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# IMPROVING PUBLIC SERVICES BY MEASURING CITIZEN PERCEPTIONS AND SATISFACTION WITH SERVICES

#### Abstract

Provision of timely, high quality and efficient services is very important for every sector, including the public sector.

Understanding citizens' perceptions, as beneficiaries or users of these services is equally important in analyzing and evaluating the performance of each public institution and organization. Lacking plan and budget allocation for research activities to measure citizen satisfaction with public services, and failing to compare such survey results between services, organizations or wave to wave results of the same organization means deficiency of a broader view and consequently disability to take the necessary steps in improving public services and meeting citizens' needs, demands and expectations. Taking into consideration that the public sector is financed by taxpayer citizens, it is necessary to plan the evaluation of public services and measure citizen satisfaction despite the challenges that may arise due to such practice.

To gain a broader understanding of the subject, secondary research method was applied – desk research – by reviewing existing research reports and studies in Albania and other countries, literature and publications from public organizations, research agencies, professional journals, professional network / portals, etc.

**Key words:** customer satisfaction, citizen satisfaction survey, measurement, public service, public organizations.

#### Introduction

Customer satisfaction survyes are studies that aim to determine consumers' opinion of the quality of goods and services offered by a private or public organization (1), so in other terms to understand how satisfied are the customers.

As mentioned in the analytical report "2018 KwaZulu-Natal Citizen Satisfaction Survey" the citizen satisfaction survey aims to understand how citizens rate services provided by their provincial and local governments to assess service delivery performance, inform improved service delivery plans, and to provide a platform for government to engage more directly with its constituents. (2)

Depending on what concern, companies or organizations, changing the objectives, methodology and results, but all have a common "denominator", satisfaction, whether related to customers or citizens. (3)

Satisfaction is an overall psychological state that reflects the evaluation of a relationship between the customer or consumer and a company (organization), environment, product or service. (4)

The distinction between 'clients' and 'citizens' is often made by the fact that the former are direct recipients of government services via dealings with a service provider. 'Citizens', on the other hand, refers to taxpayers who do not actually benefit from a service but may draw an indirect benefit, and who contribute to it and therefore have an interest in it. The public sector simultaneously serves both these constituencies, with sometimes conflicting interests. (5)

### Why it's important to measure citizens' satisfaction with public services?

As many other authors and surveys quote, Xenia Papadomichelaki and Gregoris Mentzas (2011) in their paper "Analysing e-government service quality in Greece" emphasize that the quality of service in the public sector

has become an issue of great concern. Many organisations try to conduct self-assessessments and measure the quality of their own services. (6)

Citizen satisfaction represents a modern approach for service quality in local communities and serves the development of a truly citizen-focused management and culture. Measuring citizen satisfaction offers an immediate, meaningful and objective feedback about citizens' preferences and expectations. In this way, service performance may be evaluated in relation to a set of satisfaction dimensions that indicate the strong and the weak points (of an organization). (3) It is not possible to make a performance evaluation without considering the expectations and perceptions of beneficiaries. (7)

Understanding citizen attitudes has always been important to government and the public sector. Political leaders strive to respond to the electorate's priorities and public service managers want to deliver on citizen expectations. But a clear view on what matters to the public is more important than ever in an age of spending restraint – it allows the public sector to make informed choices about allocating resources and reforming services in ways that deliver the most citizen impact. (8)

City governments, local authorities and decision makers, need to respond to the demands of different groups and manage the allocation of resources between different, and often competing, claims. (9)

At the other hand, the citizens' expectations on services gradually increased by reason of developing technologies and improvement of communication. (7)

#### Public organization's benefits from measuring citizens' satisfaction

A comprehensive approach in measuring citizen satisfaction and using satisfaction assessment can bring considerable benefits to the institution(s) concerned where it is understood as a management tool and not as a way to judge individual performance. If used properly, it will help develop a service delivery culture throughout the public service. There are several benefits public organizations that will accrue from investing in a citizen satisfaction survey such as: (a) Ensures that these organizations continue to

meet the goals set out in their respective service charters; (b) Identifies what citizens' want as opposed to what each organization's officials think they want; (c) Identifies what citizens' want as opposed to what each department's officials think they want; (d) Provides feedback to front-line staff, management and political leaders about programme effectiveness; (e) Provides feedback to front-line staff, management and political leaders about programme (and policy) effectiveness; (f) Evaluates the effectiveness of new programme strategies from the perspective of the citizen; (g) Evaluates the achievement of each organization's vision; (h) Develops proactive responses to emerging citizen demands (thereby reducing crises and stress for employees and citizens); (i) Validates requests for increased resources to areas in need of improvement. (10)

#### How to measure citizen satisfaction

There are many different ways in collecting satisfaction information (data). The experience that customers have of services can be explored in various ways. Qualitative research techniques can be used to better understand a service through the customers' eyes, and to explore in depth their experiences and expectations. Quantitative research can provide numerical measures of customer satisfaction and statistically representative findings to assess the performance of a service and provide information to drive improved service quality. (5)

Different types of surveys are possible and in order to define the most appropriate method a choice has to be made between quantitative methods: face-to-face with interviewers asking direct to respondents, via post, telephone, mail, or web-based (11), and/or qualitative methods like focus groups or in-depth interviews.

The way in which customers interact with a service varies (e.g. face to face in a local office, over the telephone or by submitting forms online or in the post) and customers may each use a variety of channels. The channels that are used will influence decisions about which data collection methods to use, as well as on the levels of satisfaction with the service. If a service is largely provided online, for example, online data collection is a viable and

even desirable option. Likewise, if the majority of interactions take place in person or by telephone, then online data collection may not be viable, especially if a significant minority of customers do not have access to the internet. The best way to explore how customers define the service is through qualitative interviews with customers, using techniques such as customer journey mapping and to tailor questionnaire content and language accordingly. If the experiences of customers are particularly complex, it may be worthwhile conducting exploratory qualitative research rather than attempting to interview them in a larger scale quantitative survey. Same applies if the target group is hard to reach. The global approach suggests mixing the use of different tools, combining quantitative and qualitative instruments, to get an exhaustive view of customer satisfaction. (5)

On the other hand, it is highly important to contionously monitor and assess the performance of public service providers, which is of a great support in evaluating the trends on citizen satisfaction index, and which in other terms facilitate the understanding of how effective and efficient are the policies and activities of organization(s). Beneficiaries of the services are also important for the service suppliers. Besides rendering the services, how efficient they are and whether they are responded to positively be also significant issue. Therefore, the satisfaction surveys should be done at regular intervals and the service area should be determined with regard to this. (7)

Based on numerous survey reports in many countries, especially in Canada and USA, it's evident that many municipalities conduct systematic citizen satisfaction surveys once every one to two years. (2) (10) (12) (13) (14) (15) (16) (17) (18) (19) (20) (21) (22) (23) (24) (25) (26) (27) (28) (29) (30) (31) (32) (33) (34)

Such periodic measurement allows comparison of results of the overall organization's performance and/or specific services provided on a year to year basis. In other cases, the citizen surveys are conducted nationally and measure their satisfaction with various services provided by different public organizations allowing comparison of results between the service providers.

Furthermore, there are regional or international citizen satisfaction surveys which compared the results between countries. (35) (36) (37) (38) (39) (40)

## Legal framework on measuring citizens' satisfaction in Albania with public services

The Cross-cutting Public Administration Reform Strategy (CPARS) (41) is a document drafted by the Albanian government and which provides a general framework for the reform of the Public Administration for the period 2015-2020. It acknowledge various issues and challenges in regard to services provided by the public administration such as: the public receives many services from the administration, but few of them are organized in such a way as to be understandable and accessible by the public; there is still much time spent to get the service and there is considerable bureaucracy, which generates even corrupt practices; along with a significant lack of transparency in the activities and decision-making. Thus, necessary to take an initiative to review the work processes related to service delivery and create a friendly approach to the public, along with the amendment of the relevant legal framework.

CPARS 2015-2020 emphasize the vision that will guide the administration's new strategy is the following: "Development of public administration, which provides high quality services for citizens and businesses in a transparent, effective, and efficient way through the use of modern technologies and innovative services and, that complies with the requirements of European integration through impartial, professional and accountable civil servants, part of efficient setups."

Among other objectives and activities, the Albanian government has foreseen creating a mechanism for the citizens that will monitor the quality of service and provide their opinion through direct contact via SMS only for recipients of service. Monitoring of quality, costs and effectiveness of service delivery will be made at regular intervals. The opinions of the citizens will be the measuring indicator for the quality of service delivery (CPARS, objective 9.3). But there's no such activity foreseen at the table which identifies the synthetic indicators according to the strategic

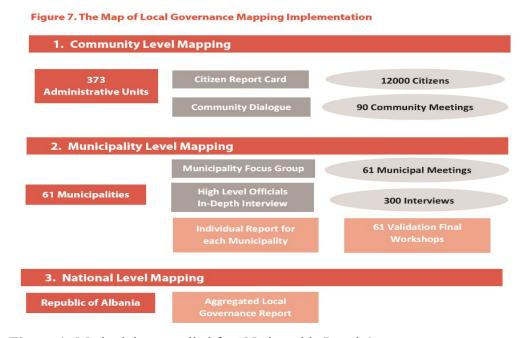
objectives, nor into the New Action Plan 2018-2020 (42).

Another objective of the strategy (no.8) identifies as one of its synthetic indicators the periodic measurement of level (%) of public satisfaction visà-vis the quality of service delivery starting from 2015 and which will be verified through the monitoring reports of Ministry for Innovation and Public Administration (MIPA). But the New Action Plan 2018-2020 has foreseen only the implementation of one function related to service quality assessment applying star system for all electronic services available at ealbania portal.

The "Long-term policy document on the delivery of citizen centric services by central government institutions in Albania" (43) drafted by MAPI highlights that it demands a fundamental shift from operating on the basis of a narrow or isolated departmental view onto a citizen-centric perspective; or in other terms the transformation of service delivery in Albania through the citizen-centric approach. And as part of program "Innovation against corruption: Building a Citizen Centric Service Delivery Model in Albania", one of its four pillars relates to obtaining citizen feedback and monitoring the performance of public administration in service delivery, while one of the key interventions is to ensure citizen feedback for every service request. Furthermore, this document (43) specifies that measurement of the citizen satisfaction index (CSI) with service delivery will be conducted with focus on four areas: access to information, ease of access to services, quality of services, and deadlines of their delivery. And that it will occur regularly through surveys, feedbacks or consultations, as specified on its objective 2.2.4.

#### Citizens' satisfaction surveys conducted in Albanaia

An important initiative in this regard is the survey "Governance Perception in a Reforming Albania. Nationwide Local Governance Mapping" (44) which was conducted during the period of October 2016 till April 2017 by three research organizations using a combined methodological approach as described in the figure below.



**Figure 1:** Methodology applied for "Nationwide Local Governance Mapping in Albania"

This survey (44) has been commissioned as one of the activities under STAR 2 project "Consolidation of the Administrative and Territorial Reform" funded by the European Union, Sweden, Italy, Switzerland, USAID, UNDP and the Government of Albania. The initiative attempts to assess the level and practices of good local governance as seen from citizens' and municipal officials' points of view across all (61) Albanian municipalities. The underlying belief of this assessment is that findings at municipal and national level will benefit local decision-makers, but also central institutions, international partners and civil society organizations that assist institutionally and/ or programmatically local governance in Albania.

The desk research conducted on behalf of this paper identified some other various infrequent surveys in Albania measuring citizen satisfaction with

public services provided by some municipalities (45) (46) (47) (48) (49) (50) (51) (52) (53); or other public authorities such as state police or social services (54) (55) (56) (57) (58) (59). These surveys are implemented mainly by non-profit research organizations in the context of specific programs or projects funded by various foreign and international donors, and less often with the request or support of the Albanian public authorities. Some of the published survey reports conducted by Partners Albania, EuroPartners Development, Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM), or Boria are focused on citizen perceptions and satisfaction with some municipality services, such as in Fier, Lushnje, Vlorë, Shkodër, Pukë, Kukës, Korçë, Rubik, etc. Some other surveys are focused on state police and citizen satisfaction and trust, mainly funded by the Swedish government programme "Strengthining Community Policing in Albania" (60).

The abovementioned study reports are published online on the official websites of research organizations who conduct the survey and donors who commissioned it, but it is difficult to find any trace of their publication on official websites of the Albanian public institutions. So there is no evidence of implementing planned and systematic cititizen satisfaction studies about or on behalf of public organization. And still there is no evidence on actions taken by the public organization based on these random studies, and no evidence on how successful these actions have been in improving public service and the organization's performance.

#### **Conlusions & recommendations**

Nowadays citizens expect the public service to get use of the development of technology, information and communication, along with best practices from the private sector, and offering a public service as good as or even better than the service received from private providers.

Measuring citizen satisfaction can be conducted in various forms, yet one of the most direct and effective is the citizen (users) survey with quantitative and/or qualitative research methods.

Measuring citizen satisfaction by conducting surveys is actually one of the

initial stages of a continuous cyclic programme which encompass the philosophy of citizens' participation, putting citizen first and lead to public service transformation. Therefore citizen satisfaction survey must be considered as a tool in evaluating the services and performance of any public organization.

Consumer and citizen satisfaction surveys are very important as they provide the organization with a wealth of knowledge and deeper understanding of the benefitiaries' views, and which definitely are a solid basis for future actions to improve these services and the performance of the organization.

Deciding on the best methodological approach to implement citizen satisfaction survyes depends very much on the objectives and target group(s); however it is recommended to apply combined methodological approach with qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative methodology allows the organization to investigate more in-depth the cizitens' perceptions, expectations, satisfaction, and which are the drivers and barriers of such satisfaction, while the quantitative methodology quantifies these results. When designing the methodology, special attention should be paid to define the target group, to which segment of population is the survey addressed to, and to include marginalized groups and those who are difficult to reach.

Citizen satisfaction surveys should be planned and implemented periodically; that's the only way to compare the wave to wave results understanding the organization's progress in terms of service delivery and quality; and to evaluate the effectiveness of actions that took place between the survey's waves.

The citizen satisfaction research findings must be communicated at all levels of the organization, from the top management to the head of departments and their teams, and also to the front-line staff who are face-to-face with citizens on a daily basis. It is equally important for the public organizations to be transparent and publish the survey results, which shall be easily accessed by general public and/or interested third parties. Publishing the results online in the organization's official website make

evident the activity itself, the overall results and periodic changes on citizen satsifation index. There are numerous channels of communication to publish the results, including the traditional channels such as print, television to the most contemporary and used ones such as interent.

Based on the broad experience and best practices from other countries and private sector, some recommendations are made. The very first recommendation is addressed to the Albanian government to review and enhance the legal framework in this regard. More specifically, to authorize public organizations to monitor and evaluate the public opinion through citizen satisfaction studies, as an efficient tool of measuring the performance and also as a key performance indicator.

Some other practical recommendations are addressed to public organizations in general, and municipalities in particular, such as: (a) to plan citizen satisfaction surveys which shall be conducted by independent and experienced research organizations; (b) to allocate budget and/or raise funds for this purpose; (c) to measure citizen satisfaction with periodic surveys once every 1-2 years by addressing the general population and more specific segments of users with qualitative and quantitative methods; (d) to announce the start of data collection and method in the website and/or other means; (e) to publish the research findings on internet and other traditional channels of communiton too; (f) to be open-minded in accepting critics and suggestions for improvement, and show willingness to establish a culture of citizen-centric service delivery.

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