



E-SERVICES AS CUSTOMER CARE RESOURCE AND MODE OF SERVICE DELIVERY DURING THE EPIDEMIC: A CASE STUDY OF POLOKWANE LOCAL MUNICIPALITY, LIMPOPO PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

This empirical paper aims to address the impact of electronically rendering services during the pandemic in the South African local government. It is quite evident that the new world of technology usage is amidst us, therefore, calls for an adaptation in customer service and care. It is within the interest of the study that the challenges of e-services are addressed adequately and the setback with e-services is highlighted, which reveals existing institutional capacity prior to the pandemic. The research method that was used in this study is the qualitative method because it uses structured interviews where one provides the explanation physically to the respondent, an explanation that would give a broader understanding of the study. E-services as customer care resources is the use of information technology for delivering government services, this is a way through which services are made available online. Digital transformation of public administration is a way to promote ethical practices and reduce the risks of corruption in local government. E-services as customer care promote efficiency and increase accessibility. In this way, service delivery transforms from traditional administration to electronic communication between the government and citizens. The findings of the study show that the pandemic affected many groups in the community, which required an immediate response from the municipality, as well as a plan to eliminate half of the difficulties encountered during the pandemic. The city has to take a more polished and planned approach. It is suggested that the municipality invest in their employees. Personnel investment is critical to ensure that during a pandemic, no duties overlap or go unfinished due to a lack of workers.

Keywords: *E-services, community, participation, epidemic, local government.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The failing municipalities of South Africa have been hit by a perfect storm of crises caused by COVID-19, which brought together institutional capacity issues, existing inefficiencies, and problems with service delivery. Municipalities are needed to implement new plans and policies to ensure that services can be provided to all communities under lockdown and after lockdown in a sufficient, effective and efficient manner (Buccus, 2021). According to the constitution, South African municipalities are required to ensure that service delivery within their borders is consistently effective and good. Mamokhere, Musitha and Netshidzivhani (2021) assert that for effective online service delivery, it is crucial that digital public administration be implemented in all aspects of government.

It is crucial to realise that information and communication technologies (ICT) will continue to drive public administration and society's adoption of e-government in the future and that this adoption will depend on one's capacity to accept technological innovation (Manda and Backhouse, 2017). The fundamental objective of improving service delivery is to increase the efficiency and efficiency of government operations in this area. The lack of service delivery, which is a major worry for the people of South Africa, as well as the country's high unemployment rate, poverty, and inequality, can all be addressed through technology (Allen, 2019). The municipality struggled

during the lockdown as a result of issues with the municipal institutional capabilities, which were raised by COVID-19.

The difficulty with e-government initiatives is the absence of IT infrastructure, trained workers, and ICT competence (Chetty, 2021). Because there are not any specialists that locals may reach through the government portal, inadequate human resource training is a significant challenge in rural areas. It is important to keep in mind that the capacity to use computers and the Internet is a key success factor in the implementation or even the social isolation of poor and rural communities (Cloete, 2012). Without adequate funding, South Africa would never be able to implement digital public administration, which will lead to the nation moving backwards even if this is the only option, particularly during pandemics. Local governments are under tremendous pressure to act as an outcome of the outbreak.

1.1.THE CONCEPT OF E-GOVERNMENT

The delivery of services within the government and between the government and the public using information and communication technology is known as digital government services. To improve efficiency, transparency, and citizen participation, e-services are the use of information and communication technologies in government operations and procedures (Ndebele and Mdlalose 2021). The application of technology to improve the access of citizens, business partners, and employees to and delivery of government services. It has the capacity to establish a new model of public services where all government agencies provide their constituents with services that are contemporary, streamlined, and seamless (Norris and Moon, 2005). Filling out tax returns, renewing a driver's license, and applying for a pet license are all common digital services.

It is an impossible task to try and limit the concept of e-governance to a certain term, because it is 'an evolving and diverse collection of practices', and it will take some governments years to perfect it because it requires certain skills and knowledge (Kanjere and Choenyane, 2021). It will be difficult for any government to practice e-government without understanding what e-government is all about. This is government initiatives that happen to be complex and intended to use new and emerging technologies to support a transformation in the operation and effectiveness of government derived from government reinvention to deliver and serve the society, which is one of the functions of government. It has got advantages of its own if effectively implemented by public officials (Steytler, de Visser, and Chigwata, 2021).

The digital public administration and other new digital technologies have great potential to change the way in which government officials operate and deliver services, the ability to inflate a series of public services or making it a priority to deliver services that are of higher quality to all community members, more especially those that were denied access to such services during the politically disadvantaged years of South Africa. Furthermore, if citizens are granted digital access to public services in urban areas, it will give hope to citizens in rural communities also because they may be able to exploit scale economies by tapping into the urban market, thereby allowing them to provide a near-efficient level of service provision (Mazzucato, Qobo and Kattel, 2022). Democratic processes, public policies, and enhanced public services are the unprejudiced intent of e-government.

1.2.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theory of system change

The theory of system change plays a critical role in e-government because it explains the changes to the government system and administration in general. This theory highlights how the use of new technologies will inevitably lead to new forms of government and the role of the 4IR. For e-Government to function properly, the government that is implementing it must have ICT experts and everyone must be able to participate in this technology and have access to the Internet.



Using ICT in government entities can be perceived as a reciprocal reinforcement process that leads to a shift in the government system, with new and more complex forms of control and discipline being implemented to ensure stability and predictability. This will also help in terms of fastening service delivery, only if people can use this technology (Bekkers and Meijer, 2012).

Coursey and Norris (2008) lamented that interactive, transactional, and integrated e-government is far greater. Governments should use it to facilitate interactivity, transactions, and integration. If implemented properly, e-government should be able to achieve e-participation or e-democracy, as well as a significant shift in the interaction between governments and citizens. Local governments should be able to provide information through their website, hence it is important to invest in IT and skills development. E-government will help to respond to the customer's need. Provision of good quality services should be prioritised and it is important that e-participation is taken into account, and this will help strengthen democracy in the country.

This theory of system change is critical for this study because it emphasizes the relevance of change and adaptation in the field of public administration. In practice, the public sector workplace is one in which every desktop has a computer and where e-mail, word-processing suites, and the World Wide Web are used on a regular basis. This contrasts with the environment ten or even fewer years before when the telephone and the mail were the principal working instruments. The use of electronic technology in government has been an extraordinary story of organisational learning and adaptation that is still unfolding. The network inherent in e-government has also given a new focus to working techniques that emphasize group cooperation and information sharing, typically cutting across the vertical division of labour that is typical of traditional bureaucracy.

1.3.PROBLEM STATEMENT

The local municipality of Polokwane is in Limpopo province and has faced inconsistencies with service delivery since the emergence of COVID-19 in 2020. The purpose of this study was to identify the detrimental impact that the COVID-19 epidemic had on the delivery of services for both the community and the municipality. The Polokwane local municipality used procedures to guarantee that certain services continued to be provided even during the lockdown, resulting in a setback for others (Shava and Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022). The current institutional capacity prior to COVID-19 and funding constraints due to lockdown caused a setback with certain services.

The municipality found it increasingly difficult to provide water, sanitation, and electricity to communities, and this is due not only to the enormous pressures imposed by COVID-19, but also to preexisting challenges such as failing aged infrastructure that has not been maintained. As a result, it is an obvious fact that COVID-19 had harmful consequences. Municipal personnel was affected by the negative effects of COVID-19 (Hingston, 2021). Several illnesses and deaths of municipal personnel have occurred since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has inevitably had a significant impact on service delivery (Nel and Lewis, 2022).

The underlying consequences of COVID-19 on service delivery have shown to require measures to ensure efficient and effective supply of services to communities (Nel et al., 2022). There was also a lack of institutional capacity in power management units and engineering, as well as a lack of sewer infrastructure maintenance plans and an energy/electricity capacity gap. The municipality will not be able to sustain future developments unless new programs are adopted; unlawful connections and bridging of electricity lead to electricity losses; and creating and maintaining suitable local roads that always provide accessibility. The disruption of other services has had a direct impact on constituents and has also caused problems.

The purpose of the introduction of the electronic government was to try and improve the standards of service quality and increase the overall efficiencies of government. According to Naidoo (2012), although there is an implementation of e-government, there are still some serious gaps which need to be closed in the South African public administration. In terms of service delivery, South Africa is faced with a multitude of challenges, including poverty, inequality, corruption, insecurity, illiteracy, and a skill shortage, to name a few.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.Covid-19 and its effects on service delivery

The focus of this review of the literature shifts from a broader view of the impact of COVID-19 in other African countries to a narrower view that includes South Africa, the province of Limpopo and the city of Polokwane and then addresses the impact on rural constituents. Covid-19 has had an international impact on the nature of service delivery. In addition to directly killing at least 200,000 people in Africa, the covid-19 pandemic disrupts critical health services and undermines years of progress against other deadly diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus, tuberculosis, and malaria, which remain the region's leading causes of death (Joseph and Williams, 2022). Access to health services fell dramatically globally in 2020 compared to 2019. The exceptional drop in patient attendance has been shown to be due to issues that confront both medical facilities and the patient community in African nations such as Mozambique.

In the context of South Africa, the epidemic and subsequent lockdown offer a significant threat to the socioeconomic well-being of any municipality and its residents (Munzhedzi, 2021). The COVID-19 epidemic has aggravated the problem of local government, local governance, and municipal service delivery in South Africa, particularly in the context of the country's broader development and governance environment (Chetty,2021). During the lockdown, one of the most pressing concerns was the supply of water and sanitation. Shava et al. (2020) go into great depth about corruption in the water and sanitation sectors. He demonstrates how several tactics were used to manipulate water and sanitation supplies. These include the use of panels and current legislation to give existing rulings a veneer of legitimacy. Municipalities are responsible for providing water and sanitation, making it a highly profitable sector given the importance of local politicians in the allocation of contracts.

Transparency was not practiced because of COVID-19, leading to corruption and waste of COVID-19 funds. COVID-19 posed hurdles to service delivery and showed certain pre-existing issues that communities had been dealing with even before the pandemic. Since the lockdown, communities have been disappointed with the supply of essential services. COVID-19 has presented various challenges to local governments, while also highlighting their critical role in providing a successful response to the pandemic when given the appropriate resources and duties.

2.2.Communities using e-services

e-Services are an endeavour to make life easier for individuals and businesses by offering online access to a variety of services (Nel et al.,2020). In an unanticipated situation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, public service delivery cannot be discontinued; instead, it must be offered online, using available digital technologies. Job application (recruitment), e-community engagement, updates on current topics, self-service portal for consumers, service-information exchange, power and prepaid water, and website design are among the services that municipalities want to offer online. Although municipalities have identified these services for digital development, it is the responsibility of their municipal council and therefore management to ensure that their municipality and communities are adequately prepared for a successful start to offering e-services (Ndebele et al., 2020).

Councillors, for example, encourage residents to use the Internet. Community development workers should meet and consult with impoverished people who do not have internet connections. To ensure efficiency and effectiveness in providing services to community members, the municipality uses a variety of platforms or electronic technologies. Communities with profound poverty, congested housing, and limited employment flexibility are more vulnerable to COVID-19. In times of COVID-19, vulnerable communities face enormous risks; Other vulnerabilities such as homelessness, disability, elder age, or poor mental health can increase the risks individuals experience (Kanjere et al., 2021). The goal of this subtopic is to describe the efficiency of e-government and e-governance services during a national lockdown in South Africa. The term of



efficacy, as used in this subtopic, refers to the employment of e-government and e-governance service delivery systems to effectively supply e-services to South African citizens during the national lockdown. The first section will focus on e-municipal services during lockdown and the capacity of community members to use these services. Many municipal services were halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the e-Services continued to work well in various municipalities, although limited operations and enquiries were authorized in several African municipalities due to weak ICT infrastructure. Most municipalities focused solely on essential services such as power, garbage disposal, water and sanitation, and municipal accounting (Steytler et al., 2020). Even municipalities with a better ICT infrastructure, such as e-Tshwane, were unable to meet the problems posed by the lockdown. In South Africa, e-Tshwane is a component of the City of Tshwane Smart City strategy.

2.3.E-Participation

E-participation is described as the use of electronic methods to encourage public participation in government decision-making or rulemaking. It is further described as the use of information and communication technology to extend and intensify political participation by allowing citizens to connect with one another and with their elected officials (Dandjinou, 2007). It is the use of information and communication technologies by citizens to participate in various democratic processes in a country. E-participation aims to promote inclusive and conscious participation or rather inclusion of citizens in decision making, particularly when it comes to concerns of governance (Ndou, 2004).

The greatest way to determine whether e-government is a success or failure is through public engagement, hence e-participation is an important component of e-governance. Constituents' ability to access public services is also an important or crucial component of e-government, but it is insufficient without the interlink of e-participation (Yusuf, Muntasa, Anamisa, Kustiyahningsih, and Wiyono, 2021). E-Government requires increasing, expanding and deepening transparency and citizen participation. To be considered effective, electronic government must be evaluated through participatory discourse and participation. However, it can be agreed that throughout the Covid-19 epidemic, South Africa has improved its participation through e-Governance and allowed maximum engagement of residents in the country, implying that everyone has access.

Marston, Renedo, and Miles (2020) discovered that some municipalities are unable to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic due to a lack of resources and capacities for virtual community engagement. As a result of a lack of resources, the community is not involved in the annual review or the community consultation in the development processes. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered municipal activity, as well as the opportunities and methods available for citizen engagement. In other words, COVID-19 has drastically altered the lives of South Africans. The strict restrictions on the location, which prevented group discussions and public meetings in person, have disproportionately impacted rural populations. Indonesia has a special culture called Gotong Royong, which means that everyone participates and works together to solve the problem. This culture is essential to support participation against COVID-19, as this pandemic was a common problem worldwide.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The qualitative research method will be used in this study because it involves organised interviews in which one physically delivers the explanation to the respondent, an explanation that will provide a broader grasp of the topic. This method was found to be relevant to this study because it uses an interview technique for data collection; the interview can be structured or unstructured; it also allows the researcher to interact with their respondent on the ground and be fully active in the research (Mason, 1996).

3.1.OBJECTIVES

- To find out how COVID-19 affected the delivery of services in the Polokwane municipality.
- To find out if communities can use e-services to access municipal services.
- The study sought to investigate the usage of digital platforms in public administration to provide services within the municipality.

3.2.STUDY AREA

The research will be carried out in Polokwane, a city that was originally known as (Petersburg) and is part of the Polokwane Local Municipality. The Polokwane local municipality is a Category B municipality in the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province. It is one of the four municipalities in the district, accounting for slightly less than a quarter of the total land area. It is a metropolis that has experienced incredible growth and wealth for more than a century. The Polokwane Municipality accounts for approximately 3% of the total surface area of Limpopo, yet it is home to more than 10% of the province's population. Due to the large population of the town, the study focuses on the Sebayeng community.

3.3.SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

In this study, purpose-based sampling and simple random sampling will be used. The study will employ a purpose sampling of municipal officials due to their character and knowledge, as well as their representation of community members in government offices. Purposive sampling, often known as a judging or expert sample, is a non-probability sample. The primary purpose of a purposive sample is to establish a sample that may be assumed to be representative of the population (Ndebele, 1994). The study will employ basic random for public involvement, and because all community members are equally affected by the same challenges of service delivery, and due to accessibility limits, only a few community members will be chosen at random.

3.4.DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUE

Interviews

In this study, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with municipal officials and ward councilors using the structured interview. This was done to understand how digital public administration or e-government assists the municipality in terms of fastening service delivery and how it benefits communities under the municipality. The researcher used the interview guide to facilitate interviews with the officials.

Focus group discussion

Focus group discussions are very fundamental in this type of study because it allows each participant to give his opinions and opinions on issues that affect his life. The good thing about focus groups is that there is no wrong answer; only the researcher can choose the information that is relevant to the study and use it for analysis. Community members from all selected wards came and participated in the discussions and made greater contributions to achieving the objectives of the study.

3.5.FINDINGS

INSIGHTS FROM MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the three officials of the municipality working in different departments. Revenue and customer service, environmental health, and



disaster management. The questions were derived from the objectives of this study and were open minded based on the responses they provided. The details of the interview are as follows.

Using e-services to access services in the Polokwane local municipality during epidemic

One of the objectives was to determine whether communities could use electronic services to access the municipality and the objective carries questions around awareness campaigns about the use of e-services. In this study, e-services are defined as a platform created by a municipality that aims at enhancing customer service by remotely making all resources and communications accessible online. One of the respondents reported that their electronic services are operational and that the municipality always strives to respect any customer online, but there have been some challenges with communication and this has led to some delays with bills.

Another respondent reported that

'We have a communication department in the municipality, and they have platforms that they use to communicate with our customers, such as SMS facilities, Facebook, WhatsApp, website, and, where necessary, radio. On a monthly basis, when we send the statements, we use emails, and we also upload them on our website for the customer to download and this means that if there is any message, we put it together with the normal statement. "

The respondent also indicated that they experience delays in payments and when they followed up with those accounts, they discover that there was a communication problem between the municipality and the customers. The lack of communication was due to some people changing their account details and the municipality would send information to inactive accounts.

Another reason for the lack of communication was due to mistakes caused by people who were dealing with accounts, and they made mistakes sending the wrong account details.

4.CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1.CONCLUSION

Digital public management has both advantages and disadvantages. Some community members see this as an opportunity to eliminate corrupt behaviors and accelerate service delivery in various places, while others believe it will not work for the local people due to limited internet connection and resources. Due to a lack of skills and infrastructure, South Africa will always struggle to successfully implement e-government in the country. There is a critical need for ICT talent development, which is one of the issues contributing to the absence of successful e-government deployment. Some municipal officials are ready for e-government because they recognise the value and need for effective service. Nevertheless, the government fails to prioritize online services, which is why a large number of people continue to travel to municipal offices to receive some services.

4.2.SUGGESTIONS

An effective e-Government should be able to attract residents who are already connected online to use online services while also encouraging the rest of the community to get online. To improve services, the government should ensure that people who are not online begin to access information on the municipal website. The municipality should educate people about e-government, including the influence it has on service delivery and the elimination of corrupt practices. It is also suggested that the South African government invest in ICT and skill development to effectively implement e-government.

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