

## **An Evaluation of the Complaint Management System in the Public Sector in Mauritius**

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### **Abstract**

*Complaints represent a great source of knowledge for Governments to improve the standards of the services they deliver. With the growing expectations of citizens, Governments are bound to always find new strategies to raise service standards. New Public Management (NPM) is a citizen centric model which, among others, cover the management of citizens dissatisfaction mostly through complaints to improve quality of service of public sector organizations. An efficient and effective ComplaintManagement System (CMS) helps in collecting the right data to finally achieve service quality standards and increase customer satisfaction. While complaints management is of high significance in the private sector, it had a lesser impact in the public sector due to minimal market competition, pressures to retain customers or other such incentives to improve quality of service. But with the 'Vision 2030', the Mauritian Government implemented a central complaint management system in view to become a more citizen centric Government. In this paper, the Citizen Support Portal (CSP) is evaluated as the complaint management system in Mauritius. A survey has been carried out for data collection about the CSP in Mauritius. The data has been analysed using SPSS and Ms Excel. The results obtained show that apart from the complaints handling, best practices and the quality of service delivered by the system and its employees, there are other factors that affect citizen satisfaction impacting on the overall effectiveness of the portal.*

**Keywords:** *Mauritius, Complaints, Complaint Management System (CMS), Citizen Support Portal (CSP), Citizen Centric Government, Customer satisfaction.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The recent years have witnessed the development and changes in Government policies and service delivery worldwide. The relationship between citizens and public institutions is being re-shaped by a global public management revolution in order to alleviate the crisis of democratic legitimacy. Governments are working towards applying the New Public Management (NPM) model which, among others, proposes a customer-centric management culture, supported by transparency and accountability for results, in contrast to the traditional management style of public institutions and delivery of public services which is based on the principles of bureaucratic hierarchy, centralised planning and direct control. It has also been observed that Governments are increasingly facing various challenges including the rise in public expectations about standards of public service. These are mostly generated from the impact of forces of globalisation, growing commercialisation and marketization of public services which in turn has caused a shift towards a stronger consumerism model based on market-oriented principles and thereby, leading to major pressures on state institutions to invest and upgrade their existing services.

Consequently, the quality of public service now depends invariably on the level of customer (citizen) satisfaction. Like in the private sector, customer satisfaction has gained momentum in becoming an important indicator of performance in the public sector though market conditions and scope for choices are usually limited in public services. The same attention is also being given to customer complaints with the introduction of formal complaint procedures, and the institution to review processes to promote organisational learning and service improvement with the objective of improving customer satisfaction with public services.

In this paper, the main objectives are to assess whether the Citizen Support Portal (CSP), a CMS introduced by the Mauritian Government, is able to meet citizen expectations in using a complaints and feedback mechanism and to identify potential loopholes in the system which are critical indicators of customer dissatisfaction.

## **II. Literature Review**

Public policy development and public service delivery have been affected by the New Public Management (NPM) during the last decades (Gruening, 2001). NPM supports that users of public services should no longer tolerate poor services but should be encouraged to provide feedback for public service improvement, in turn, strengthening the sense of trust and confidence in Government. Among many other possibilities to be more a more customer-centric government, Mauritius has opted for the implementation of a Complaints Management System to assess specific citizen needs. Therefore, to understand the nature of complaint management in the public sector, both as a concept and in practice, it is important to consider literature that addresses the subject in the private sector as well, since it has been established for a longer period and reasons for customer dissatisfaction can be identified. Hence, this section draws heavily on business literature to supplement research published in public management which specially considers different ways of conceptualizing complaint management theory and practice and also summarizes what has been learnt so far in this regard.

### **2.1 New Public Management (NPM)**

The NPM as described by (Hope, 2001), (Waheduzzaman, 2019), (Singh & Slack, 2022) and (Dejana Zlatanović, *et al.*, 2022) emerged in response to some economic and social issues, such as too large and expensive public sectors, lack of responsibility and accountability mechanism, the need for information technology to increase efficiency and the demand for quality services by the public, which governments worldwide have been experiencing. It focuses on creating public value and defines citizens as customers of the public service. (Osborne, 2002) has identified the following elements, collectively known as the NPM and which are being practised by several countries around the world:

- When allocating resources and to show greater transparency cost cutting is important.
- The traditional bureaucratic organisations should be disaggregated into separate agencies.
- Management authorities within the public agencies should be decentralised.
- The function of providing for public services must be separated from their purchase.
- A market and quasi-market mechanism should be established whereby quality services are delivered to citizens through healthy competition among the sectors and by allowing citizens to choose their service and products according to their needs and choices.
- The public sector should seek to behave in a business-like-manner by adopting private sector styles of management by introducing performance management targets, indicators, output objectives, term contracts, performance-related pay and local determination of pay and conditions.
- There should be an emphasis on service quality standard and customer responsiveness.

The above philosophies will allow Governments to run more efficiently and at less cost as postulated by (Nunes & Ferreira, 2019) and (Lapunte & Walle, 2020). However, although these principles are undoubtedly good, most of them depend on the context. In their paper, (Oehler-Sincai, 2008) established that privatisation, decentralisation and corporatisation, in the absence of strong independent and autonomous monitoring institutions, can favour corruption and abuses. Furthermore, NPM gives the decision-making authority to the purportedly professional bureaucrat, thus getting rid of political control as mentioned by (Manning, 2001).

### **2.2 Complaint Management System (CMS)**

The identification and correction of various causes of customer dissatisfaction through properly disseminated information is referred to complaint management as discussed by (Fornell, *et al.*, 1996) in their paper. (Filip, 2013) mentioned that it is fundamental to identify the different causes of customer dissatisfaction to ensure the quality of service delivered. A complaint management system is not aim to provide solution to a particular dissatisfied customer but involves a process of investigating and preventing recurring complaints as mentioned by (Carney, 1996), (Johnston, 2001), (Vos, *et al.*, 2008) and (Taleghani, 2011).

The Mauritian Government is also adopting new reforms to meet citizen expectations and public needs while securing its policy and political arenas. Monitoring of the citizen satisfaction concerning public services is, therefore, fundamental to evaluate in order to have an idea of the impact of reforms and identify areas which require further actions but there are no standard survey instruments and methodologies available. In this context, a central complaint management system, known as the Citizen Support Portal (CSP), introduced by the

Government in 2017 to collect data, is eventually used to identify the different areas of improvement in public service delivery and at the same time, allow understanding of the reasons behind citizens dissatisfaction. The Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB) is also responsible for complaints management in different regions in Mauritius.

### **III. Methodology**

In this paper a quantitative method and research design has been used to analyse data collected. The objective of the study is to evaluate the CSP as a CMS and to ascertain the extent to which citizens are satisfied with the service.

#### **3.1 Data Collection**

A questionnaire was designed for the study entitled 'Customer Satisfaction Survey – Citizen. Support Unit Portal (CSP)'. The survey questionnaire has been disseminated to Mauritian citizens using the online platform. The questionnaire has been designed using Google forms and the link shared to citizens in different regions in Mauritius through the social media platform. The questionnaire contains the following sections:

##### **Section A: Profile of the respondents.**

This section collected information about gender, age, education level and the nearest CAB office to their residence.

##### **Section B: Willingness to use the CSP to make complaints.**

This section collected information about citizens' willingness to use the CSP to make complaints and also included barriers to make complaints and whether complaints have been addressed.

##### **Section C: To determine how efficiently complaints are being handled by the CSP.**

This section collected data on citizens' perspectives of the complaint handling practices while using the CSP and during their interaction with the CAB offices' employees. The questions were set according to the principles proposed by the Ombudsman Western Australia (2010) mentioned in the Literature review. This helped to find out if the portal and staff had the potential to capture sufficient and valuable information which would further be used to provide redress and improvement in public services.

##### **Section D. To determine if citizens are satisfied with the service quality of the CSP.**

A mix of the SERVQUAL model developed by (Parasuraman, *et al.*, 1988) and the quality dimensions identified by (Stauss & Seidel, 2019) was used. Hence, the quality dimensions used are as follows: Tangibles, Access, Friendliness, Empathy, Individual Attention, Active Feedback, Reliability and Speed of Response

##### **Section E: Reviews**

This last section which was open-ended gave citizens the opportunity to give their opinions without being restricted by imposed choices.

#### **3.2 Pilot Testing**

A pilot test of the questionnaire was carried out on fifteen random citizens of different age groups. It has been found that those who have ever called at a CAB office and have heard about the CSP found it easy to answer the questionnaire since the questions are clear and explicit while the others could not complete the questionnaire since they had never used the portal and some were not even aware of that type of complaint facility.

#### **3.3 Sample Size and Selection**

The study focused on Mauritius with an estimated population of 1,263,888 with 624,820 males and 639,068 females (Statistics Mauritius, 2021). Using the Slovin's formula, the sample size required was 400 respondents. Since 50.6% represents female and 49.4% represents male, the number of female and male candidates used for the survey are 202 and 198 respectively.

#### **3.4 Reliability and Validity**

The p-values which are less than 0.01 proves that the results are significant. The critical values for the Pearson's Correlation Coefficient,  $r$ , are above 0.196 showing that the questions are all valid.

### **IV. Data Analysis**

SPSS and Ms Excel have been used to analyse the data collected from the survey. Out of a sample size of 400 citizens, only 367 of them responded to the survey. The rate of response is 92% and among the respondents, there are 181 males and 186 females. 33.2% of the respondents are between 30 to 40 years old, 28.9% between 41 to 50 years old, 19.6% between 20 to 29 years old, 9.3% between 51 and 60 years, 7.4%

above 60 years old and 1.6% below 20. From the respondents, 62.4% studied up to the tertiary level, 31.1% up to the secondary level and 6.5% up to the primary level.

#### **4.1 Modes and Barriers to Complaints**

Among the respondents, 10.6% chose not to voice out their complaints, the other 89.4% showed their dissatisfaction using the different avenues available to them. 6.5% of them preferred to write letters, 9.8% chose to complain directly at the different information desks and 24.5% had used hotlines. It can thus be observed that a total of 40.8% of the respondents preferred to complain directly to the concerned ministry or departments. However, 48.5% of the respondents acknowledged that they preferred to use the CSP for complaints. 16.9% of them opted to convey their complaints through CAB Offices and the other 31.6% chose to directly register their complaints themselves on the CSP, at their own convenience.

208 respondents agreed that people are not aware of their right to make complaints and 160 of them stated that citizens find difficulty in identifying the right institution. On the other hand, 117 of the respondents said that complaints were continuously directed to other agencies for remedial action, 172 of them believed that complaint will not make any difference, 183 of them agreed that there were no provisions to make anonymous complaints, 221 of them stated that it takes too long to obtain a remedial solution, 80 of them feared that if they complained, their existing support will be cancelled and 15 of them stated that there were other barriers that affected complaints management. They suggested that the complaint process was unclear, there were no indications available on the complaint procedure, there were no right employee attending to the complaints, staff lacked the skills and commitment to help and sometimes no solution was being proposed to them. These barriers therefore, discouraged citizens from complaining to public sector agencies.

#### **4.2 Remedial Action**

62.1% of the respondent's requests had been attended and the other 37.9% did not receive a remedial solution. From those respondents who received a remedial action, 69.7% were satisfied with the action taken as compared to 30.3% who were not satisfied. There is thus an indication that people trust the public sector as citizens' complaints do not go unheard and thus, encouraging more citizens to use the CSP is a step in the right direction.

#### **4.3 Customer Focus, Visibility and Accessibility**

56.9% of the respondents agreed that they were properly welcomed at the CSP counters while 14.7% of them preferred not to give their views. The results hence show that customer focus was being applied practically, since more respondents agreed that they were properly welcomed to make complaints.

58.3% of the respondents agreed that the complaint procedure was clearly explained to them by an officer while 12.3% of the respondents opted not to give their views. It can be observed that some kind of visibility is being practiced as part of the CSP complaints handling practices.

58.6% of the respondents agreed that the CSP is user friendly and 3.8% of them remained neutral. This implies that the complaint procedure can be easily accessed since the portal is user friendly. In addition, 55.9% of them agreed that they could understand the procedure and 10.6% of them preferred to stay neutral.

#### **4.4 Responsiveness**

70.9% of the respondents agreed that their complaints were acknowledged within one week. The results illustrate that a higher number of people approved that their complaints were being acknowledged on time while 9.8% of them remained neutral. However, the results also demonstrated that the acknowledgement of complaints was not done by the concerned departments within one week. Only, 41.1% of the respondents agreed that their complaints were acknowledged within a week by the concerned department. Hence, even though CSP and CAB staff are striving to provide a higher responsiveness as good complaint handling practice, officers and mechanisms set in other departments could be hindering the good functioning of the CSP.

#### **4.5 Objectivity and Fairness**

61.3% of the respondents agreed that in general, they had been fairly treated during the complaint handling process. 17.7% of them preferred not to give their views. There is indication that the frontline officers and the CSP mechanisms are unbiased and provided fairness as part of the complaint handling practices.

#### **4.6 Confidentiality**

48.8% of the respondents claimed that the CSP facilitates the registration of complaints anonymously online. 60.5% of the respondents agreed that staff do respect their confidentiality upon request and would not disclose personal information when registering complaints.

#### **4.7 Remedy and Review**

58.8% of the respondents agreed that they had received a remedial solution following their complaints. On the other hand, 57.3% of them disagreed and stated that up to now they had not received any remedial solution. Overall, 51.7% of the respondents indicated that they had not received the remedy within two months and some are still waiting. However, 35.9% of them agreed that they had received a solution within two months.

47.9% of the respondents agreed that indeed the option to review the decision following their complaints is available. However, 37.8% of the participants mentioned that they had not been informed about these possibilities.

#### **4.8 Accountability and Continuous Improvement**

65.4% of the respondents were of the view that their complaints had been directed to the right department. On the contrary, 51.8% mentioned that they were not kept informed about the status of their complaints. The results therefore showed that public sector agencies were increasingly being more accountable since complaints are rightly directed to them but proper follow up is required from CSP staff.

56% of the respondents were aware that the services of the public sector have improved. Because this percentage represents more than half of the respondents, it can be deduced that the public sector is effectively learning from complaints.

#### **4.9 Tangibility**

49.3% of the respondents were in favour of the attractiveness and ease of use of the portal while 49.1% of them rated the time required to register the complaint online as high. Therefore, it can be observed that the service quality is high when the tangible dimension is being considered. However, some respondents mentioned that the portal does not provide for languages other than French and English, which can be a problem for citizens and expatriates who cannot understand or read these languages.

#### **4.10 Access, Friendliness and Empathy**

Only 52.6% of the respondents favoured a good accessibility to the portal. 57.5% of them gave a good rating concerning friendliness, politeness and courtesy. 53.6% of them were satisfied with the communication skills of the frontline employees. 52.9% of them favoured the time given to complainants to explain the issues they are experiencing and 46.9% of them responded positively to the willingness of staff to respond to citizen queries.

#### **4.11 Individual Attention and Active Feedback**

57.2% of the respondents showed they had received individual attention and 48.5% of them favoured the respect of privacy. Only 35.4% of the respondents were in favour that they received regular feedback during the complaint handling process. The findings thus, demonstrate that citizens are generally not satisfied with the active feedback system.

#### **4.12 Reliability and Speed of Response**

51.8% of the respondents were of the view that their requests are directed to the right department. 57% of the respondents were not satisfied with the time taken to find a solution to their complaints. 53.7% of the respondents were highly satisfied with the acknowledgement of complaints. On the other hand, 51% of the respondents were not satisfied concerning feedback from staff.

### **V. Conclusion, Recommendation, Limitations and Future Works**

The overall results from this paper should help the Mauritian public sector to efficiently improve the CMS, especially the CSP. Complaints' handling best practices, barriers to complaint making, fairness, service quality and citizen satisfaction are the main elements considered for a CMS. It is remarkable to note that obtaining remedial actions, the time taken to receive it, emotion-related constructs, that is, fairness, empathy and friendliness and barriers to complaints-making have a strong effect on complaints voicing medium. Although, the CSP has not defined time limit to provide a remedial action, it is still the preferred complaints voicing medium.

Furthermore, it has been observed that the CSP and its employees adhere to the best complaints handling practices. The analysis reveals that CSP has improved the way complaints are managed in the Mauritian public sector but responsiveness, confidentiality and remedy, still require more attention. Hence, the loopholes identified in the CSP complaints handling practices, hinder its effectiveness to collect maximum information about public. This information asymmetry thus prevents the Government from designing reforms for timely and proactive enhancement of the service and therefore explaining the citizen dissatisfaction with the public sector service delivery.

Additionally, the eight quality dimensions have been used to assess the quality service of the CSP, perceived by citizens. It has been found that although all those qualities are reflected by the CSP, the employees of the Citizen Support Unit and CABs, but unfortunately are not practised by the frontline officers of the different Ministries and Departments.

Although the CSP helps to direct complaints to the right departments, but if not supported by proper actions, solutions and reforms, it will lead to an overall bad service quality perceived by citizens and hence, lower citizen satisfaction. However, one of the crucial elements of the CSP is that it shows the accountability of each and every department. Since, the outcomes of complaints normally fall under the agencies providing the remedial action, it is important to include citizens' viewpoints about those government bodies as well. Hence, instead of judging the service of the public sector as a whole, citizen can assess the quality of service of each and every public institution individually. Thus, the effectiveness of the CSP highly depends on the proper service delivery of all the Government bodies in Mauritius.

### **5.1 Recommendations**

To help improve the CSP and citizen satisfaction, the following recommendations are made based on the tested and proven solutions applied to other Institutions' complaints management system:

Apart from English and French, other languages could be implemented in the digital interpreter on the CSP. The complaint policy should clearly mention the responsibility and accountability of each stakeholder involved in the complaint handling process. Additionally, through a citizen charter, citizens will learn the level of service they deserve versus to what they are receiving by encouraging more feedbacks and the willingness to use CSP. Registering complaints without providing personal information increases safety of the complainant and encourages more users to make complaints. Defining response time of each action taken during the complaint handling process will help in increasing trust and confidence since remedial actions will be provided to complainants within a time frame. Another benefit is that regular feedback can be communicated to complainants. Since the customer service starts with the first contact person, all staff should be trained to deal with complainants. Training will also provide the required skills to handle difficult cases and keep up to date with the new services of the public sector.

### **5.2 Limitations of study and Direction for Future Research**

In this paper, the methodology focused on an online survey from citizens who have experience using the CSP. Citizens not conversant with ICT were neglected when disseminating the questionnaire. Employees of the CSP and other officers from other government bodies, who have a better insight of the complaints handling practices have not been considered. Future works can include the conduct of qualitative surveys to have a better insight about complaints procedure. Assessing the type of complaints being registered in the different regions in Mauritius can also be useful for proper allocation of resources such as, human resource and funding.

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