What are the successes and failures of Parliamentary Constituency Information Centres in communicating parliamentary information to Zimbabwe's citizens?

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Abstract:

Among a number Parliament of Zimbabwe Reforms started in 1997 included the need to reform the information services that led to the establishment of Parliamentary Constituency Information Centres (PCICs) during the life of the Fifth Parliament from 2000 to 2005. PCICs were established to provide public access to parliamentary information and to act as a platform for public participation. In a study that evaluated the performance Zimbabwe's Parliamentary Constituency information Centres (PCICs), literature review focused on information theories, rights and needs among other issues. Methods used to collect data included questionnaires, interviews, observations, and analysis of relevant documents. Data indicated that although constituents are satisfied with information obtained from PCICs, there were concerns over information formats and currency; location and administration of PCICs; poor infrastructure; lack of capacity building; and political partisanship. This paper identifies some of these challenges and the contribution made by Zimbabwe's PCICs in providing access to Parliamentary information.

Keywords: Parliament of Zimbabwe / Information Dissemination / Constituents / Parliamentary Constituency Information Centres /Parliamentary information

1. 0 Introduction

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 of Zimbabwe holds a lot of information for the public interest and has created Parliamentary Constituency Information Centres (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 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2006). Constituents are people living in an area represented by an MP. The Parliamentary Constituency Offices provide services that give effect to direct interaction with MPs and the opportunity to lobby representatives, report-backs from MPs and advice on how to access services from both public and private sector establishments. They also offer assistance with challenges that face local communities and in participating in the processes of parliament, such as preparing submissions or drawing up and presenting petitions. MPs also attend Committee meetings so that they can convey information about what happens there to the public.

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 and included the need to reform the information services involved a major exercise to establish PCICs in all 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. This article analyses the contribution of PCICs in disseminating parliamentary information to constituents in Zimbabwe. In doing so, it will identify the factors influencing the effective functioning of the PCICs in Zimbabwe.

2.0 Literature Review

A study of literature was found to be important in order to ascertain the contribution of PCICs in disseminating parliamentary information and the challenges faced.

2.1 Constituents' Parliamentary information needs, access and challenges

Obholzer, (2011), in The Declaration on Parliamentary Openness defines parliamentary information as:
Parliaments generate a large amount of information that is meant for public consumption. Obholzer (2011) states that parliamentary information includes:

"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."

This section examines the concepts of information needs. Information need is the lack of appropriate information on which to base choices that could lead to benefits or services that may improve citizen 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's 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 needs being 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." Van Lill (2000) however warns that information should not be seen as a need in itself, but rather a construct or tool used to satisfy primary human needs. Kebede (2000) agrees that satisfying information needs of users is a dynamic process and once knowledge has been accumulated can lead to renewed information needs, leading to T.S. Eliot's Choruses from the Rock's three key terms namely data, information, and knowledge.

The provision of information is complex and should be regarded as a management tool. This tool is applied to: determine how effectively and efficiently the information centre is serving the needs of its users; identify the limitations and failures of service; and to recommend ways to improve such a service (Cox, 2000). Adopting effective management practices ensures formulations of an efficient policy and its effective implementation. Agha and Akhtar (1992) identified factors vital for effective management: strong leadership, participative management, team building, effective human resources management and appropriate organisational structures. For organisational capacity building, it is also essential to develop information centres for management to support policy planners, administrators, and practitioners at all levels to make informed decisions and effectively handle their functions in a decentralised manner (Bhola, 1995).

A great deal of research has been undertaken in Britain, North America and Australia to identify the extent and nature of information needs (Dervin and Nilan, 1986). It has been revealed by these studies that even in developed countries, there is need for services that concentrate on providing specialised information. Ikoja-Odongo (2002) ascertained the information needs of an informal economic sector in Uganda in "A Study of the Information Needs and Uses of the Informal Sector in Uganda: Preliminary Findings". The author examined the use, role and impact of information in the growth and development of informal sector. Opinions of citizens under study were collected through focus group discussion, informant interviews and observations. The study revealed the need for simplification of information packaging and improvement in its delivery. Cuminghame (2009) argued that information needs relating to parliament must respond to the following 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 he maintained, is that parliamentary information services are dedicated to parliament, its

needs and tempo. This means that its staff must understand how parliamentarians operate; what the information needs of citizens are; and how to respond to these needs.

Harris and Rajora (2006) remark that people around the world are learning through experience that the survival of democracy itself may depend on a massive change in attitude in societies about the appropriate rights, privileges and powers of corporate entities. This requires access to information. When used in its broadest sense, access means enabling people to identify, locate and use the information that will meet their needs. This should encompass principles of free inquiry and intellectual freedom; removing barriers to access, such as censorship or restrictions based on age, political affiliation, culture, religion and cost. An access to service system encompasses removal of any restrictions that would discourage citizens from enjoying equal services (Lips, 1991). Citizens sometimes face difficulties in accessing parliamentary information services. Tell (1998) presented difficulties in 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." This is supported by Sawi (2003), whose findings revealed that several countries have embraced the establishment of constituency information centres to provide access to information, for well-known economic, political and social reasons.

Sawi (2003) describes Parliamentary reform as politically sensitive given that parliament itself is an eminently political institution. There is constant confrontation amongst contesting parties. For this reason, efforts at reform usually encounter resistance from within and outside parliament. Findings by Granickas (2013) in working with parliaments also noted challenges such as:

- Lack of staff knowledge and a need for training;
- Lack of financial resources;
- User resistance; and
- Lack of management support.

A major challenge has been the controversy over use of constituency development funds (CDFs). These are public funds meant to benefit parliamentary constituencies through allocations and/or spending decisions influenced by the MP. Use of CDFs has sometimes been controversial, because they raise a number of fundamental questions. Baskin (2010) identified the following as some of the central challenges faced in administering CDFs:

- Accountability and transparency deficiencies generally result from the lack of a clear, effective mechanism for oversight or separation of powers delineated in CDF policy;
- Efficiency issues arise when there is a misallocation, misuse, or underutilization of CDF disbursements;
- Equity dilemma surface partly because of different approaches to defining what is meant by "fair CDF distribution". To address these three elements, one must define who the deserving recipients are, what the limits are of the project or item for which money is allocated and how to gauge the fairness of the process of distribution?; and
- Raised questions that highlight the effects of CDFs on representation and other dimensions of parliament.

Despite being portrayed as a source of inefficiency and corruption, research in Kenya, Jamaica and India indicate that CDFs emerged in part, out of the failure of technocratic administrations to provide adequate services in health, education, roads and community centres. It is true that some country CDFs serve mainly as political slush funds, so inefficiencies can accompany the operations of all CDFs. In this, they however do not differ from most other government programs aimed at delivering services. Well institutionalized CDFs, such as in Kenya and Jamaica can significantly constrain opportunities for corruption and create systematic oversight and auditing of individual projects.

3. 0 Methodology

There were several categories of target groups identified to throw light on the contribution and challenges faced by PCICs in disseminating parliamentary information to constituents. Members of Parliament (MPs) were identified because these are the political leaders within the constituency. They represent their constituencies in parliament. They provided feedback to members of the public on parliamentary activities. PCICs exist as a meeting place, where MPs and constituents exchange information both from Parliament and from within the constituency. The Administration of Parliament executes the PCIC project. The Administration of Parliament is well-informed on issues relating to parliamentary reforms; and the Clerk of Parliament was selected for the interview on the basis of a number of advantages for the research. An overall view of Parliamentary reforms, policies, history, and plans provided relevant data from an informed position. Officers of parliament from various departments run the PCIC project. These include the ICT, PR, Research and Human Resource departments. The public relations (PR) department is responsible for managing the project; the research department for maintaining the informatics database; the ICT department for ICT equipment; and Human Resources for Office Assistants (OA) recruitment. They are in contact with OAs who work at PCICs more frequently and as such they are aware of the challenges they face. PCIC Office Assistants (OAs): They are responsible for the day to day PCIC operations. They keep diaries of events for MP programmes, schedule meetings and serve the public or visitors to the PCIC. In the absence of the MP, the OAs represent the MP and the PoZ; and their non-partisanship on political issues has a huge impact on the public, because they are closer to the people than anyone involved in the project. In addition, since they are locals they have a better knowledge of communities and cultures.

In order to have a comprehensive picture on success and failures of PCICs in the dissemination of parliamentary information, data was collected through interviewing these target groups. In addition, 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.
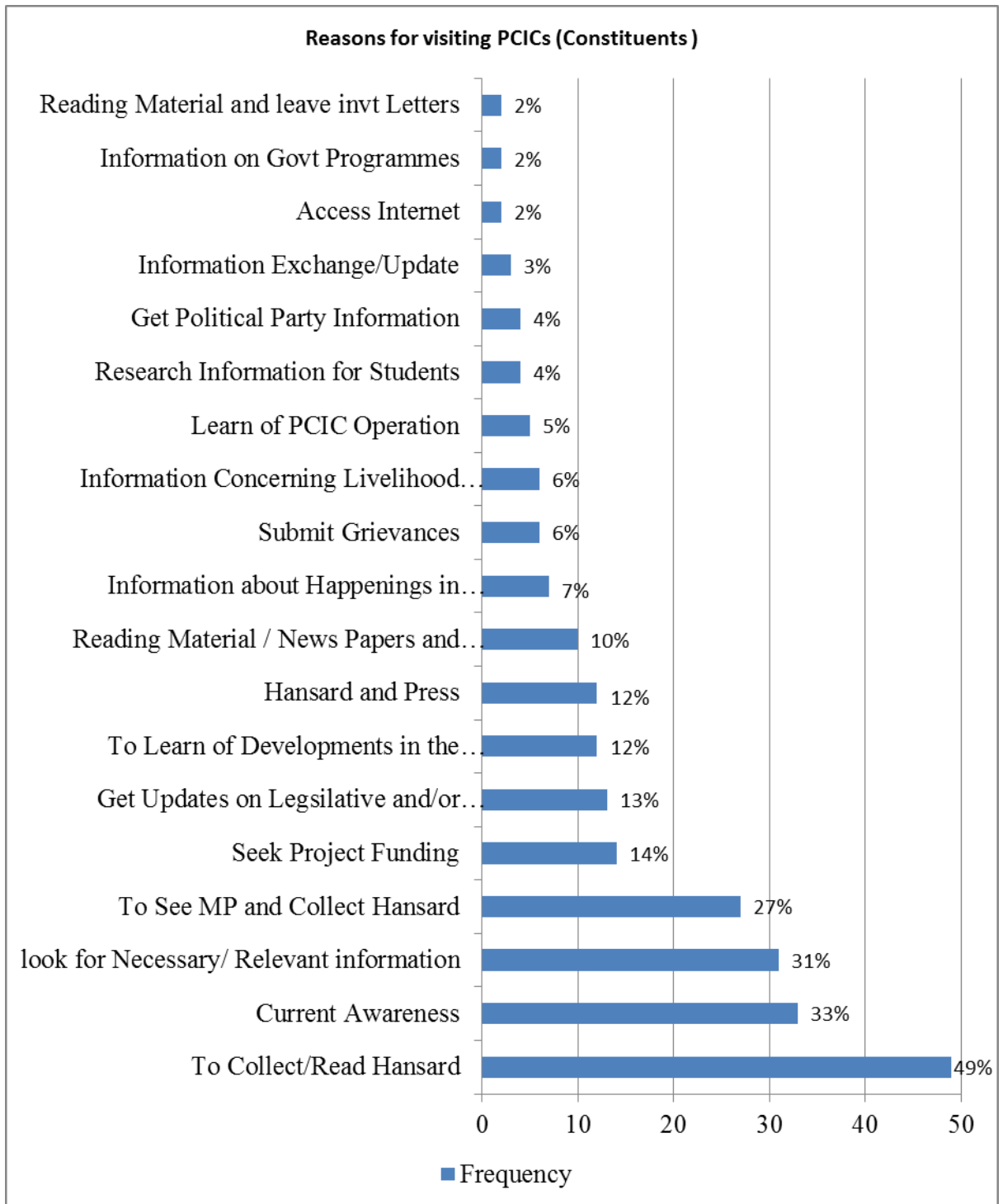
4.0 Discussion

Study data revealed PCICs have made some contributions to the provision of information to constituents, but they there are also several challenges.

4.1 Reasons for visiting PCICs

Constituents visit PCICs primarily to find information about legislation. Figure 1 indicates that the Hansard is the most dominant publication consulted at PCICs (49%). The Hansard captures what happens in Parliament; and visitors to the PICIC enjoy reading the Hansard and continue to 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, latest copies of the Hansard, new bills being discussed in parliament and any other publications from parliament. Besides these reasons, people want to learn about Parliament in general. Parliamentary studies are one of the courses taught at tertiary institutions throughout the country. As such, PCICs, being the nearest sources of parliamentary information are visited by researchers, teachers, students and lecturers. On the other hand, the MP from time to time invites councillors and constituents with a view to updating them on: the latest developments discussed in Parliament; and new laws and programmes that may affect the constituent well-being. Given the challenges that the country faced before 2008, people had many unsettled grievances and might have wanted to meet the MP for assistance in solving their problems; and seeking funds for projects. They would also want to invite the MP to officiate at certain functions, such as graduations and school prize-giving ceremonies, weddings and official community project openings.

Figure 1: Reasons for visiting PCICs

Reasons for visiting PCICs (Constituents)

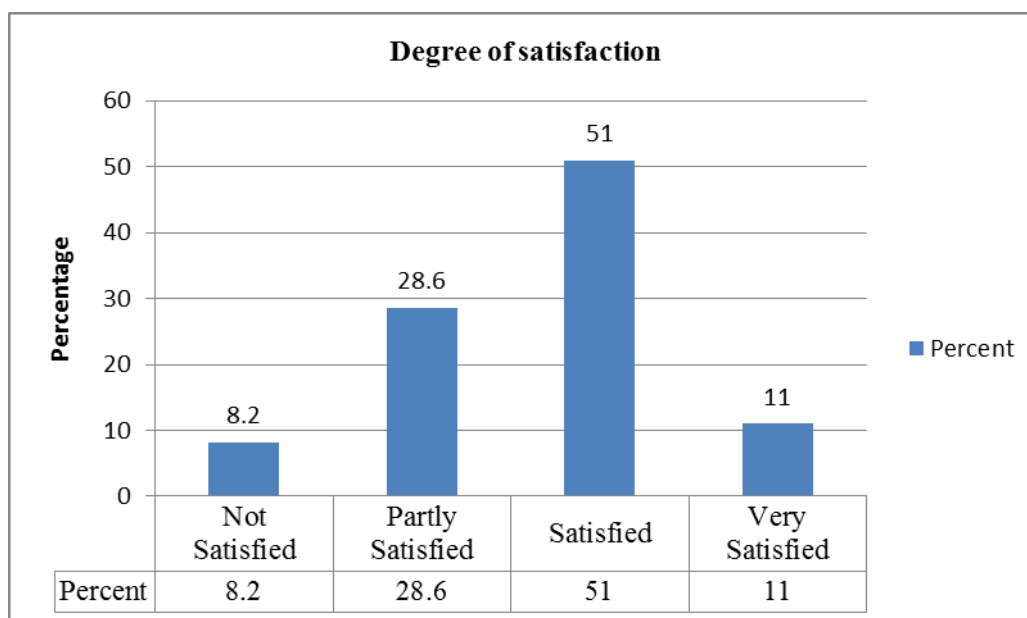| Reason	Frequency
Reading Material and leave invt Letters	2%
Information on Govt Programmes	2%
Access Internet	2%
Information Exchange/Update	3%
Get Political Party Information	4%
Research Information for Students	4%
Learn of PCIC Operation	5%
Information Concerning Livelihood…	6%
Submit Grievances	6%
Information about Happenings in…	7%
Reading Material / News Papers and…	10%
Hansard and Press	12%
To Learn of Developments in the…	12%
Get Updates on Legsilative and/or…	13%
Seek Project Funding	14%
To See MP and Collect Hansard	27%
look for Necessary/ Relevant information	31%
Current Awareness	33%
To Collect/Read Hansard	49%

■ Frequency

The above findings harmonizes with the interview response by the PRO who found that through their outreach programmes to educate the public about functions of Parliament that most constituents who have used the PCICs were found to be excited about obtaining copies of the Hansard. One constituent respondent summed up his / her opinion in the questionnaire: *'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.'*

Respondents expressed how they valued PCICs for being useful to providing them with parliamentary information and thus being empowered.

4.2 Degree of satisfaction

There was a need to analyse constituent responses on satisfaction to the question: *'To what extent are you satisfied with the information obtained at the PCIC?'* to find the degree of satisfaction experienced, as shown in figure 2. Most users are satisfied, showing an aggregate of 62%, for those satisfied (51%); and those very satisfied (11%). Thus, PCICs have played a valuable role by filling the information gap existing between PoZ and constituencies. The majority feeling satisfied shows that a well-intentioned project has potential in supplying useful information, whereas those who are only partly satisfied confirm that more information is needed.

Figure 2: Degree of satisfaction

Those constituents not satisfied, and not fully satisfied could be looking to meet other services not available at the PCIC. It is a challenge for PCICs to meet the varied needs of different groups of people residing within the constituency, ranging from farmers to teachers, extension workers, health workers, religious groups and entrepreneurs.

4.3 Achievements of PCICs

The advent of PCICs thus has benefited the constituents (79%) and any other community groups (table 1). Further PCIC beneficiaries are: schools and teachers (38%), students (22%), government departments, MPs, OAs and NGOs. The availability efficient

PCICs lessens the burden on Parliament of Zimbabwe (PoZ) work. The administration of Parliament identified beneficiaries as the:

- Public in general no longer travel to PoZ to obtain information because it is now available at PCICs, so they are now better informed able to discuss development issues during PCIC meetings.

- OAs: They have benefited through employment created for them as part of the local community;

- Education sector, both students and teachers: They obtain parliamentary information necessary for parliamentary studies and research, a component of school and college curricula. MPs plan meetings from the centres. Additionally, MP contributions are now factual and evidence-based, with data from the PCIC informatics database.

- Civic society and NGOs are now able to disseminate information to various constituencies through the centres.

Table 1: Achievements: Main contribution of PCICs

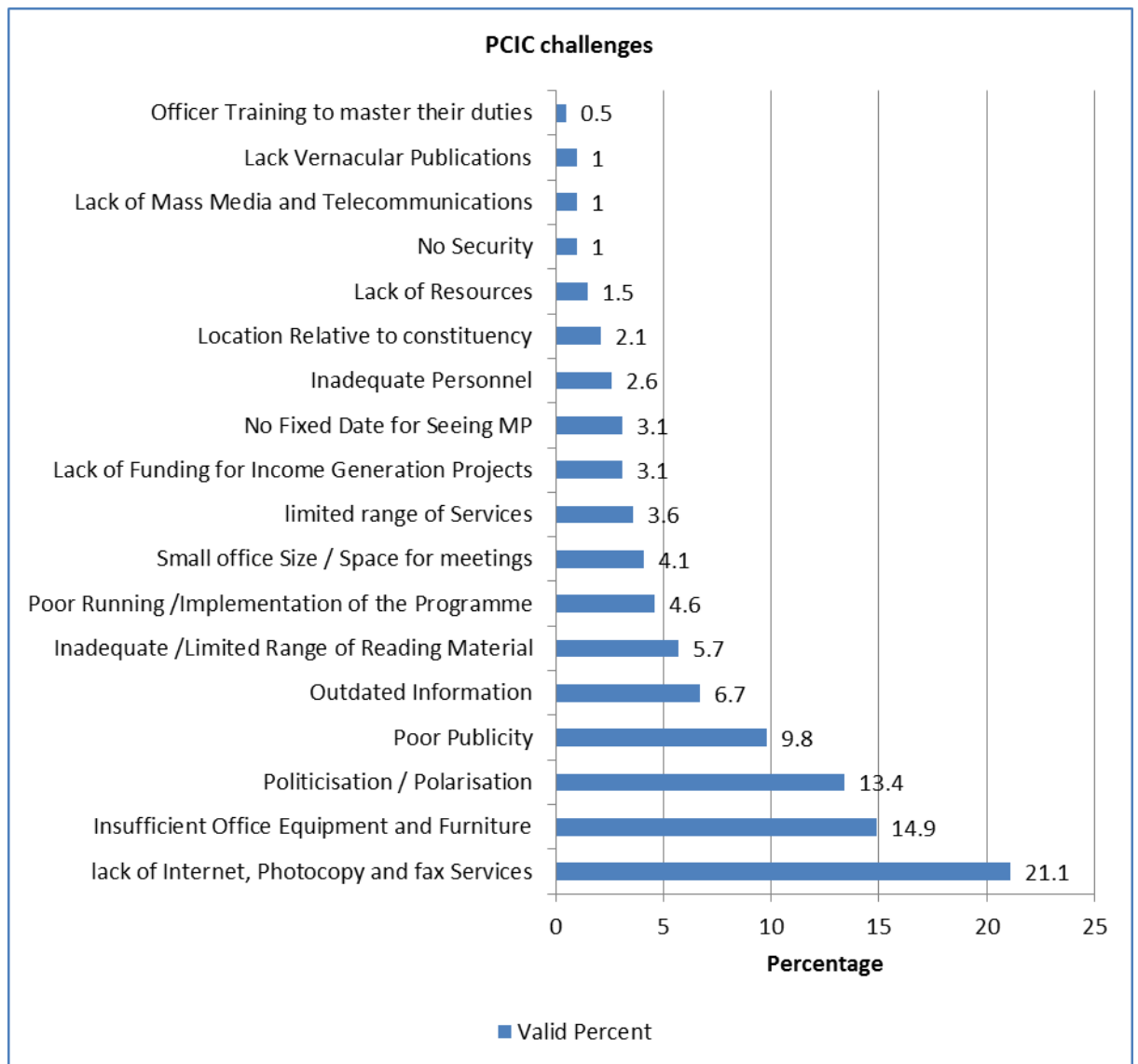| Beneficiaries	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Weighted Average
The Community	46.7	42.9	12.5	79.5%
Schools/ Teachers	20	21.4	12.5	38.4%
Students	13.1	13.3	0	22.0%
OA	13.1	6.7	0	17.6%
MP	6.7	0	0	6.7%
Councillors	0	6.7	0	4.5%
Govt. Depts.	0	6.7	0	4.5%
NGOs	0	0	12.5	4.2%

Linked to the issue of main beneficiaries was the view that the targeted beneficiaries have improved their knowledge, or influenced Parliamentary business, as a result of the introduction of PCICs. PCICs are mostly about representation and development.

5.0 Challenges

Several challenges that affect PCIC operations at various levels were identified by respondents. Respondents indicated a number of issues affecting PCIC operational efficiency. These touch on: lack of ICTs; inadequate office equipment and furniture; poor program

implementation; insufficient office space, lack of diarised dates to meet the MP; inadequate personnel and lack of security, as figure 3 shows. Further challenges raised were the inadequate reading material, outdated information, and lack of vernacular publications.

Figure 3: PCIC Challenges

Another weakness relating to perception centres on awareness issues. Constituents are concerned with political polarisation of PCICs (13.4%). Constituents tend to view PCICs as political party centres. This affects constituents' participation at PCICs for fear of political victimization. This perception also affects MPs in their endeavour to reach as many people as possible within the constituency.
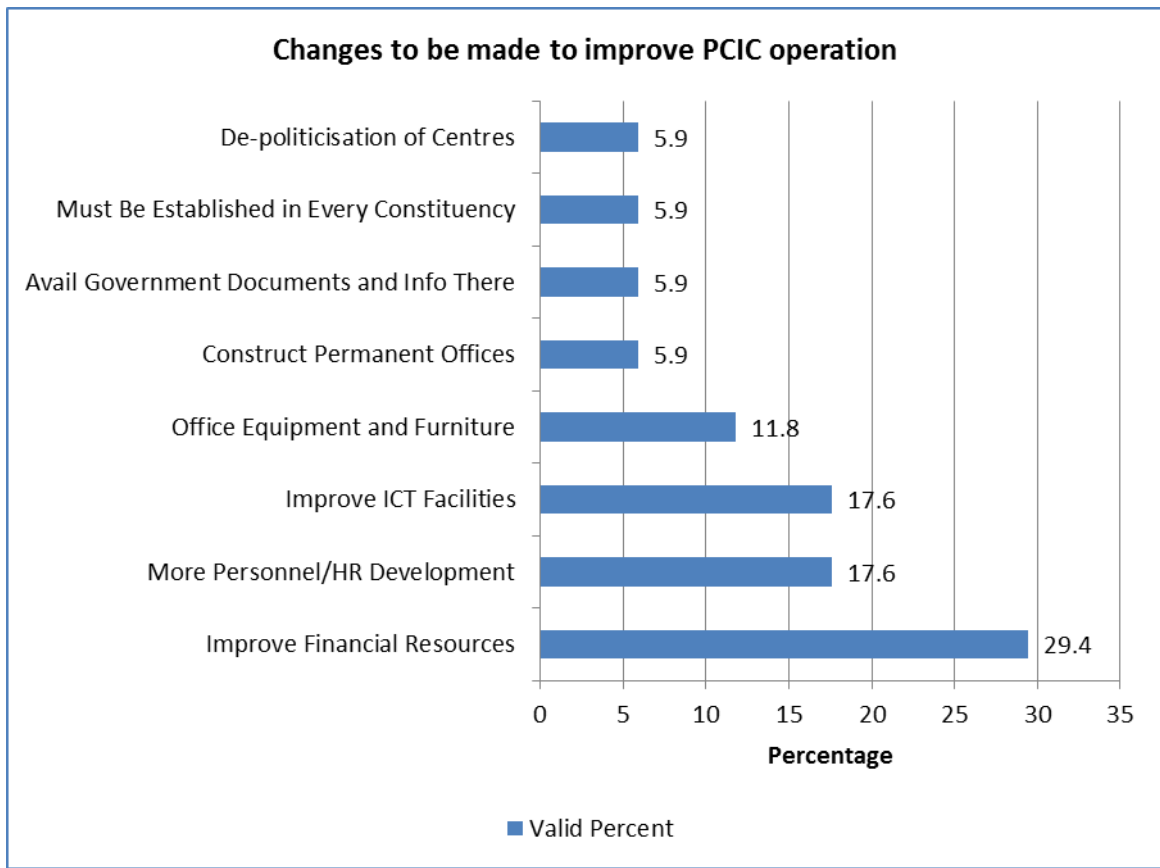
6.0 Changes to be made to improve PCIC operations

These can be divided into operations, information delivery and administration, as shown in figure 4. The first category, relating to operational challenges includes:

- ICT Improvements;

- Office equipment and furniture;

- Construction of permanent office;

- Additional personnel; and

- Increased funding.

The second category of challenges, relating to the improvement of PCICs information delivery was that there are insufficient parliamentary publications and these are not delivered timeously. As information delivered does not meet constituent demands, MPs also think PCICs must provide government publications / documents. This could improve the range of information available to constituents. Currently, PCICs do not provide information from other government departments. This provides pointers and urges Parliament to improve and increase the number of parliamentary publications that are allocated to PCICs. This also shows clearly that most constituents want to get the opportunity to improve their understanding and knowledge about activities that take place in Parliament. Inadequate parliamentary publication supplies affects access. Parliament of Zimbabwe has been unable to provide timeously 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 timeously. This has been a major respondent concern.

Figure 4: Changes to improve PCIC operation

The third category was the concern that there must be permanent office structures in every constituency. Lack of permanent structures was said to have had huge administrative and financial impacts, due to the increased number of PCICs from 120 to 270 constituencies. 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 continuously educating constituents, particularly highlighting that PCICs are not political party offices.

7.0 Conclusion

The establishment of PCICs should be seen as a process which involves: establishing constituent needs and 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. From this paper one can identify a number of areas where dissemination of parliamentary information can be improved in light of the challenges faced.

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