

SECTION 3 IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF SERVICES

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3.1 Public reporting

Public reporting refers to the systems established to provide information to the public on the intended standard of public services, and to offer redress if those standards are not achieved.

The context for change

As in many settings, the present situation in Zimbabwe is mixed:

- Zimbabwe has its Ombudsman enshrined in the Constitution. The Ombudsman reports to Parliament on complaints by the members of the public regarding public administration.
- The National Social Security Authority, which administers Health and Safety regulations, monitors and periodically releases information on health and safety and publishes the breakdown of accidents in various workplaces.
- There is no statutory right of access, by the citizens to personal records held by government.
- The Director of Information in the Government of Zimbabwe regularly issues press releases on government information.
- The Office of the President and Cabinet handles public appeals arising from their dealings with various ministries.
- The Accountant General supervises and monitors government expenditures.
- The Parliamentary Committee on Public Accounts monitors expenditures by Ministries, follows up questions from briefing in Comptroller and Auditor General's Report.
- The Comptroller and Auditor General's Report to Parliament reviews audits of accounts of ministries and parastatals.

Implementing change

Since the Public Service Review Commission of Zimbabwe Report in 1989, criticisms of secrecy in the operations of government have continued, which have resulted in significant changes. A factor that helped to foster public debate was the lifting of the State of Emergency imposed before independence and retained by the incoming government because of security problems. The general effect of the state of emergency was to inhibit the provisions of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, which contains the bill of rights.

The bill of rights requires freedom of speech, expression, religion and protection on the release of information.

The degree to which the climate has changed can be seen by the way in which the Government has introduced a new practice in producing White Papers on proposed changes in law. For example, changes are proposed by the Government to the law on "Marriage and Inheritance". Introducing the public debate the White Paper, states: "The contents of this Memorandum do not represent settled government policy. They are no more than suggestions put forward with a view to stimulating public debate on issues of law which affect the lives of most people in Zimbabwe."

Supporting material

- (i) White Paper on Marriage and Inheritance in Zimbabwe
- (ii) Ministry of Information Press Releases

3.2 Introducing a quality management approach

Quality may be defined in the Zimbabwe public service, as elsewhere, as doing the right things well. More formally, quality management is intended to meet continuously the agreed customer requirements throughout the organisation at the right cost.

The Zimbabwe public service has seen considerable debate on the practicality and utility of introducing quality management approaches. In Zimbabwe, as in most other countries, quality management has developed first in the private sector. For the past three years, an increasing number of public sector personnel have received training in quality management. However, it does seem that in many cases the transfer of skills may not have survived the journey from the training centre to the practical field.

Taking some recent examples:

- The record expansion of government schools after independence inevitably led to a reduction in the quality of education provided at such schools. Primary education at least is now available to all children and the challenge now is how to improve the quality of education within the resources available. This is being tackled on a number of fronts, including upgrading schools and facilities, improving the conditions of service of teachers, increased teacher training and up-grading and a review of the school curriculum.
- Concern about poor customer service remains in relation to the issuing of passports and registering of births and deaths. However, the situation is expected to improve with computerisation.

Key elements in establishing quality systems include researching customer's perceptions of the service and their degree of satisfaction.

Except in the education and police sectors, it is difficult to identify many government departments, that have developed indicators for measuring the effective delivery of service. However, in March 1996, the Office of the President and Cabinet requested each ministry to draft a Client Charter to capture these concerns and to act as a catalyst in changing the perceptions of civil servants who did not understand their responsibilities to the public, i.e. what services are on offer, how they are to be delivered and in what time-frames.

Supporting material

- (i) Office of the Ombudsman Annual Reports
- (ii) Public Service Review Commission of Zimbabwe, May 1989

3.3 A particular initiative in ensuring a right of redress: the establishment of police community relations officers

An example of government determination to improve relations between the civil administration and the public occurred in 1986 when the government issued a policy statement on the introduction of police community relations. Following the struggle for independence, suspicion had grown between the police and the community affecting the effectiveness of the police service. As a way of improving several diverse complaints systems, the government directed the police to introduce a Community Relations Officer at each Police station.

The functions of the Community Relations Scheme are:

- to identify and solve problems that hinder working relations between the police and the community;
- to identify and address the needs of the community;
- to explain the functions of the police to the community;
- to explain the complaints procedures against the police to the community;
- to receive complaints against the police and act on them;
- to give a report every two weeks to the Government on how the scheme was operating; and
- to break the general malaise and raise public confidence in the police.

In general, members of the public who want to make complaints do not know how to go about making their complaints. While the practice has been to approach MPs, ministers and other senior officials. However, the best help can be given by those who are nearest to the delivery of the service.

An effective complaints and redress procedure is essential to make public service more customer-responsive.

A ministerial statement made on 27 July 1984 was followed by a press campaign in support of the ministerial statement and a feasibility study which reported a year later. A key recommendation in the feasibility study was that there should be a pilot project in one area.

There was a sustained campaign by the trainers to enable the police management in the pilot area to be ready to face the community and explore obstacles to the effective delivery of police service. This was followed in turn by further campaigns in the community to identify the main grievances. A dialogue was created and as the numbers of people seeking counselling service from the police increased, so the number of complaints against the police decreased.

With pleasing results in one area, it was now possible to extend the campaign to other parts of the country. This was followed and strengthened by the introduction of a police service charter intended to foster public awareness.

The major costs incurred were for training exercises.

The system is now:

- *effective* in that it requires an explanation of police behaviour to aggrieved parties in the community;
- *accessible* to users of services as the police community relation officers have the duty to visit schools and other community organisations;
- *simple* to operate, with clearly set out procedures and responsibilities allowing flexibility – if the complainant prefers to obtain legal advice, they are free to do so (however, in most cases, complainants are satisfied with the explanations and, if necessary, apologies);
- *speedy* with time limits for dealing with complaints;
- *confidential* to protect those concerned from retribution.

Supporting material

- (i) Parliamentary Ombudsman Annual Reports
- (ii) Police public relations posters
- (iii) Police Service Charter 1996