

Accessing information through Zimbabwe's Parliamentary Constituency Information Centres (PCICs)

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Abstract

This article focuses on the performance of Zimbabwe's Parliamentary Constituency Information Centres (PCICs) in disseminating parliament generated information and providing a platform for public participation. Questionnaires were used to collect data from office assistants (OAs), members of parliament (MPs) and constituents. In-depth interviews were conducted with development partners, the Clerk of Parliament, and officers of parliament. Document analysis, site visits, and observations were also used to collect data for the study. It was found that although the introduction of PCICs was well received by various stakeholders, the information remains a critical concern because of its inadequacy and lack of currency. It was also found that there are challenges encountered in disseminating parliamentary information to constituents. The article recommends ways of improving the dissemination of parliamentary information through Zimbabwe's PCICs.

Keywords: Parliamentary Information, Constituents, Information Dissemination, Information Access, Zimbabwe

Introduction

In Southern Africa, the Parliament of Zimbabwe pioneered the creation of constituency offices (referred to as Parliamentary Constituency Information Centres in Zimbabwe), and a number of countries in the region, including Zambia, Botswana, South Africa and Malawi have followed up and developed constituency offices. There were three major reports dealing with information service reforms for the Parliament of Zimbabwe in the 1990s. These included The Zimbabwe Parliamentary Information Consultancy Report (Englefield, 1996); Report on the Provision of Information, Analysis, Parliamentary Education, Public Relations and Information Technology Services to the Parliament of Zimbabwe (Verrier, 1997); and The Parliamentary Reform Committee Report (1997). The Parliamentary Reform Committee Report led to the establishment of PCICs which is the main focus of this article. Section 62 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) provides for access to information. In particular Section 62 (1) of the new Constitution clearly states that:

every Zimbabwean citizen or permanent resident, including juristic persons and the Zimbabwean media, has the right of access to any information held by the State or by any institution or agency of government at every level, in so far as the information is required in the interest of the public accountability.

Parliament as an institution of government holds a lot of information for public interest, and has created PCICs to improve access to such information. A Parliamentary Constituency refers to a specific geographical area in Zimbabwe that a Member of Parliament (MP) represents in the House of Assembly. In view of its importance, many parliaments in developing countries have initiated programmes to establish parliamentary offices in each constituency, where MPs are available for consultation by constituents. Traditional sources of parliamentary information in Zimbabwe that receive process, store and disseminate information include *committees and journals, research, and public relations, and library departments*. These departments are physically located within parliament building. The Parliament of Zimbabwe reforms that were started in 1997 which included the need to reform the information services, involved a major exercise to establish PCICs in all the 120 constituencies during the life of the Fifth Parliament from 2000 to 2005. The aim was to close the gap that existed between parliament and the public and between the MP and the public as well.

The objectives for the establishment of PCICs were two-fold, namely to provide public access to parliamentary-generated information, and to act as a platform for public participation. The main parliamentary publication found at the PCICs is the *Hansard*. There is a need to provide information resources in various formats, such as television, radio, newspapers, bulletins, Internet and social media. The distribution of these publications to constituents is not evenly balanced because access to PCICs is affected by office location and political partisanship. The purpose of this article is to produce valid insight about the process, patterns, and constraints of the dissemination of parliamentary information by PCICs to both primary (MPs, constituents, OAs, and Officers of Parliament) and secondary users (Government Departments, local authorities, NGOs, researchers, schools and tertiary institutions). In doing so, it will identify the factors influencing the effective functioning of PCICs in Zimbabwe with a view to analysing the constraints and recommending methods for improving access.

Access to Parliamentary Information Services in Africa

The idea of access and public participation is part of wider trends reflected in declarations, international instruments and strategic plans which represent major efforts to universalise democracy and freedom of access to information, and freedom of expression. Examples that were found relevant for the study were The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 19 of the UDHR, 2001), The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC, 2006 – 10) and Inter -Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2006) strategic plans, The Declaration on Parliamentary Openness, and the International Federation of Libraries Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development (2014). A recent declaration is *The IFLA Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development (2014)*, which is expected to succeed the Millennium Development Goals. The declaration advocates the need for access to information and set the agenda for development for the next decade by: adopting policy, standards and legislation to ensure the continued funding, integrity, preservation and provision of information by governments, and access by people.

A number of African countries have introduced information services to disadvantaged areas, and there has been a steady and increasing, trickle of publications devoted to this topic. There have also been a number of conferences and workshops on the theme. Probably, the most complete synthesis of the information services theme was published by Sturges and Neill (1999). They suggested that the movement is influential in most countries of East, Southern and West Africa. It is found in Anglophone countries and also exists in particularly lively form in Francophone West Africa. Ideas and experiences from the Francophone countries have been drawn together very effectively by Ndiaye (1999) in his research entitled *Performance measurement and project evaluation for African rural information services*. From these research projects, the movement has produced speculative writing and some experimentation. The speculation has been fruitful; the research helpful and stimulating but it is the experimentation that is now most important. The movement is now much more than a matter of words.

Rosenberg (1998) questioned in 1993 if such services were sustainable beyond an experimental phase.

The importance of access to information by the public cannot be overemphasised particularly in developing countries. Information is so vital and that is why Nyerere (1967) stated that:

while other countries in the world aim to reach the moon, we must aim for the time being at any rate to reach the villages by providing them with necessary information.

Thus, access to parliamentary information by the majority of the constituents could provide them with knowledge on the functions of parliament, as well as enable them to participate in parliamentary activities. This is so because the provisions of parliamentary information in Zimbabwe and in Africa at large are focused mainly in urban areas where the parliament is situated whereas parliamentary constituencies are scattered across the countryside where the majority of the people live. This is a scenario regarding information services in Africa that have been modelled on Western patterns, without taking account of the local environment and non-literate masses (Kantumoya, 1992). An access to information service encompasses the removal of any restrictions that would discourage citizens from enjoying equal services (Tell, 1998) and access to parliamentary information is crucial in this regard. Obholzer (2011) defines parliamentary information as:

Information about parliament's roles and functions, and information generated throughout the legislative process, including the text of introduced legislation and amendments, votes, the parliamentary agenda and schedule, records of plenary and committee proceedings, historical information, and all other information that forms part of the parliamentary record, such as reports created for or by parliament.

With the establishment of constituency information centres, we are experiencing for the first time in history that citizens can have immediate

access to information to participate in a democratic society. This view is supported by findings that several African countries have embraced the establishment of constituency information centres to provide access to parliamentary information, for well-known economic, political, and social reasons (Sawi, 2003). Parliament pursues a number of goals, including the development and dissemination of information, building support for the political system and providing services to all constituents. Both MPs and constituents need access to information about these goals. The Global Centre for ICT in Parliament's (2010) research for the World e-Parliament Report in 2010 showed that parliamentarians need access to information to generate and maintain public support. They also need to focus on opportunities that digital tools can offer to become more effective in information dissemination (Sobaci, 2012). Without ready and easy access to relevant information, MPs have no hope of keeping pace with rapid societal changes, nor will they be able to make the right decisions. Likewise, constituents want to be kept informed about decisions made in parliament that affect them. They need access to information in order to solve problems in their everyday lives. This information provides them with a sense of security, achievement and control.

Constituents however face certain difficulties in accessing parliamentary information. In a study of the problems being faced by various parliamentary information systems, Tell (1998) identified the difficulties of equal access by citizens and concluded that:

a genuine approach should operate freely along particular lines. Problems such as political power, leadership, democracy, liberty, and political systems are common to every state. Interests differ and solutions arrived at in one environment can sometimes fail to have a bearing on similar institutions in one area or several areas within the state.

Nonetheless, if parliaments want citizens to have a say in the affairs of the country, they must first secure their right of unrestricted access to information that is necessary for participation in parliamentary activities. Kohl (1991) explains that once the legal obligation to respond to information

requests from parliament is binding upon all government agencies, then it guarantees the identification, analysis, condensation, and dissemination of, accurate, and up-to-date information on a strictly non-partisan basis.

Parliamentarians and Constituents' Information Needs

Information need is the lack of appropriate information on which to base choices that could lead to benefits that may improve the citizen's well-being (Tester, 1992). Tester's definition is a good starting point for a consideration of what we mean by information needs. It emphasises that we seldom want or need information for information sake. Information is a means to an end, something that enables us to make choices. Devadason and Lingam (1997) categorised information needs by distinguishing between unexpressed and dormant information needs. Dormant needs are needs of which a user is still unaware and that can be activated by an information system. With unexpressed needs, people are aware of their needs but do nothing about them. Smith (1991) classifies information needs as being either general or specific. General information need is the need for current information on topics of interest, while specific needs refer to problem, solving and solution— finding information. According to Atkins (1973), information need is:

a function of extrinsic uncertainty produced by a perceived discrepancy between the individual's current level of uncertainty about important environmental objects and a criteria state that he seeks to achieve.

Kebede (2000) agrees that satisfying information needs of users is a dynamic process, and once knowledge has been accumulated, that can lead to renewed information needs. In a debate on legislative information services, Robinson (1991) concluded that, while legislative information services can be seen to provide specialised research in the narrow sense of providing services for a specialised clientele, they differ from libraries and other information service providers. The latter must provide information on the breadth of human knowledge, rather than concentrating on a range of

subjects relevant to a specialist clientele. Parliamentary information needs to cover the whole universe of knowledge. Cuminghame (2009) argued that information needs relating to legislation must respond to the question: What do parliaments do? Answers to this question affect the need for, and functions of information in parliamentary libraries and information services. There is scope for endless debate but the truth is that parliamentary information services are dedicated to parliamentary activities. This means that its staff must understand how parliamentarians operate; what the information needs of citizens are; and how to respond to these needs.

The information needs of MPs and constituents relate to their varying roles. A survey conducted by the Global Centre for ICT Parliament (2010) showed that parliaments are struggling to meet ever growing citizen expectations. Data suggest citizens hold parliamentarians to account principally for the services they are able to deliver outside parliament, not for their law-making role, nor their ability to oversee the executive. Research has shown that parliamentary capacity to deliver is being stretched to the limit, and might even be taking them away from their parliamentary duties. The Global Parliamentary Report 2011 surveyed over 600 parliamentarians, and suggests that working on citizen issues is the single most time-consuming aspect of a parliamentarian's work.

It is clear that constituency service is important both to citizens and MPs. Studies in different regions of the USA suggest that the public believes that some form of constituency service is the most important part of an MP's role, while MPs themselves no doubt see the benefit of meeting the public's needs for various reasons, not least to improve their chances of re-election. The same survey conducted for the Global Parliamentary Report in 2011 indicated that parliamentarians considered law-making to be their most important role (52.3%) of respondents; followed by holding government to account (17.2%); and solving constituent problems (12.5%). When asked what they thought citizens see as their most important role, however, the result was different. Parliamentarians believed that, in the eyes of the citizen, solving citizen problems was the parliamentarian's most important role (36.4%); followed by law-making (20.3%); holding government to account (16.2%); and promoting the interests and economy of their constituency (13.1%).



Figure 1: Ranking parliamentarians' roles
(Source: World e-Parliament Report 2008)

The 2008 World e-Parliament Report identified that many parliaments lag in their ability or effectiveness as public institutions to inform and interact with citizens. To avoid the risk of eroding public trust, parliaments need to define new strategies and a vision aiming to re-engage the electorate, interact with citizens, inform citizens, and provide multiple channels for receiving and disseminating information. Casini (2008) provided examples of parliaments moving from the almost “traditional” citizen input solutions to the more interactive and popular, social networking media. In Brazil, lawmakers connect with the constituents through various social media. The Brazilian e-Democracia project relies on the use of social media combined with offline legislative events, such as committee hearings, and conferences. The initiative is intended to reach a broad segment of the public, parliamentarians, researchers, non-governmental organisations and interest groups. The main goal is to permit easier access to the decision-making process by citizens not associated with strong interest groups or corporations that usually lobby for access to the centre of power in Brasilia, where the national government is located.

To involve constituents in parliamentary issues

and challenges, there is a need to address the digital divide; access to technology for all citizens, complexity of multiple languages, literacy, and people with disabilities. This will encourage citizens to make effective input and valid comments through their representatives. Citizens are requested to make democratic choices. To do this, they need a considerable amount of information about what goes on in the parliament; the choices on offer; and the consequences of choosing one course of action in preference to another. The issues are clarified at critical decision-points, such as elections or referendums. But there is an underlying expectation that citizens will act as informed citizens, gathering, sifting and using information for the collective, personal, and individual benefit. This is a fundamental principle of democratic political systems.

Without understanding the above relationship between legislators and constituents, it would be difficult to make any meaningful information needs analysis of these two groups. Parliamentarians require free and easy access to relevant, accurate, timely and impartial information if they are to accomplish the difficult tasks they have been elected to implement. Similarly, constituents need feedback information from parliament and information generated within their constituency.

Zimbabwe's Information Policy and Legislation

Information providers across the country operate within the regulatory framework of the National Information Policy (NIP). Information policy regulates the kind of information collected, created, organised, stored, accessed, disseminated and retained (Nnamdi, 2008). According to Niegaard (2007), national information policies are put into practice through legislation and other state initiatives, national programmes, and projects. Usually associated with government information, information policy also establishes the rules, within which private information providers and the media operate, and establishes guidelines to regulate participation in the information sector. These arise from the political, economic and social needs and conditions existing within a country. Feltoe (2003) identifies some of the following NIP regulatory provisions in Zimbabwe:

- Constitution of Zimbabwe (Section 62 Amendment (No.20));
- National Libraries and Documentation Services Act (No.11 / 85);
- Censorship and Entertainment Controls Act (No. 694 / 81);
- National Archives Act (No. 8 /86);
- Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPA), (Chapter 10:27); and
- Public Order and Security Act (POSA), Chapter (11:17).

The NIP should inform Parliament of Zimbabwe's (PoZ) information policy. In turn, PoZ's Information Policy should guide the operation of PCICs. However, this is not the case with regards to Parliament of Zimbabwe Information's Policy.

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were found to be inevitable. However, the qualitative approach was predominant because it was found to be better for answering more fully the main research question. If the answers to the research question were to be obtained simply using statistical data, then measuring access to information through PCICs would be shallow and incomplete. A mixed methodology approach (Ngulube, 2010) was

therefore used to collect and analyse data. The key target groups of the study were the administration of parliament— officers of parliament and development partners on the one hand and MPs, office assistants (OAs) and constituents on the other hand, justified the methods selected for this study. Questionnaires were used to collect data from OAs, MPs and constituents. In-depth interviews were conducted with Parliamentary Programme Coordinator, representing development partners, the Clerk of Parliament, and officers of parliament. Observations were also used to collect data during visits to PCICs to study constituents' behaviour in their natural set and other activities taking place within the PCICs. Document analysis was used to reinforce and compare with the participants' verbal accounts. Documents analysed included OAs monthly and annual reports, parliamentary reforms reports and Administration of Parliament reports. The response rate indicated that 255 out of 625 constituents completed and returned the questionnaire; 15 out of the 25 copies of the questionnaire were returned by office assistants; and 20 out of 25 returned by MPs.

An appropriate sampling strategy was adopted to obtain a representative and statistically valid sample of the whole population. The sample selected covered geographic sub-areas of the primary sampling units, that is, the provinces in which constituencies fall. It captured the rural-urban divide and population sub-groups. The sample plan used was purposive sampling in some instances, and random sampling in other clusters of target groups. This was an attempt to keep costs to a manageable level, while simultaneously avoiding too much focus on a convenient geographical region, such as areas close to Harare. This was also done to avoid bias and damaging effects on reliability. A purposeful or judgmental sample was selected based on the knowledge of a population and the purpose of the study.

Purposive sampling was used to choose the geographic province for the first stage of selection in the sample plan. This decision was based on opinions of which districts are typical or representative in some sense or context, for instance most Mashonaland districts were typically "ZANU PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front)" districts, while the metropolitan and Matabeleland Provinces were typically "(MDC

Movement for Democratic Change)" and some were typically sway provinces. Neither political party was in control of sway provinces. Random sampling techniques provided the probability in the choice of elements from the sampling population. Saunders, Philip and Thornhill (2003) describe how a random sample can provide satisfactory and valid surveys for researchers. With regard to the sampling frame, stratification was done to avoid bias and subjective opinion on population subgroups. Stratification was chosen as it greatly decreased the likelihood of selecting an odd sample. With the stratified sample, every constituency in the sample frame had a chance of selection that was unbiased and unaffected by subjective opinion. The stratification ensured each stratum was as different as possible from other strata, thus the Bulawayo Metropolitan province was excluded as it just mirrored Harare. Most PCICs in

Bulawayo and Harare fall under Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party, hence the decision to choose one of the provinces. This ensured heterogeneity among strata with homogeneity within strata.

The reason for choosing urban and rural areas as two of the strata for the survey thus becomes clear. According to Denscombe (2003: 23), urban and rural populations are different from each other in many ways with regard to types of employment, source and amount of income and average household size. The total number of registered voters was obtained from *The Report on the Delimitation exercise for the 2008 Harmonised Election*. For example, from the 10 provinces in Zimbabwe, Mashonaland Central had 488477 registered voters from 18 constituencies. There are currently 7 PCICs operating; and from these, 4 PCICs were sampled. The four sampled PCICs had 106904 registered voters. Table 1 shows the sampling frame that was used.

Table 1: Sampling frame

Province	Total Constituencies	Total Registered Voters	Total PCIC	Total PCICs in Selected Provinces	Sampled PCIC	Registered Voters in Sampled PCICs
Bulawayo	12	313459	8			
Harare	29	766478	15	15	7	187082
Manicaland	26	709664	11	11	5	133630
Masvingo	26	699200	11	11	6	160356
Midlands	28	739502	11			
Mashonaland Central	18	488477	7	7	4	106904
Mashonaland East	23	624638	9			
Mashonaland West	22	583503	9			
Matabeleland North	13	345263	2			
Matabeleland South	13	342280	6	6	3	80178
Total	210	5,612,464	89	50	25	668,150

(Source: Report on the Delimitation Exercise for Zimbabwe's 2008 Harmonised Elections)

There are no specific rules for sample size in qualitative research. On determining the sample size for this study, the researcher considered the availability of time and resources, and the extent of the need to provide valid and reliable data. The main sampling units considered for constituencies was 25 per PCIC, consisting of 12% of the 210

Constituencies, providing a sample greater than 10%. The sample size was 5/10 provinces, 25/50 PCICs, 668 150 /3006099 registered voters in sampled province. Sample size accounted for the spread of PCICs across the country. The costs and precision was optimally maintained, while also addressing the constituents' needs for those desiring data for sub-populations or sub-areas. The locations of PCICs selected were from the following categories (table

Table 2: Locations of PCICs

Province	PCIC	Category
Harare	1. Harare Central	Central Business District
	2. Mt. Pleasant	Low Density
	3. Budiriro	High Density
	4. Glen View South	High Density
	5. Kambuzuma	High Density
	6. Mbare	High Density
	7. St. Mary's Chitungwiza	Dormitory Town
Masvingo	8. Gutu North	Growth Point
	9. Gutu Central	Growth Point
	10. Masvingo Urban	Town
	11. Bikita West	Growth Point
	12. Mwenezi East	Rural set-up
Mash Central	13. Mazowe South	Communal
	14. Mazowe West	Farming
	15. Mt. Darwin West	Communal
	16. Mt. Darwin South	Growth Point
Matabeleland South	17. Bulilima South	Town
	18. Bulilima	Town
Matabeleland North	19. Umzingwane	Rural Community
Manicaland	20. Mtare Central	Border Town
	21. Makoni South (Nyazura)	Farming
	22. Mutasa South	Rural Community
	23. Dangamvura-Chikanga	High Density
	24. Headlands	Farming

2).

The locations of PCICs that were visited range across urban, rural, farming, border and dormitory town constituencies.

Discussion

Data for access related issues are discussed below under the following categories: why constituents visit PCICs, PCIC distance from constituent residence, number of monthly visitors, physical location and challenges in accessing parliamentary information.

Why Constituents Visit PCICs

Constituents visit PCICs primarily to find information about legislation. The data in figure 1 indicates that the *Hansard* was the most dominant publication consulted at PCICs with 49% of constituents visiting PCICs to collect or read this publication. The *Hansard* captures what happens in Parliament, and visitors to the PCIC enjoy reading the *Hansard* and visit the centre to monitor what is happening in Parliament. It provides information on current legislative debates. Constituents need current

information about what is going on in parliament. They expect current awareness services (33%) and to be informed about availability of the latest copies of the *Hansard*, new bills being discussed in parliament and any other publications from parliament.

Beyond these reasons, people want to learn about parliament in general. Parliamentary study is taught at tertiary institutions throughout the country, and for this reason, PCICs are visited by researchers, teachers, students and lecturers. From time to time, MPs invite councillors and members of the public to the PCIC with a view to updating them on the latest developments discussed in parliament, as well as new laws and programmes. Given the challenges that the country faced before 2008, people had many grievances and would want to meet their MPs for assistance in solving their problems (27%), and seeking funds for projects (14%). The lower ranked reasons for visiting PCICs showed that constituents may also want to invite the MPs to officiate at community functions, such as graduations, school prize-giving ceremonies, weddings, and official community project openings, as well as access

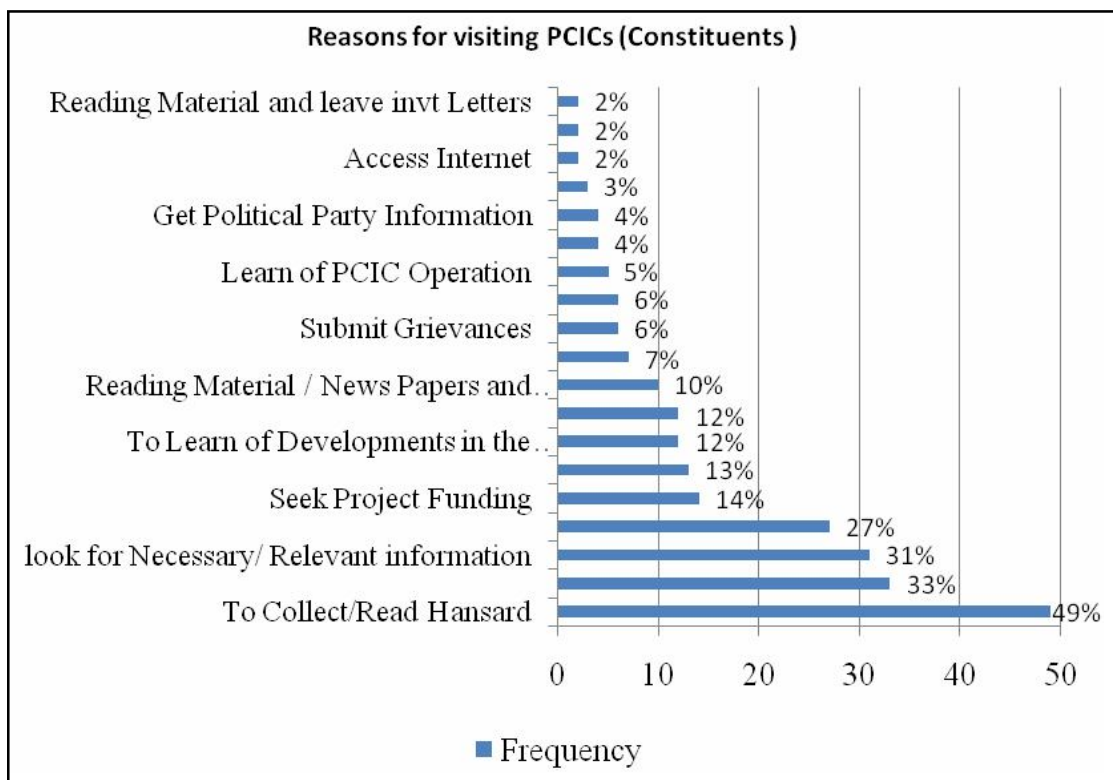


Figure1: Reasons for visiting PCIC

Internet (2%). The fact that none of the PCICs are connected to the Internet at the time of study explains this score.

These findings also harmonise with the interview response by the public relations officers. Public relations outreach programmes to educate the public about functions of parliament revealed that most constituents who had used the PCICs were found to be excited about obtaining copies of the *Hansard*. One constituent respondent had summed up his/her opinion in the questionnaire as follows:

If I don't find the Hansard on my visit to the PCIC then next time I won't visit... ' I enjoy reading the Hansard especially when topical issues are being debated in Parliament.

These are some of the various reasons why the public visit the PCIC. Some of the reasons have not been anticipated by the Parliament of Zimbabwe prior to implementation of the PCICs project. The significance of these findings is to provide pointers and urge Parliament to improve and increase the number of parliamentary publications that are allocated to PCICs

constituents want to get the opportunity to improve their understanding and knowledge about activities that take place in Parliament.

The significance of the data provides pointers and urges Parliament to improve and increase the number of parliamentary publications that are allocated to PCICs. Inadequate parliamentary publication supplies affect access. Parliament of Zimbabwe has been unable to provide timely a variety of information sources in various formats required by the public. The PCICs mainly rely on MPs delivering parliamentary publications on return visits to parliament; and the gap increases when the MP is unavailable for long periods. Due to the late delivery of publications, it is difficult for the centres to obtain information or current awareness services timely. This has been a major respondent concern.

PCIC Distance from Constituent Residence

The majority of constituents came from within a 1km radius of the PCIC. About 25% of visitors travelled less than 1km to the PCIC; 50% travel 2km and less, while 75 % travelled between 2km and 7km.

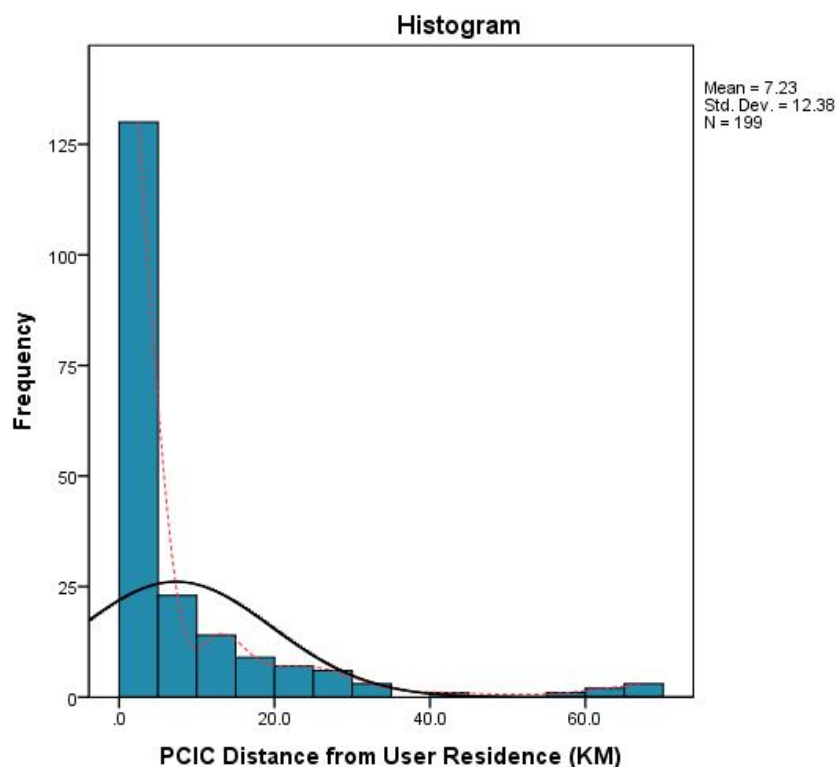


Figure 2: Constituents' distance from PCIC (KM)

Some constituents came as far as 60km from the PCIC as shown in figure 2. The mean distance travelled is 7.2km (see figure 2).

The aim of this indicator was to show how easy or difficult it is for constituents to reach and gain PCIC access, and to use its information resources and other services. This aspect of access relates to distance from constituents residences, centre locations, number of visitors per month, frequency of visits, and other access barriers. Constituents are affected primarily by the distance from the information centre. Visiting or not visiting the information centre could also be the result of information availability (see figure 1). However, there are also constituents, who travel very long distances, as far as 60km to visit a PCIC. These could be councillors coming for important constituency meetings, or individuals requiring MP interventions, or they could be teachers from distant schools visiting on pay day.

Physical Location

Location has an important bearing on access to the PCIC. Figure 3 shows that:

- most PCICs are located at Council premises (47.2%); and
- a significant number are located in towns, government institutions, growth points, private business premises and industrial areas.

Because Council premises and town centres have buildings and infrastructure such as telephone facilities, electricity, security and transport networks, these issues of centrality, infrastructure and political neutrality are of paramount importance with regard to PCIC location. PCICs that were located at private premises, residences and industrial areas were mostly those belonging to MDC stronghold because they could not obtain offices at Council premises. Documents analysed revealed Parliament administration's involvement in visiting council offices to appeal for space to accommodate PCICs after it was discovered that MPs belonging to MDC were failing to obtain offices for PCICs for political reasons. This occurred after it was discovered that rural district councils preferred MPs from one political party instead of others. As a result of failure of the parliament to pay rentals and rates, most MPs were chased away from rented premises. They moved to industrial areas, or used their own residences. Most

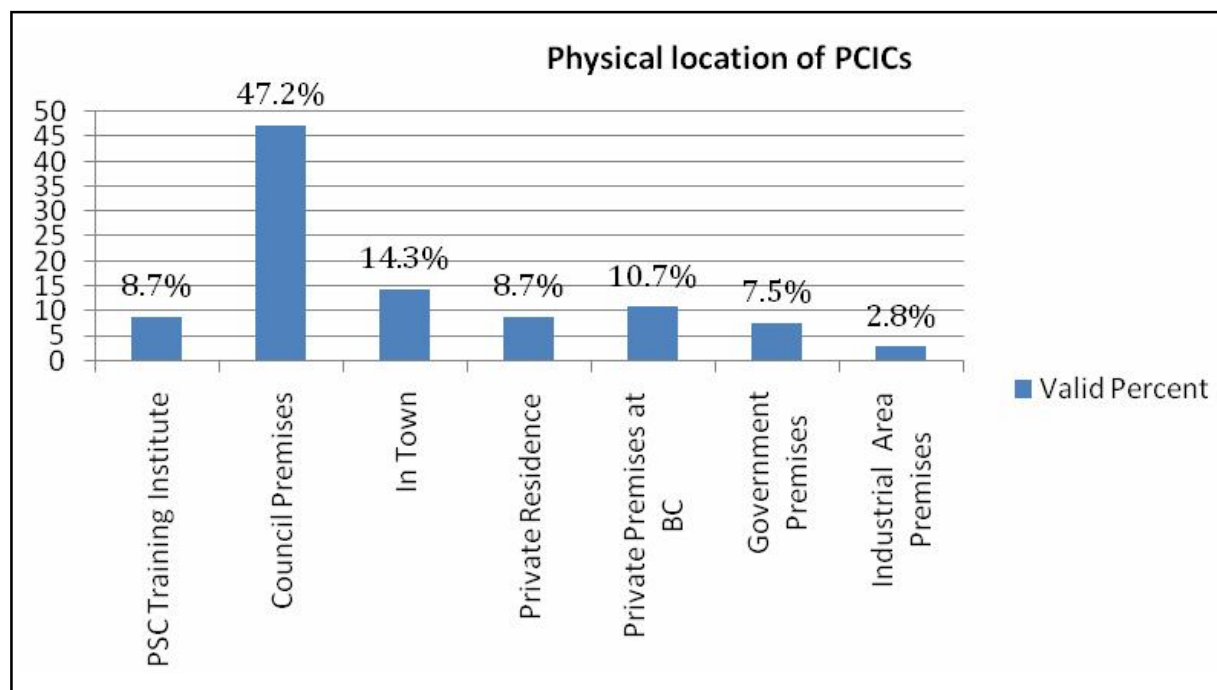


Figure 3: Physical location of PCICs

PCICs are located in council premises and the least number are located in industrial premises.

Two notable locations came to light through personal observation. The first one was the Harare Central PCIC which is located at Trafalgar Court, but which is not visible at all to constituents, even though it is in the Central Business District (CBD). The billboard is poorly placed, because there are no directions to the office from outside the building. Although the Harare Central PCIC is in the CBD, its location is not visible to most constituents. The second was Headlands PCIC whose location is at the MP's house, and is not convenient at all because respondents saw it as partisan and they felt uncomfortable to visit the MP's private residence. Thus, location of PCICs is a major factor affecting accessibility.

Political polarisation has also been widely cited by respondents as a reason for poor access to information through PCICs at various locations. The mixing of political and public interest is one reason why a number of PCICs have been seen as partisan. In many rural constituencies, political barriers hinder the ability of constituents to claim their right to information to demand better governance and public services. PCICs could have prevented this through continuous education of constituents, particularly highlighting that PCICs are not political party offices.

Number of Monthly Visitors

On average, there were 93 visitors per constituency, per month. The minimum was 20 and the maximum

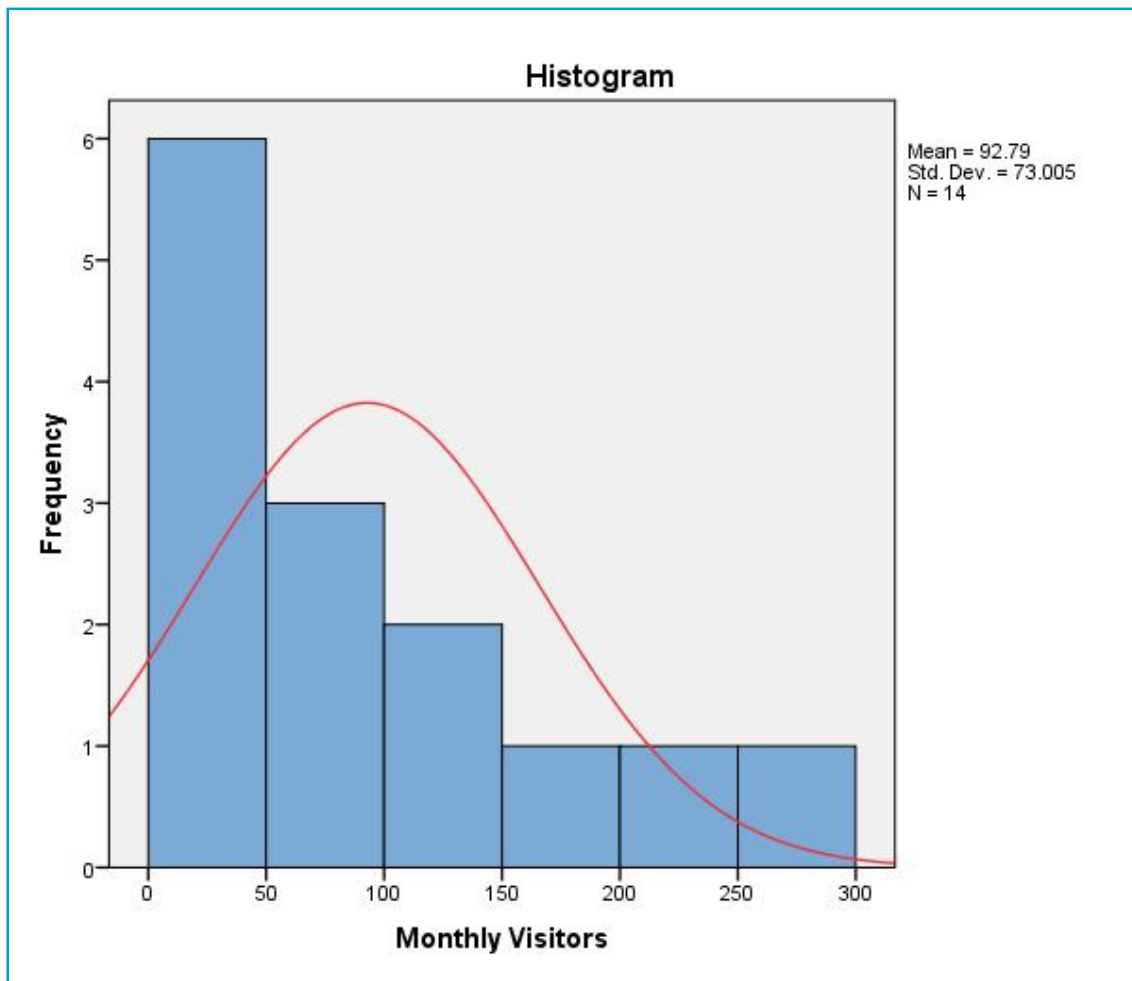


Figure 4: Histogram showing monthly visitors to PCICs

was 250 per month, as shown in figure 4.

This means the PCIC location, information source availability; population density and provision of a variety of activities affect the number of constituents who visit PCICs. Access to PCICs encompasses removal of any discouraging restrictions that might prevent constituents from fully utilising the centres. The rural-urban divide or the centre –periphery problem affect the effectiveness. PCICs are concentrated in towns and growth points. Equality of access had not considered the provision of the service to worst off segments of the population. This relates truly to PCICs. Do constituents receive fair and equal treatment or do they have equal access to their local MP? There are still a number of MPs who prefer to provide services to members of their political parties through the PCIC. Despite the above challenges, PCICs have operated and provided access to information resources generated from PoZ.

Challenges in Accessing Parliamentary Information

In addition to PCIC access factors discussed in the above section, there are other challenges faced by citizens in accessing parliamentary information services. Sturges and Neill (1999) emphasise the importance of long-term and comprehensive support. The need for long-term intervention is correlated with the effectiveness of PCICs. Development partners have played an important role in PCIC project, but they often perceive tension between stakeholders in long-term projects as damaging to their reputation.

They thus respond by turning to new opportunities, rather than continuing to coordinate a project with difficulties.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The establishment of PCICs to provide access to parliamentary information should be seen as a process which involves: establishing constituent needs; establishing objectives matching these needs; developing services to achieve the objectives; providing the services; monitoring and evaluation of outcomes; and revising the objectives in light of changing needs. We noted in this paper that many

issues emerged from the study that PCICs are viewed in the light of:

- Providing access to parliamentary information;
- Providing a forum for public participation in democratic process;
- Development activities. Issues of public interest are discussed through coordination by MPs at PCICs;
- Oversight of MPs. Whereas parliament plays an oversight role to the executive and the judiciary, PCICs play an oversight role on the MP's activities within the constituency; and
- Evidence based data can be obtained through PCICs where all stakeholders within the constituency make their contributions. It is thus important that PCICs should ensure that needs of all constituents are met.

In order improve the PCIC performance of PCICs in providing access to parliamentary information, the recommendations are that:

- There is the need to educate citizens about the MP role by communicating clearly what the MP can and cannot do for them, and to redirect requests by informing constituents about existing government programmes that provide the kind of assistance they are seeking.
- PCIC offices must be centrally located for ease of accessibility not only to the centre but also to other community services, such as public utilities. In identifying the location, authorities should involve constituents because they are partners in the services they get, not just recipients. After the location has been identified, it is important to construct permanent, fixed, PCIC offices being guided by an appropriate PCIC model. If permanent offices are not constructed, PoZ should consider a pilot programme that would experiment with trial leases of PCICs in public buildings, such as centrally located and easily accessible libraries. PCICs can be housed in community libraries, schools, community halls, colleges and universities. Due to the lack of funding, institutions such as libraries or universities can be approached to donate surplus computers.
- Promotion and awareness should be a continuing

activity, and should focus on PCICs activities and their attempt to reduce the information gap. Formal launching activities advertised in the media, such as on radio and television, which is how most people are reached; promotional materials can also be supplied to constituents. PCIC location must be clearly sign-posted with visible, mounted billboards, giving directions to the centre. Billboards need to be re-done, because some are faded, rusty and not mounted.

- Traditional formats and Internet connectivity should be considered a priority. To empower and strengthen constituents in this digital age, staff must be introduced to ICT use. Also, given the vast distances and poor infrastructure in many constituencies, ICT holds the power to disseminate information; mobile technologies should also be used;

Finally, from this paper one can identify a number of areas where dissemination of parliamentary information can be fully understood from further research. The resource implications of service delivery require further investigation and discussion.

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