organisations respond to citizens dissatisfaction' (Kariuki & Tshandu 2014:805).

A qualitative study design was adopted, with self-administered questionnaires used to collect data from purposefully selected participants from the Department of Employment and Labour in the Free State province. The results of the study draw attention to redress mechanisms as a vehicle to turn around the lapses in public service delivery. The research makes a major contribution to the significance of the effective implementation of a complaints management system, and it offers concrete recommendations for how the government can effectively implement a complaint management system through adequate staffing, capacity, and training.

The next section of this article provides the literature review and theoretical framework for the study focusing on policy implementations and customer complaints management. This is followed by a description of the methodology used in the study. Thereafter, we discuss the findings and offer conclusions.

Literature review and theoretical foundation
Policy implementation

In order to have a better understanding of the customer complaints management systems within the context of South African public service, one must first understand the processes of policy implementation. It is for this reason that literature on policy implementation was consulted to draw a comprehensive picture of the common determinants for an effective and efficient implementation of customer complaints management.

There is limited research on how to manage customer complaints in the public sector. For example, Alemán, Gutiérrez-Sánchez and Liébana-Cabanillas (2018:108) argue that although many countries are interested in measuring citizen satisfaction in order to improve their services, there is a lack of research on how to do this effectively.

According to Gafar (2017:29), the relationship between citizens and governments should be based on the principles of customer service. This means that governments should recognise citizens' right to demand better service delivery and should respond to complaints promptly and effectively. However, Gafar also notes that this is not always the case, and that citizens' complaints are often poorly handled. Studies on customer complaint management in the public sector have found four important elements that contribute to poor complaint resolution: bad leadership, a lack of information, unskilled complaint handlers, and poorly constructed policies.

Past research suggests that generally policy implementation is viewed as a top-down administrative and hierarchical

process whereby policy actors will operate at different levels each with a clearly distinct role in the implementation of a policy and these processes also require multiple actors to regularly interact, constantly communicate, and bargain for effective implementation (Bevir 2009:104). Scholars demonstrated in a number of studies that policy implementation is not that easy, that is, just taking an instruction from your superior and implement. For instance, Cloete et al. (2018:199) argue that policy implementation was too complex to manage systematically, as a matter of fact, implementation occurs much more chaotically, non-linearly, and by default rather than an automatic process that delivers as programmed.

Previous studies advocate that there are repetition two important approaches to look at when dealing with policy implementation, firstly a top-down approach and secondly, a bottom-up approach. The top-down approach to policy implementation only focuses on the policymakers and restricts the involvement of the implementors. Hence, some of the criticisms associated with this perspective includes consideration that the implementation phase is purely an administrative process and it ignores or eliminates the political aspects (Raj Paudel 2009:40).

Literature studies have proposed some approaches to look at when dealing with policy implementation. For example, Von Meter and Von Horn's variable cluster approach, Edward's interacting factor approach, and the Mazmanian and Sabatier's goal attainment approach (Cloete et al. 2018:199). The conclusions that can be drawn from these models are that for a policy to be effectively implemented, the following preconditions should be observed:

- Communication, resources, dispositions, and bureaucratic structure.
- The relevance of policy standards and objectives.
- Policy resources and inter-organisational communication and enforcement activities.
- Characteristics of the implementing agencies.
- The economic, social, and political environment affecting the implementing jurisdiction or organisation.
- Legal structure to enhance compliance by implementing officials and target groups.
- Committed and skilful implementing officials.
- Changes in socioeconomic conditions, which do not substantially undermine political support or casual theory (Cloete et al. 2018:202).

The bottom-up approach to policy implementation distinguished two implementation models within the bottom-up perspective. These models are Smith's tension-generating change approach and the 'Network' approach to implementation. Research indicates that this approach is best studied by starting at the lowest level of the implementation chain and moving upward to see its success. Moreover, the street-level bureaucrats or frontline implementers, implement almost all policies and this approach should start by identifying the network of actors in service delivery and ask

them about their goals, strategies, activities, and contract (Khan 2016:6).

The bottom-up implementation model describes the process of implementing a policy by considering the interaction between four components: the idealised policy and the desired pattern of interaction; the target group of people whose behavior is being targeted by the policy; the implementing organisation responsible for implementing the policy and the environmental factors which the the implementation of policy must be forced to consider (Cloete et al (2018:202). The Smith's tension-generating change approach provides for a better understanding of the importance of leadership and capacity in an institution, the changing behaviour of the target group, and the structure of the institution in ensuring policy success. This approach is relevant for this study as the structure, leadership, and capacity play a critical role within the public service in ensuring that customer complaints management systems are effective. It can be deduced from research that adequate funding, motivation, and attitude of officials and the conflict and uncertainties affecting frontline staff, economic, social, and political environment should be taken into consideration to ensure effective policy implementation.

This article in its quest to relook at the customer complaints management policy within the Department of Employment and Labour argues that when officials who are entrusted to implement public policies are committed, have required skills, actions are guided by legal and constitutional mandate, then the chance for effective implementation is increased.

An effectively implemented complaint-management system is a prerequisite to solving citizens grievances and this will result in improved service delivery. Nevertheless, an ineffective system can result in citizens not reporting problems and this can lead to government officials not getting accurate information about grievances. The research primarily focused on the processes and procedures for an effective implementation of the customer complaints management systems in the South African public service. The issue of what kind of structures are needed and the type of skills required within the public sector for effective implementation of customer complaints management are articulated in this article. Research shows that there are certain conditions that also need to be considered for the policy to have a chance to be successfully implemented and the following variables were identified.

Variables for successful policy implementation

The 7-C protocol is the extension of the original '5-C Protocol', which is a framework of critical variables affecting implementation and developed by Najam, A (1995) that provides an explanation and understanding of the difficulties of implementation and also helps to expose potential sources implementation gap (Bayrakal 2006:132). Scholars of policy implementation research such as Cloete et al. (2018) have added two more variables to Najam's '5-C Protocol'. This

study adapts the 7-C protocol as outlined by Cloete et al. (2018). The seven key clusters of explanatory variables that might allow for a better understanding of the policy implementation are the following: Content, Context, Commitment, Capacity, Client and Coalitions, Communication, and Coordination.

In order to implement the policy on customer complaints management it is important that attributes such as leadership, motivation, and resources are made available to ensure policy success. It is the researcher's view that a lack of appropriate training of staff who are responsible for handling complaints could cause dissatisfaction among the public. Furthermore, this article concurs with a view that 'major challenge in policy and project implementation by the public bureaucracy is ineffective leadership, communication, coordination and collaboration in policy and project design and implementation' (Hussein 2018:355).

Moynihan and Thomas (2013:789) argue that governments are facing a challenge on how to provide good customer service, and this has resulted in a need for visible, accessible, and navigable systems to communicate with their customers. In order to locate the citizens role as part of the solution to provide better services by the public service institution, one needs to understand what customer complaints management entails and the next section clarifies its importance.

Customer complaints management

Justice Theory by Smith states that the reason people complain is because they seek justice. This theory highlights three kinds of justice, namely, distributive, procedural, and interactional. Firstly, distributive justice entails the fairness of the outcome of the complaint, and secondly, procedural justice deals with the perception of the fairness of the complaints handling process. Thirdly, interactional justice looks at the actions of the officials during the complaints-handling episode (Ang & Buttle 2012:1026). It is the procedural part of this theory that this study seeks to address. The question posed by the research is: How are the processes and procedures in managing customer complaints implemented within the South African public service?

Moynihan and Thomas (2013:789) argue that governments are facing a challenge on how to provide good customer service, and this has resulted in a need for visible, accessible, and navigable systems to communicate with their customers.

On the one hand, Dahlgaard-Park (2015:8) reports that 'an effective complaint management system encompasses the policies, procedures, practices, staff, hardware and software used by an organisation for the management of complaints'. Equally important, service providers should continually gauge the quality of the service they deliver and should encourage feedback from clients. Furthermore, provision of access to lodge customer complaints when customers are dissatisfied with the quality of service delivered should also be encouraged (Walter & Ezema 2016:16). On the other hand,

Jerger and Wirtz (2017:263) maintain that the impact of bad complaint handling affects employees in many ways including: being negative towards service orientation; lower levels of job satisfaction; stress and frustration; emotional exhaustion, which result in absenteeism, retaliation, revenge, and sabotage.

According to Serrat (2017:2), customer service is 'the way the organisation handles the interactions between itself and its customers' in order to meet their expectations. In addition, Mctigue, Rye, and Monios (2018:323) argue that 'in order to eliminate barriers for effective policy implementation, policy makers must ensure that resources are be made available, and this should include appropriate funding and skilful and committed implementing officials'.

The Department of Public Service and Administration (2013:13) through the Citizen Complaints and Compliments Management Framework (CCCMF) considers cost reduction, continuous improvement, citizens' satisfaction, rights protection, provision of resolution, timeous provision of information, and serving as a monitoring system, as some of the benefits or advantages of an effective complaints management system. The CCCMF's purpose is to 'provide the parameters within which government departments and agencies should develop their complaints and compliments management systems' (DPSA 2013:3).

According to Zairi (2000:331), 'complaints must be looked at in a constructive, positive and professional perspective for the following reasons:

1. They are a way of receiving feedback from customers and therefore necessary means for putting into action improvement plans.
2. They are a tool for preventing complacency and harnessing internal competencies for optimising products and services.
3. They are a useful way of measuring performance and allocating resources to deal with the deficient areas of the business.
4. They are a useful 'mirror' for gauging internal performance against competition and best in class organisations; and
5. They are a useful exercise for getting nearer the customer and understanding them better':

> User voice and complaints can serve as important inputs to innovation in public services. User knowledge can be harnessed to provide insights and ideas that prompt more effective service responses and add value to service delivery. (Simmons & Brennan 2017:1085)

Furthermore, we concur with Dahlgaard-Park (2015) in that:

> organisations that promote and encourage complaints and respond to them fairly and promptly are more likely to strengthen relationships, identify problems, improve service delivery and systems, and improve customer service. (p. 4)

Research methods and design

One factor that prompted this study is the concern about how effective and efficient are the processes and procedures

for implementation of customer complaints management policy within the South African public service specifically within the Department of Employment and Labour and to establish and investigate the knowledge that officials have pertaining to the customer complaints management systems. This study is firmly positioned within the interpretive research paradigm. 'Interpretivism allows descriptions and explanations of human beings and their concerns to be subtly and thoughtfully imbued with human values' (Birks 2017:4). Carson et al. (2011:5) write that in the interpretivist approach the focus of the research allows for the understanding of what is happening in each context. In addition, there should be consideration of different actors' viewpoints, multiple realities, the researcher's involvement, and the contextual understanding and interpretation of data.

A qualitative study design was adopted, with self-administered questionnaires used to collect data from purposefully selected participants from the Department of Employment and Labour in the Free State province. Permission from the Director General of the Department was granted and data were collected online through email interviews with all participants who were willing to participate in the study. The first author obtained the required ethical clearances before embarking on the study. Furthermore, a consent form was made available to all participants for their permission to participate in the research.

This study deployed purposive sampling. This method of sampling selects respondents who are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information. Three layers of policy implementers were selected for this study; the operational staff, in this case, the Client Service Officers (CSO) (10), Registrations Supervisors (RS)(5), and the Deputy Director: Centre Operations (DD:CO) (5); in total 20 participants were selected. The interview questions were based on the 7-C protocol framework that contains seven dimensions necessary for the effective policy implementation. The seven areas derived from the 7-C protocol are *content, context, commitment, capacity, client and coalitions, communication, and coordination*. For instance, on the content dimension the questions posed were, 'To what extent do you know your role and responsibility when you receive a complaint? Please explain?'; and to the managers the question was, 'To what extent do you believe that your subordinates understand the process of lodging complaints within organisation? Please substantiate'. Furthermore, the questions on the capacity dimension asked, 'Have you been trained on this policy? If yes how do you rate the training provided?'; and 'In your view do we believe we have enough knowledgeable staff to implement this policy effectively? Please elaborate'.

The participants were encouraged to take measures to ensure confidentiality by securing email access with a password. Participants were encouraged to delete their responses and empty their trash as soon as they sent their responses to the researcher. The researcher took steps to cut and paste the text into a word processing programme, save the data in a password protected computer or laptop to protect names and addresses of participants, and also deleted and emptied the trash.

Analysis approach

According to Nishishiba, Jones, and Kraner (2017:8) when results of the qualitative research are presented, each theme should be discussed with enough evidence from the actual data by using direct quotations from the original text so as to capture the essence of the story in the experience of real individuals. According to Vaismoradi et al. (2016:101) a fundamental issue in the analysis is that the research participants' individual meanings and social reality are appropriately carried in the research report. 'Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set'. The data were analysed using the six-phase approach to thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012:60):

1. Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the data. The first author read and re-read the participants responses to the interview questions and took note of narratives relevant to the key research questions.
2. Phase 2: Generating initial codes. Initial codes were identified and open coding was used to label data that were potentially relevant to the research question.
3. Phase 3: Searching for themes. After open coding, the analysis shifted to aggregating data to possible themes.
4. Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes. In this phase, the researcher used a recursive process to further develop the themes to ensure all were relevant, discrete, and captured the full meaning of the data.
5. Phase 5: Defining and naming themes. The final step was to name and define each theme.
6. Phase 6: Producing the report. The last step was to analyse the themes to identify the overall compelling story of the data.

To ensure trustworthiness of the interpretation, the second author reviewed the codes and coding of data after it had been carried out by the first author. Any differences were discussed and resolved.

Table 1 provides the data structure that emerged from the analysis. The table shows the themes along with proof quotes. Proof quotes as recommended by Pratt (2009) to show the data and support how interpretations were reached.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa Department of Public Administration and Management Research Ethics Review Committee (No. PAM/2021/007).

Results

When we investigated the data from the respondents, we discovered that the procedures and systems in place to

handle customer complaints were inadequate, unclear, and inaccessible. As shown in Table 1, which summarises the respondents' accounts of their work and includes illustrative quotes from the participants, it became clear that the citizens 'voice' is missing and that current strategies do not view customer complaints as an opportunity for public institutions to learn from mistakes and avoid them in the future.

When we looked at the dimension of *content*, whereby we examined the knowledge of officials about the processes and procedures in the implementation and their role and responsibility on the customer complaints management systems, evidence from the responses indicates that officials at the managerial positions believe to a large extent that their subordinates understand the processes that need to be followed when dealing with customer complaints. However, the supervisors had mixed perceptions as some indicate very limited knowledge, some argue that they do not know, while others say they have thorough knowledge about the processes to manage customer complaints. At the lower level of the hierarchy, responses from the CSO demonstrate that they understand what steps should be followed when customers are dissatisfied with the public services.

When we considered the *context* component of the study, we explored the role of management in ensuring compliance with the complaints management system. Generally, the question that can be asked is whether citizens have trust in the current management within the public service to handle their complaints; in addition, are officials within the public service confident in a manner that management of an organisation handles the complaints management systems. Participants indicated that when officials attend training, there is no monitoring to establish whether or not the theoretical knowledge derived from the portfolio of evidence material relating to customer complaints management is converted into the daily responsibilities by management. Certain comments from participants indicated that there was a genuine belief that the management is doing all within its power to ensure that this policy is implemented because of the Standard Operating Guides and complaints boxes provided by management:

> 'Yes, I believe management has done enough because there are trainings, seminars, outreaches and Imbizos, it is the officials who are reluctant in implementing.' (CSO 6)

Considering the dimension of *commitment*, the research posed the following questions: *In your opinion, do you believe there is enough financial commitment to implement this policy? and , do you believe there are enough and committed officials to implement this policy?*

Some comments indicated that there is no budget directed to the policy. Therefore, there was a need to have a separate budget that focuses on the complaints management policy as well as the need for a committee to manage the financial matters of this project:

> 'This is a function that needs to be dealt with by committed officials and having a separate budget can assist in that regard.' (DD:CO 3)

> 'Budgetary constraints impede effective implementation.' (DD:CO 1)

The findings from the data indicate that there is a strong observation that an inadequate budget has a potential to negatively affect the successful implementation of the customer complaints management policy. Officials contend that budget is available, but the level of financial competency could be a stumbling block to policy success. Furthermore, it could be deduced that based on the analysis of responses from participants there is a shortage of knowledgeable staff to implement the customer complaints management policy. At the centre of the factors that hinder effective policy implementation is the failure to train and capacitate staff on how to implement the customer complaints management policy.

The dimension of *capacity* intended to answer the question as to whether officials received training on the customer complaints management system. The frontline staff and supervisors were not afforded an equal chance when it came to training pertaining to the implementation of the customer complaints management system; data reveal that there is a gap between top management and bottom frontline workers when it comes to training on the customer complaints management. Furthermore, some participants cited problems with the relevance of the contents covered in the training sessions that were provided by the service providers. Scholars of public policy implementation suggest that policy implementation is a constraint in that 'sometimes personnel are not available, or facilities are inadequate, and sometimes frontline implementers are unable to carry out an intervention due to lack of motivation or expertise' (Khan & Khandaker 2016:54).

The *client and coalition dimension* focused on whether citizens are consulted about the policy. Data clearly indicate low or limited consultation between citizens and public service institution. The use of social media to express dissatisfaction highlights the fact that citizens were either ignorant or reluctant to lodge complaints, or they did not trust the processes that their complaints will be handled fairly:

> 'No clients always ask us for complaints contact numbers and emails that they can complain to, but it's not even provided for officials, there aren't notices on walls to educate clients about steps they can follow to lodge a complaint. No citizens do not even know it exists therefore they were not consulted.' (CSO 3)

> 'In my opinion I believe citizens are consulted via different platforms of media, radio, television, newspapers, billboards etc. What I am not sure about it is how the clients receive the message. Even before the Pandemic COVID-19 information sessions and Imbizos were held and conducted to inform the clients about our policy and services-citizens were informed about our Impimpi Toll free hotline numbers and other methods to consult the department.' (CSO 8) 'No.' (RS 3)

TABLE 1: Summary of data collection and themes.

Dimensions (7-Cs Protocol)	Focus of questions	Proof quotes	Analysis
Content The policy content captures the envisioned objectives, mission, and goals to be achieved, with a substantial focus on delineating activities and projects geared towards realising those objectives (Cloete & De Coning 2011:146).	Knowledge about the processes and procedures in the implementation of the customer complaints management systems	'The staff do understand this process fairly well in that they know what to do and when to do it, but the IT challenges are a serious hindrance.' (DD:CO 5) 'I think they don't know, because I also don't know. They never attend any training. Even when they go for orientation as new appointees, they don't take them through the policy.' (RS 4) 'There is a little understanding, this is due to lack of training and availability of resources.' (RS 2) 'As a supervisor I have to check the complaint and make sure that relevant information is there on the complaint, that the relevant documents are attached and contact the employer trying to resolve the complaint.' (RS 2) 'There is an SOP on how customer complaints are taken and handled in the Dept. and such is available to employees and trainings provided also emphasise the process of lodging a complaint.' (DD:CO 3) 'They do understand because every complaint lodged has to go into a complaints register. Performance agreement entered into between the department and the official talks to how complaints must be handled.' (DD:CO 1) 'They should use the complaint box which are situated at the labour centre helpdesks.' (CSO 5) 'They should write a formal complain to the manager or request to see the manager.' (CSO 6) 'Complain to supervisor if not satisfied can escalate the complaint to the manager.' (CSO 7)	• Standard operating procedures not clear • A lack of training • Orientation of employees do not cover complaints management processes
Context Evans (as cited in Badmus 2017:28) argues that the success of development programs is often influenced by the bureaucratic environment, societal values, and the organisational structure of a country.	Managements' role in ensuring compliance with the complaints management system	'No, I have never seen the policy let alone I do not know where to access it. I have never received training on the policy or had any kind of short briefing on how to give attention to client complaints to ensure that they are solved as per policy.' (CSO 3) 'Yes, I think management has done enough because we have client complaint box where every client has a right to express his or her feelings about the service rendered.' (CSO 4) 'I don't think there are enough and committed officials to implement this policy, either the official will be protecting his or her colleagues to be exposed of the wrong doings.' (CSO 1) 'Nope, firstly the process of complaints is not clear and when the complaints have been lodged there is no clear process of how to deal with it.' (CSO 5) 'Yes, I believe management has done enough because there are trainings, seminars, outreaches and Imbizos, it is the officials who are reluctant in implementing.' (CSO 6) 'Yes, I think management has done enough because we have client complaint box where every client has a right to express his or her feelings about the service rendered.' (CSO 4) 'Yes, because induction is conducted with all the policies of the department and all new circulars are implemented after consultation made with affected parties.' (CSO 2) 'Management has done well, but there are still gaps to be filled, especially with top management and certain sections are still behind in implementing the policy.' (RS 2) 'No, the office complaint box is not monitored and if only the DD and some trusted officials will know about the complaint, their kept secret for no valid reason. The officials in the office they were never orientated about the complaint box or even how to handle it from the Helpdesk.' (RS 3) 'No, the management has not done enough, we don't know about the policy.' (RS 4) 'There is still need a need for improvement, if the department can benchmark with other Departments like Dept. of Health a lot of improvement can be achieved, matters like cell phone policy, posters on the process of lodging a complaint to be clearly displayed.' (DD:CO 3). 'I do not think so as more power is with management and there's little room for anybody else.' (DD:CO 5) 'No, policy is not supported by deployment of necessary resources to ensure effective implementation, e.g. poor systems and lack of material and human resource.' (DD:CO 1) 'No, no one has ever taken me through the policies of the department except the ethics policy.' (DD:CO 2)	• A lack of monitoring and evaluation • Limited deployment of valuable human and financial resources by management • A need to benchmark
Commitment Bayrakal (2006) defines commitment as the degree to which individuals or organisations are willing to support and implement a policy. He argues that discretion, or the amount of freedom that individuals or organisations have to interpret and implement a policy, is an important factor that can affect commitment.	Financial and human resource commitment by an organisation	'This is a function that needs to be dealt with by committed officials and having a separate budget can assist in that regard.' (DD:CO 3) 'Budgetary constraints impede effective implementation.' (DD:CO 1) 'There is no budget specifically for the policy.' (RS 1) 'No, I am not sure if the staff that have been working for the department in the past years were not trained on this policy, but they do not seem to have a full grasp of the policy.' (DD:CO 2) 'I don't think there are enough and committed officials to implement this policy. The official will be protecting his or her colleagues to be exposed of the wrong doings'. (CSO 1)) 'I don't think there are enough and committed officials to implement this policy. The official will be protecting his or her colleagues to be exposed of the wrong doings'. (CSO 1) 'No, there are not enough, some officials are there because they were employed, there are few officials who are committed in implementing the policy, the department should do a survey and/or research to see who should be where.' (CSO 6) 'Not all staff members were trained on the policy it was only specific employees.' (RS 1) 'For what I have seen, we definitely do not have knowledgeable staff. There seems to be no one aware of what is needed and how it must be done.' (RS 4) 'No I don't think we have at the moment; implementation of policy requires a whole lot of things.' (RS 2)	• Human capacity constraints • Insufficient financial commitment
Capacity The public sector's capacity to implement government policy is determined by its structure, functions, and culture (Cloete 2011).	Training of staff on the customer complaints management system	'No, I have not been formally trained, I trained myself on various policies and researched.' (CSO 6) 'Unfortunately not, I would like to be trained on it, so that I can handle complaints effectively.' (CSO 7) 'I would say yes but honestly I cannot [re]call what they did at training, there was poor planning, and the facilitator seems to lack understanding.' (RS 2) 'Yes, the training was provided, and the training is up to the acceptable standard, however, I believe that continues training can assist as human turn to forget (refreshing the memory).' (DD:CO 4)	• Quality of training offered • A lack of a proper training plan • A lack of insight or technical skills by facilitators

TABLE 1 (Continues...): Summary of data collection and themes.

Dimensions (7-Cs Protocol)	Focus of questions	Proof quotes	Analysis
Client and coalitions Clients and coalitions are stakeholders in a policy, meaning that they have a stake in its success or failure. They can take action to support or oppose the policy, depending on their interests (Bayrakal 2006)	Are citizens consulted?	• 'Yes, it is noted in the entrance of every centres but our clients are ignorant and they are scared to lodge complain.' (CSO 4) • 'I do not think they were consulted enough they do not know much about the policy.' (CSO 5) • 'No, citizens not consulted about the policy. The policy is treated as an internal tool to handle complaints. That is the reason why citizens resort to social media in order to get attention.' (DD:CO 1) • 'Yes they were consulted, but to a lesser extent in that it was main on media, thus excluding a lot of people who do not have access to such.' (DD:CO 5) • 'In my opinion I believe citizens are consulted via different platforms of media, radio, television, newspapers, billboards etc. What I am not sure about it is how the clients receive the message. Even before the Pandemic COVID-19 information sessions and Imbizos were held and conducted to inform the clients about our policy and services-citizens were informed about our Impimpi, Toll free hotline numbers and other methods to consult the department.' (CSO 8) • 'No I don't think they were consulted; the department has failed to consult us officials.' (RS 4) • 'I have no idea but I believe that every policy before is approved there must be consultation with respective organisation.' (RS 1) • 'I would not think so or if it was done the majority were not consulted, the citizens are clueless on how and what to do when lodging the complaint.' (RS 2)	• Limited consultation • Processes not clear on how citizens can participate. • Consultation done through public gatherings and on social media platforms.
Communication Hussein (2018) defines communication as the sharing of information, ideas, and feelings between people. He argues that effective communication is essential for the implementation of development policies and projects because it allows for a shared understanding of the goals and objectives of the policy or project.	Are procedures to lodge customer complaints clear, user friendly, and visible?	• 'The process is clear and user-friendly. There are forms in different languages. If the complainant cannot write they can complain via telephone, emails can be used as well where the complainant can write or elaborate on the nature of the complaint.' (RS 1) • 'It's clear to us the staff who knows, others who don't know including the client they are in darkness.' (SUP 3) • 'No, not at all, we don't even know where to start if you want to lodge a complaints.' (RS 4) • 'The process is clear and user-friendly. There are forms in different languages. If the complainant cannot write they can complain via telephone, emails can be used as well where the complainant can write or elaborate on the nature of the complaint.' (RS 1) • 'There are clear but they are not user-friendly, maybe the cause of it, it's just the lack of understanding.' (RS 2) • 'No, the procedures are not clear-there is a need for posters with respect to the procedures of lodging of complaints.' (DD:CO 3) • 'Yes, because the clients are aware that they can use all sort of media and even writing to the highest official in the Department (Office of the Minister) to lodge complaints.' (DD:CO 4)	• Processes not clear, user friendly, and visible • Procedures not fully utilised • No communication strategy to deal with customer complaints received
Coordination Coordination and collaboration between and within organisations are essential for effective policy implementation. Intra-organisational coordination refers to the cooperation and communication between different departments or agencies within a single organisation, while inter-organisational coordination refers to the cooperation and communication between different organisations (Cloete et.al 2018).	Is there coordination of activities among sections pertaining to the implementation of the customer complaints system?	• 'No, training and development section does not go to … centres to educate officials on policies, and the communication department only sends out written manuals to inform on new policies or changes and finance section always has budget constraints therefore deprives officials from effective learning of policies.' (CSO 3) • 'Yes, it is part of Performance Agreement for Training and Development to see to it that those trainings are conducted. Communication Unit see to it that those advocacies are communicated to all via e-mails and constant reminders before the actual date of advocacy. Finance provide catering, venue and any other resources needed in order for the policy advocacies to be a success.' (DD:CO 4) • 'No, none of the mentioned business units has conducted like information session to educate the staff about the policy.' (CSO 1) • 'No, there is not enough support.' (CSO 5) • 'There is a delay in training to train the staff, I think it's a lack of funds.' (CSO 4) • 'Yes, I believe there is enough support from other Business Units.' (CSO 6) • 'Yes, there is a task team that is busy drafting a customer satisfaction survey and posters directing clients on how to lodge a complaint.' (DD:CO 2) • 'Yes, there is support as and when training needs are indicated on the PDP (Performance Development Plan), they arrange the requested training so it is also dependent on the manager and the subordinate to include such training so that it is on the Provincial Skill Plan.' (DD:CO 3) • 'Yes, it is part of Performance Agreement for Training and Development to see to it that those trainings are conducted. Communication Unit see to it that those advocacies are communicated to all via e-mails and constant reminders before the actual date of advocacy. Finance provide catering, venue and any other resources needed in order for the policy advocacies to be a success.' (DD:CO 4)	• No coordination of activities among units • No consequence management

Note: Data are derived from the semi-structured email interviews.

CSO, Client Service Officers; RS, Registrations Supervisors; DD, Deputy Director; CO, Centre Operations.

The *communication* component is about whether *the procedures to lodge complaints are clear, user friendly, and visible.* The participants acknowledge that because citizens express their views on social media and even write to the office of the Minister to lodge their complaints, this may indicate that the processes and procedures to lodge customer complaints are not clear to everyone who uses public services. Some of the participants caution that the procedures are clear but not user friendly, while others suggest that there is a need for posters on customer complaints processes and an increase in information sharing to ensure that citizens understand the procedures to be followed when they want to lodge complaints:

> 'Yes, because the clients are aware that they can use all sort of media and even writing to the highest official in the Department [*Office of the Minister*] to lodge complaints.' (DD:CO 4)

> 'There are clear but they are not user-friendly, maybe the cause of it, it's just the lack of understanding.' (RS 2)

The *coordination* component aimed at providing a response to the following question: 'do you believe that there is enough support from other sections (e.g. Training and Development, Communications, finance) to ensure that the policy is implemented effectively and efficiently?'

Data demonstrate a lack of coordination of activities among the responsible parties on the customer complaints management processes. The analysis of responses demonstrate that there are no information sessions conducted on customer complaints management policy by the Training and Development section within the HRM branch. Furthermore, there is no consequence management when people fail to do their work. This is an indication of a gap within the Employee Relations (ER) section. Data from the views of CSOs compared with those of the managers and supervisors illustrate a gap in their understanding of the support that other sections provide to ensure policy success.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the processes and procedures necessary for effective and efficient implementation of the customer complaints management system within the South African public service, specifically within the Department of Employment and Labour Free State. Those with the responsibility to implement – the mentors of the system – acknowledged that citizens were not knowledgeable of the procedures and the processes to file complaints, and therefore they did not utilise the system. Mctigue et al. (2018) argue that:

> [I]n order to eliminate barriers for effective policy implementation, policy makers must ensure that resources are be made available, and this should include appropriate funding and skilful and committed implementing officials. (p. 323)

Evidence from collected data points to the fact that there was a lack of consistency in knowledge across all levels of

the hierarchy, from managers, supervisors, and frontline officials. If staff in all levels of the hierarchy are not in agreement, it is very hard to implement any system.

While there is limited research in the area of customer complaints management in the public service, this study makes the following contributions. Firstly it is the first research to use Cloete's 7-Cs dimensions on policy implementation to examine the customer complaints management system within the South African public service. Secondly, it provides insights into how those responsible for implementing the customer complaints management system view the problems hindering the effectiveness of the system.

The research findings concur with the view of Zairi (2000) that:

> [M]ost organisations that face big challenges in customer complaints handling: suffer from a lack of systematic approach to complaints handling, do not recognise the importance of customer complaints at a strategic level, are ill-equipped in terms of systems and processes for logging in complaints, processing them, etc. not proficient with measurement and in non-financial areas such as customer satisfaction and complaints, have adverse cultures and too much of 'blame and reprimand' practices; and, have not embraced the concept of quality management and its related concepts. (p. 333)

The findings of the research have major implications for managers within the Department of Employment and Labour. In order to improve the system that deals with customer complaints, there is a need for a unit to be established specifically to deal with customer complaints management. In addition, effective communication strategies are essential to ensure that citizens are aware of the procedures and processes to lodge complaints. The study also emphasises the need for increased training for implementing officials in the area of public service delivery and customer service.

Furthermore, to achieve an excellent communication strategy to deal with customer complaints management, the service standards and service charters should be communicated to stakeholders to enable them to understand the standard that the institutions or department has promised, hold them accountable, and demand answers if they fail to meet those set standards. Responses from participants reveal that there is a need to increase the interactions with clients through *Imbizos*, community outreach, use of social media, and surveys to inform them about available platforms they can use to lodge complaints. In order to implement the policy effectively and efficiently, there is a need to intensify training and ensure that facilitators are knowledgeable in the area of public service delivery and customer services.

While the study has limitations in that it focuses only on the implementers of the system, it provides a foundation for future research to focus on the users, the citizens, to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the customer complaints management system within the South African public service.

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Disclaimer

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