

CHALLENGES FACING GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION OFFICERS IN DAR ES SALAAM CITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Abstract

The execution of government communication officer's role is widely experiencing a myriad of challenges of different patterns from one country to another. This study has focused on challenges facing local councils' communication officers in Dar es Salaam city of Tanzania. The study adopted a qualitative approach method and used purposive sampling to select nine [9] communication officers and five [5] Executive Directors) making a sample size of 14 respondents where attended in-depth interviews, observation and documentary review as data collection technique. The gathered data was thematically analysed. The study has revealed that the major challenge facing communication staffs in Dar es Salaam city was organisational structure which does not create an independent communication unit leads to other challenges such as budget constraints. The communication activities were largely not a management function as many of communication officers were not involved in the management meeting were the major decisions about councils were done. Other challenges included, poor cooperation from other departments and lack of common statutory document guiding communication function in local councils. The study recommends communication activities to be a management function that will allow communication staffs to be part of committee management meetings.

Key words: Government communication, government communication officer, public relations

Introduction

Government communication sector as captured in this paper is one of the complex fields to encounter due to ever changing demands in governance environment influenced by various forces including globalization and technology advancement increasing now and then (Gezihagne, 2018). Government communication has emanated from the philosophical principles of the government's need to provide clear, truthful, and factual information to citizens, indicating the governments' responsibility to give citizens lucid, accurate, and reliable information (House of Lords of London, 2009). Practically there is no way that the government can run its activities on policy implantation without any specified form of communication to the state.

According to Raunio and Johansson (2019), government communication is a central feature of political life and over the past few decades, growing resources devoted to communication has

been an outstanding trend in the organisation of political executives. In this period of rapid changes, in which people expect their governments to act responsibly, government communication capacity may determine its success or failure (Tarawneh, 2015). As to Mkapa (2003), the purpose of government communication is to uphold citizens' unalienable rights to information, expression, and accountability. This suggests that governments have the responsibility of fostering conversations and permitting free exchange of ideas. In light of Head (2007), governments are required to follow due process, respect civil rights, and ensure that justice prevails in their decision-making. The economic development increases competition among organisations as each organisation seek for public attention, approval and support resulted into establishment government communication posts headed by communication officers (Gezihagne, 2018).

Government Communication Officer

Government communication officers are individuals charged with government information 'treatment' for both internal and external publics (Azionya et al., 2014). Others describe government communication officers as governmental staffs striking a right balance between providing correct, neutral and comprehensive information, and promoting what governments, political leadership, and the public need (Pallas et al., 2014). In-light of description, Putra (2009) argues that in government communication sector there is no single title referring communication officer, instead there are different titles such as information officers, communication managers, public relations officers, communication directors, communication marketing managers, public relations affairs officers, corporate affairs officers/managers and so forth depending on the structure of the government institution. In respect to the captured argument, titles do not count what matters are roles played by the individuals and determine the title; the top managements only have to look at the role given to their communication staffs and decide a more appropriate title. Based on this understanding, this paper has replaced all the available titles in communication sector (and similar positions) with "government communication officer".

The importance of government communication officers is connected to the value that information has to be managed carefully (Hunter, 2010). This argument is supported by Fredriksson and Pallas (2018), who also argue that government information should be strategically communicated. In particular, government communication activities need to be

formalised to reduce complaints from citizens (Head, 2011). In this nature, Queensland (1989), as cited in Head (2011, p. 13) contends that;

It is legitimate and necessary for government ministers, departments and instrumentalities to employ staff to help ensure the public is kept informed. Media units can also be used, however, to control and manipulate the information obtained by the media and disseminated to the public. Although most government-generated publicity will unavoidably and necessarily be politically advantageous, there is no legitimate justification for taxpayers' money to be spent on politically motivated propaganda. The only justification for press secretaries and media units is that they lead to a community better informed about government and departmental activities. If they fail to do this then their existence is a misuse of public funds, and likely to help misconduct to flourish.

Functions of Government Communication Officers

The government communication staffs have fundamental roles not limited to facilitating communication between the government and its publics for prosperity by building an efficient and proactive government communication system through research, training and information dissemination for good governance and the creation of positive images (Kiambi, 2014). Moreover, the communication officers are charged with the responsibility of coordinating, planning, executing communications and evaluation on government policies and programmes. They are also devoted to coordinate ideas designed to attract both local and international investors. The role of government communication officers is undeniable function as ensures the health and survival of government institutions hence provide opportunities for government to effectively monitor, react and interact with other key groups within their environment (Teresa, 2017).

In-vain with government communication officers' importance, various government institutions have allocated more resources to communication offices in terms of budgets, and human resources. However, despite of its significance for good governance, the communication officers in public sector has been facing numerous challenges not limited to insufficiently recognition, poor conceptualization of their roles and limited budgets (Raunio and Johansson, 2019). Taylor

(2012) argues that regularly local governments' communication officers have not been given the powers to show their impact and potentialities on their institutions; instead, they end up clipping files of news stories. In local government in particular communication officers are not part of the decision-making body known as committee management team (CMT) as a result their communication activities are not aligned with the strategic plan of their councils.

According Zura (2016), largely, the challenges facing communication officers emanates in the organisational structure of the government institutions as it creates solid lines on the relationship beaten the communication officer and the executive directors. Scholars like (Winarso, 2018; Renani et al, 2017; Yahaya, et al, 2018) discuss that the successful organisation is the one with a well organised, coordinated and supervised flow of information observing the organisational structure. Plowman (2005) cited in Chen and Ni (2021) extends that government communication officer becomes a strategic management function when it helps the institution to formulate the institution's attitude to achieve the institutional goals. In the same vain Grunig (2006) concludes that without involvement of communication officer's role in decision making it would be a futile function that could not fulfill its key task. On the other hand, Abukashawa (2013) and Zahradnik (2012) remark that a working environment including good office location with enough space is a contributive factor for the performance of communication officers in public institutions.

Statement of the problem

The world has experienced a remarkable expansion of government communication sector. In-light of tremendous growth of communication sector , early 1980th Tanzania embarked on social-economic changes of numerous policy reforms including public management strategies, civil service reform programs, public service reform programs and local government reform programs aiming to combat poverty and foster economic growth (Itika, 2015). The career needs assessment of 1998 and 2000 resulted into establishment of government communication unit and mass deployment of communication officers in almost all government institutions from central to local government authorities (Government Circular, 2002).

Despite the establishment of government communication officer positions in almost all government institutions little is known about organisational structure, budget allocations magnitude understanding of roles and responsibilities communication officers and the general

facilitation of communication activities in public offices. In-vain with the argument, various studies from outside Tanzania for example (Teresa (2017; Gezihagne, 2018) from Ethiopia, (Kiambi, 2010; Njuru, 2011; Kaleli, et al., 2021; Omondi, 2012; Nyambega, 2021) from Kenya Onsongo, et al. (2017) from Rwanda, Saleh (2017) from Libya and Anyijuka (2016) from Uganda revealed that involvement of communication officers in strategic planning and decision making body originated in organisational structure is the major challenge facing communication officers in government institutions. As such, this paper sought to find out the challenges facing local councils' communication staffs from Dar es Salaam city incorporating five municipal councils.

Theoretical perspective

This paper focuses on government communication officers' practice specifically on the challenges in course of discharging their duties. Thus, the researcher keenly selected a theory underpinning the effectiveness of government communication or public relations. Notably, the researcher was inspired to the study by Anani-Bossman (2018) aiming to develop a framework for public relations practice in the financial services sector in Ghana as it puts:

The last two decades has witnessed PR scholarship putting forward theories which seek to look at PR practice from both the local and global perspectives. For example, while PR practice in Europe is based on the reflective paradigm, the Americans support the relational paradigm, the European dimension of public relations put emphasis on the initiation of relationships with stakeholders. (p. 5)

It is exciting to discover that in various scholarly arguments Africa appears to be missing in the development of theory that reflect the challenges faced by government communication officers in relation to theory parameters. Importantly, most of the academics researched on this area were from South Africa leaving aside other parts of Africa (Anani-Bossman, 2018). That, South African has academically proven the contribution of communication management to institutional growth over the years as (Steyn, 2007) quoted in Anani-Bossman (2018) argued that significant contributions made were the distinction between strategic communication management and 'communication management taking place on different organisational levels. Van Heerden (2004) in her master's dissertation on practice of Public Relations in Africa, identified three main models as two-way symmetrical, two-way asymmetrical/symmetrical and the public

information/press agency as the models that influence the communication practices in Africa. On that note, excellence theory of public relations considered to be the best one guiding the study.

The Excellence Theory

The Excellence Theory developed by Grunig and Grunig in 1984 states that participation of public relations officer in a strategic decision-making can help the management behaviour rather than interpret it to publics. In a detailed manner, the excellence theory specifies how public relations makes institutions more effective, how PR is organised and managed by scanning the organisational environment and contribute to organisational success. The term 'excellence' in the mentioned theory is used as attributive factor that makes an organisation effective in its goal. The significance of the excellence theory to the current study is on the organisational achievements framework, as it provides the foundation on the entire strategic communication plan of the organisation. As noted earlier, during the excellence study by Grunig et al. (2002) four essential principles for the strategic management of public relations were established including:-

1. The involvement of public relations in strategic management.
2. The empowerment of public relations in the dominant coalition direct reporting relationship.
3. The use of a two-way symmetrical model of public relations.
4. Knowledge potential for managerial role and symmetrical communication.

Despite, the differences in cultural, political and social environment of each country, the four principles are cross-cutting principles that can apply in diverse appeals for communication officers to be part of the management. On top of that the inner sense of the principles and general theory at large calls for planned communication activities aligned with strategic plans of the organisation.

Tench (2011) and Zerfass (2008) cited in Anani-Bossman (2018) for organisations to be effective, communication sector must be a part of the organizational policy decision-making process. Communication officers serve as facilitators by assisting organizations to align organizational objectives with the needs of stakeholders and different environmental situations.

The practical compliance with the four aforementioned principles signifies the value devoted to the government communication staffs hence diminish the challenges likely to occur. In most of African countries government communication sector is perceived as a luxurious role with little appreciation and contribution to success of the public institutions. It is the motivation of the researcher to investigate the scenario surpassing communication officers in Dar es salaam city.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Dar es Salaam city, Tanzania focusing on five municipal councils. The city was selected due to the fact that is the largest city in Tanzania referred as the national commercial hub, home of the country's business and accounts for over half of the national tax revenue. Despite official shift of the government operations to Dodoma, Dar es Salaam remain concentrated with public and private activities and providing platform for opportunities unlike any other city in the country (Dar es Salaam master plan report, 2018). Dar es Salaam is the third fastest growing city in Africa – leading in the list of Africa's fast urbanisation rates, and the ninth fastest growing city in the world (Doyle, 2017). According to the National Bureau of Statistics report of 2022, Dar es Salaam is the leading region with a population of over 5.38 millions of people, equivalent to 8.7 percent of the total population. In addition, the city mayor statistics report of 2020 ranks Dar es Salaam city as the world's fastest growing city with the average annual growth rate of 4.39 percent with a population of more than six million.

Dar es Salaam city is experiencing a unique growth resulting into great pressure on social economic services delivery from the respective authorities (Kanyama et al., 2005). Local councils by nature in Tanzania are people centered aiming at giving more power to the people to competently participate in the planning and implementation of development programmes within their respective areas and generally throughout the country (Shadrack, 2010). According to (Kanyama et al., 2005) Dar es Salaam lacks coordination among institutions, government sectors and agencies to promote development including substantial public transportation. In researcher's view, the execution of social services requires intensive communication services from a well planned, implemented and evaluated communication function organised at a management level.

This study mainly used qualitative research approach as it focused on experience and the environment surpassing the communication landscape in Dar es Salaam local councils. Qualitative approach as a research method explores attitudes, behaviour, and experiences and it views the social world as a human creation and not a discovery (Dawson 2007; Oduro-Ofori, 2011). Despite largely using qualitative approach, the study has some quantitative elements. The quantitative elements were seen in the framework of frequencies of answers during the thematic analysis helping to codify themes. Also the numerical data of respondents from the sample size qualifies the aspect of qualitative approach. However, availing the research objectives the quantitative elements did not compromise the qualitative inclination hence supplement the qualitative findings and conclusions?

The population of the study was Dar es Salaam city communication officers and the Executive Directors. The selection of the mentioned population is based on their richness of the required information for this study. The researcher used purposive sampling technique in-vain with scholar's explanation that it is a strategy used in which a researcher identifies only respondents' concerns or select instances that are rich in the required information through answering the research questions (Kombo, 2006; Flick, 2018). The sample size of this study was 14 respondents whereas 9 were municipal communication officers and 5 were the executive directors.

The data collection procedure entailed both primary and secondary data collection. Primary data were collected through interviews and observation. The methods were chosen in line with the qualitative research approach and case study design as applied in the current study. Documentary sources such as relevant books, journals, articles, official publications, newspaper clippings, reports and seminar papers were used to ascertain primary data. Qualitative data, which form the largest components of this study as in line with its focus, thematic analysis was used in which the collected raw data was organised, observed on general ideas from the participants, coded by removing chunks, describing the major themes, convey descriptive information by using tables, and capturing the general essence from the themes.

The researcher sought permission and introduction letter(s) from the Vice Chancellor, University of Dar es Salaam, prior to beginning field work. The Vice Chancellor is mandated by law, for issuing research permits to students and academic members of staff. The researcher underscored the issues of anonymity of respondents and confidentiality of the **information. , in** adherence to codes of conducts, solely individuality of local councils communication officers were labeled with number 1-9, the Executive Directors with letter A to E and municipal councils with AA to AE.

Findings and Discussion

Organisational structure

In respect to the above subtheme, seven out of nine communication officers reported major challenge affecting their communication practices to be organisational structures. The organisational structure puts communication units under ICT departments and mostly the department is headed by ICT personnel. Communication officers claimed that according to their organisation's structures, head of departments are the ones forming organisational management teams hence able to attend the management meetings commonly known as committee management team (CMT). According to interviewed communication officer such structure affects the representation of communication officers in decision making. For example, one communication officer from municipal council AD spoke about how not having an autonomous communication department resulted in rare attendance of CMT. To her, attending the management meetings never happens unless there is something special that requires her clarification as she puts it in the quotation presented here:

I think the organisational structure is the nuclear of our communication problems. All of our communication challenges need the entire management attention but unfortunately I don't have that opportunity to attend the meeting because our communication unit is not an independent department. This mean that my communication programs and plans are to be presented by someone else (ICT manager) who is not expert in that area. Always there is difference in presentation of departmental issues from an expert and non-expert in that field.

In this quotation, this officer appears to feel that the absence of a communication officers' seat in the management committee undermines the presentation of views that would improve

organisational communication. This view was shared by another communication officer selected from the same council. This one spoke about difficulties of planning and implementing communication programs because there is someone in between decision making meetings and them. Like the previous interviewee, this one felt that to address communication challenges faced, management attention was necessary and this was only available through being in a room where decisions were made as heard here:

What I see as a major hitch in my job is the council's setting where the communication unit is under the ICT department and being headed by ICT personnel, there is no way I can plan and implement my communication programs since they have to be channeled to another person who is not professional in that area. Sometime I do face unnecessary delay of my raised issues because the head of department doesn't understand or see the emergence of my issue.

Looking at this quotation and the one from the previous interviewee, there is a clear pattern that can be seen in their responses. In this quotation, the interviewees seem to believe that the problem is not just the absence of an autonomous communication department, but also the placement of communication matters under the leadership of someone that is not part of the public communication profession. By saying "...doesn't understand or see the emergence of my issue" the second interviewee highlights why placing communication under someone that is not a communication officer is wrong and detrimental to organisational communication. This pattern was noted in responses provided by interviewees recruited in council AC and AB respectively. However, these responses presented slight differences. For example, communication officers from municipal AB indicated that they were allowed to attend the CMT although not as members but as communication officers invited by Executive Director for taking photos.

My experience here is that one of us (from the communication unit) attends the meeting but not as CMT member rather as photographer. Sometime you might not be aware that there is a meeting but at last you are contacted that take your camera and go to the conference room. In due performing photo taking role you can have a chance to answer some issues related to communication as they emerge in the meeting.

In a detailed manner, the above quotation captures communication officer feel like not valued as communication officer rather than a mere photographer. Based on his explanations, he is not happy with the experience of being asked to attend the CMT at a moment of photo-taking. The obtained answers interpret that in the absence of photo-taking role the respondent has nothing to

do in the management meeting unless there is pertinent issue to clarify. Such answers imply that communication activities are considered as simple as taking photographs. Meanwhile, no one is there in the meeting to raise and defend communication related issues.

According to these findings, communication officers interviewed have identified the combination of communication units with ICT units and putting them under the leadership of personnel that are not communication professional as a challenge for communication. This structure is opposed by existing literature by (Winarso, 2018; Renani et al, 2017; Yahaya, 2018; Zura, 2016) have extensively discussed the relationship between organisational structure, organisational communication and effective communication. In the same vein Grunig (2006) concludes that without the involvement of communication officers' role in decision making, it would be a futile function that could not fulfill its key requirement.

The referred scholars have identifies communication as a management function upon which success or failure of organisations depend. To ensure that communication programs are linked to the strategic plans of municipal councils, someone with knowledge of communication has to be part of the management team. According to them, a successful organisation is one with a well organised, coordinated and supervised flow of information. Abukashawa (2013) and Zahradnik (2012) argue that a working environment including good office location with enough space is a contributive factor for the performance of communication officers in public institutions. In respect to the above findings, Plowman (2005) cited in Chen and Ni (2021) argues that public communication becomes a strategic management function when it helps the institution to formulate the institution's attitude to achieve the institutional goals.

Following the analysis of data from communication officers, also the Executive Director's interviewee data was analysed. The general observations made from this data show that executive directors have a different perception of the organisational structure with regard to exclusion of communication staff from strategic meetings. For example Executive Director B told the researcher that;

To me, I do value communication officers as very important members of staff, not only here but in all the councils I have worked for, you can track my record. I do provide an opportunity to participate in all management meetings and necessary activities. I think in the past, the communication unit wasn't there; that is why some of the managements ignored them. But for any

accounting officer who knows their importance, he should involve them in the decision-making processes. At my council, we are striving to make them happy by providing them with working equipment such as iPad, modern cameras, and approval of their budgets and to allow them to contact media directly without bureaucratic controls

In the quotation above, the executive director seems to know and value the role of communication officer in her council. Not only in the current council but also she declares doing the same in other councils she has worked for. The executive director admits that maximum involvement of government communication officer in all council's activities is crucial step to make communication officer plan his/her communication programs. The respondent is she aware that communication industry in local council is new one compared to other field as the reason to be ignored. She believe that if at all the council wants to achieve its goals and objective communication officers should be given the significant attention including budget, working tools and full mandate to exercise their duties. In the similar views was shared by Executive Director D however backing-up the communication officer's lamentation over the independency of communication unit appealing for performance enhancement. He recommended that;

For the benefit of effectiveness, I agree with those talking about the separation of the department of ICT from public relations. Uniting the two units with equal weights is obvious; one will be in charge of the other, and to my experience ICT overshadows the communication unit giving ICT a higher image. For example, now if the system collapses, everything will stop, no tax collection, payment in our hospitals will stop; it will be chaos for sure. So this brings biases of attention to some staff members. In my view, we can separate them and make the public relations unit a full department by strengthening it with other components such as protocol and making it bigger and comprehensive. I call upon communication officers to have a big debate and suggest how the communication or public relations department should be and show the value they will bring into the councils. If they stand alone, even the issues of budget can be improved

In the above quotations, the executive directors B & D seem to have the similar views on the importance of communication officers in their council. However, executive director B demonstrated advancement in facilitating communication activities. The executive director D identifies communication unit having the same weight and value as ICT unit, but combining them can automatically cause biases from the management. Indeed, despite arguing for equal weights of the two units, for him ICT is superior to communication unit as he said "...for example, now if the system collapses means everything will stop, no tax collection, payment in

our hospitals will stop; it will be chaos for sure...” such statement reflects his inner feeling over the supremacy of the departments. Based on his answers, it seems that communication units need to be restructured and endowed with other functions like protocols so that they can bring more impact to public institutions. While the mentioned respondents were arguing for councils’ communication staffs involvement in decision making body and separation of the two units, slight differences were provided by the Executive Director C who thinks that nothing wrong with organisational structure the problem is communication officers themselves. As she said;

It’s true that our communication officers do not attend CMT because of the council’s structure, which is our guide. However, sometimes it depends on the management decision which is the discretion of each council. But for me it is not good practice for communication officers to be part of the management team, how many departments will we have in the meeting? Communication unit being inside the ICT is not an issue; the issue is for communication officers to appreciate their position within the established structure. In my view, most of the challenges facing communication officers are because they do not know what to do. They lack professionalism, sometime I do ask myself if real they understand their jurisdiction of their role/functions.

Following the above quotation, the respondent seems to be in a “comfort zone” with organisational structure. What is seen by communication personnel and respondents B and C as epicenter of the challenges marring organisational communication for her is not the case. Provided the ministry concern has provided the structure it should respected and obeyed, however, she acknowledges that the management has power to decided otherwise when it come the issue of local councils’ communication staff to attend the management meetings (CMT). In respect to her opinions, the great challenge is on professionalism, enthusiastic and flexibility of councils’ communication expert within the existing structure.

Interestingly, the findings revealed that despite the structure being the same, not all communication units of the studied councils were headed by ICT managers. At the Ilala municipal council (city council), for example, the department was headed by a communication officer. As one would expect, due to this difference, collected data shows that the challenges facing communication officers of this council were slightly different from those faced by communication officers of councils headed by ICT managers. Here is a quotation extracted from responses provided by an interviewee who also happened to be the head of department:

Here the question of structure is not a problem. I am the head of the unit/department. Together with my team, we plan; we implement and evaluate our communication programs. Actually, I am happy with my position and my council, since I do what I am supposed to do. I feel valued.

The above answer provided the argument that the communication unit headed by communication personnel diminishes some challenges facing government communication officers in due performing their duties. Notably, it proved that despite the organisational structure provided by the ministry concern there is an alternative for communication officers to be head of department instead of ICT personnel. In line with the answer from head of department the researcher extended his inquisitive from an interviewee who was part of the top management on how a communication officer was instituted as a head of department. The Executive Director A responded by saying that either ICT personnel or communication officers can head the concerned department provided required qualifications are met. Here is how the interviewee responded:

For me anyone can be head of department provided he/she qualifies. Actually my motivation was to empower my communication officers with enough information. You cannot have spokesperson in your organisation that is not well informed. By making her head of department means I am pushing her into the decision making team. Including a communication officer in senior management meetings makes it easy for us to accommodate communication programs within our master.

In this quotation, it is clear to say that there is no statutory boundary for communication officers to be head of department. The management can appointment anyone to be head of department provided the craters established are observed. Indeed, following this statement saying that “actually my motivation was to empower my communication officers with enough information” proves that relinquishing of some challenges to communication officers depends on understanding capacity of the top management. In additional, it provides the evidence that communication programs can be easily accommodated on if there is significant representation in the decision making team.

The above findings show that communication officers work under departments that are a fusion of communication units and ICT units. The departments are mainly headed by ICT managers. These findings appear to imply that although organisational structures of the studied councils appear to be similar, their operations seem to be open to customizations suggested or made by Executive Directors. Specifically, the differences noted have to do with leadership of

department under which communication activities are hosted and communication officers' participation in decision making meetings.

The organisational structures have an impact on the performance of communication officers because determine reporting structure, information flow, and relationships between the management and communication officers. As discussed by Zura (2016), a simple organisational structure with direct reporting relationships provides solid environments for communication officers and organisation. Based on the findings, it is not clear why the same structure was operating under different models and what qualifications were demanded by the head of department position. However, the study has found that one qualifies for the position after six years of service since first appointment. Therefore, since ICT units have existed in local councils for longer periods than communication or public relations units, ICT officers were likely to have served for long time, hence their appointment.

Available data shows that ICT units were established in local councils in the early 2000s, followed by communication units. Regarding the combination of ICT and communication units, it is assumed that it is the result of the misconception of the terms 'information communication and information officer (as commonly used), which might have resulted in the conclusion that they are same field. Under such a conclusion, separating them would have not made sense. However in reality these are two different disciplines but ones that work closely.

Misunderstanding of communication office's roles and responsibilities

The study also focused on how council's management perceived the local council's communication officers' roles. This was done as a way to understand the challenges facing communication staffs and the magnitude of cooperation they receive from other departments/units. For example the Executive Director D responded as follows to a question on this matter:

My office perceives communication officers as important personnel with the crucial role of engaging the public in council's development. Mind you, our services are people centered; they need to be communicated regularly; therefore, communication officers have an important role of giving information about our activities and our obligations towards the public. They are the link between the public and the council. In general, their roles are important and call for maximum understanding of their value within the council.

In regard to this quotation, the respondent seems to understand and admit that communication services are essential for council's developments. He acknowledges communication officers having unquestionable role of information deliverance which stimulates the development of his council. The similar opinion were obtained from the Executive Director B though extending her explanations to the significant function of communication officer in her office by reducing the number of complaints from the people they serve. She said:

Our communication officers have the role of providing information and different clarifications about everything in our councils. For example, they have to provide information about land conflicts, which are always paramount in our councils and question regarding taxes collected and how they are spent. By so doing, we reduce complains from the public. If their functions are well articulated, they have a good chance of contributing to the success of our municipality. Although some public complaints are still there, at least they get information about our activities. With fully utilisation of our communication officers, we ensure peace and harmony in our councils.

In respect to the quotations above, almost all Executive Directors showed positive attitude towards the roles played by communication expert. However, the local council communication staff interviewed did not think these leaders understood their importance. For example, a communication officer from AC municipality said most of the challenges she faced in executing her roles accrued from top management's limited understanding of her role at the council. The interviewee attributed this limited understanding to lack of representation of the communication unit in management meetings, which resulted in poor understanding of the communication industry's potential contribution to the council's successful achievement of its goals and objectives as she puts it in the following quotation:

Referring to my day-to-day functions, I think the council does not really understand what I am supposed to do here. For example, if I am not entitled to attend the committee management meetings (CMT), how are my communication programs going to be fully represented in the management? I have experience from other councils where communication units are fully represented in CMT despite the fact that communication officers are not heads of their departments. Here the situation is different. This representation is done by someone who is not a communication expert.

Another communication officer from the same council shared the following statement:

My major role is to take photos of events and meetings although sometimes I arrange press conferences or coordinate media events for our boss. To me I can say that there is poor understating on what I owe to in this council.

In response to the same inquiry, the second communication officer from municipal council AD stated that:

I don't think if the management really understands what the communication unit entails for the successfulness of our council. The way I see is just to perform minor issues like As taking photographs, organising events, providing general education to the public via the municipal council's social media accounts. But what I am doing here have no direct connection with the council's strategic plan. Some time I come from home without knowing what actually I am going to in that day.

Likewise, another interviewee shared the following view:

My experience here is that one of us (from the communication unit) attends the meeting but not as CMT member rather as photographer. Sometime you might not be aware that there is a meeting but you are contacted at the last minute to carry your camera and go to the conference room. While playing your photography role, you can have a chance of answering some questions related to communication as they emerge in the meeting.

Regarding to the above quotations there is a great misunderstand between the top management and the communication officers over the roles and responsibility of the communication officers in the councils. These findings imply that the perception of communication staffs in the study area is different from what is theorized by scholars in literature. The misunderstanding of the roles and responsibilities of communication officers in the studied councils is mainly reflected in the primary duties carried out by the officers. These officers appear to mainly perform minor functions which do not require communication officer to be part of the managements. Poor understanding of communication officers' role has also been documented by some authors. For instance, Taylor (2012) argues that regularly, local governments' communication officers are not given the platform to show their impact and potential; instead, they clip files of news stories. Scholars (e.g. Abukashawa 2013; Saleh, 2017; Taylor, 2012; Zahradnik, 2012) argue that

misunderstanding and misconception of the roles of communication officers is one of the great challenges facing communication officers when carrying out their functions.

According to Boudreaux (2005), communication officers that are part of organization management get the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes where major problems are discussed and procedures and programmes are adopted, implemented, and evaluated. Since the government communication officers interviewed are generally not part of such meetings, they are not part of the activities mentioned here. Kiambi (2010) and Njuru (2011) cited in Kaleli et al. (2021) argue that limited appreciation of the role played by communication officers is the cause of their exclusion from top management teams. Ananto (2004) cited in Anggreni (2018) confirms that when a communication officer becomes part of a management team, determine their function becomes easy. Overall, this study shows a state that is not aligned with the Excellence Theory presented by Anani-Bossman (2018). The theory notes that communication officers should be part of organisations' management teams and should be assigned managerial roles.

Cooperation with other departments

The findings also demonstrated the question of cross-cutting roles and responsibilities of communication officers within the local councils. The interviewees generally talked about their inability to cooperate with other staff members from different departments attributed by limited understanding of their roles and responsibilities. One of the interviewees said:

I experience poor cooperation; they have their own calendar of events. It is very rare to be involved in their programs unless there is a special case or when there is an ordered from higher authorities. I am only requested to take photographs during the events.

In the quotation above, communication officer seem to be perceived as clerical staffs that does not supposed to be involved in a strategic plans of the year calendar of the council originated in each department. The findings imply that communication officer is less connected to entire programs of the council. The necessity of councils 'communication officers' involvement is vivid when the need for photo taking come into being and coordinate media. The similar claim was provided by another communication officer from different council as she put;

Sometimes we are involved in departmental programs. Mostly, we are asked to coordinate media events, the content which we don't even know. However, it is not surprising to find an event that took place at our council, which I am not aware of, getting aired on TV news bulletin out of my information while I am in the office.

In respect to the above quotations, communication officers demonstrated a serious challenge on coordination of communication activities among the council's departments/units. However, such experience was different in one council where some interviewees indicated that they are adequately integrated in teams that include members from other units and that they are regularly involved in activities. For example, one interviewee from the city council stated that:

We get good cooperation from other units although it was not easy. However, in some cases we still experience some delay when we request for information. Also, they are reluctant to talk to the media.

These findings show that communication officers do not receive enough cooperation from other departments or units. In fact, even those that did not talk about being excluded from teams formed by their councils still reported cooperation issues. The responses provided by interviewees also highlight lack of harmony in communication activities in the studied council since departments seem to have their own ways of handling communication. The insignificant cooperation between communications officers and other departments means that communication activities are not management function hence institutional information cannot be captured in councils' strategic plan. Scholars (e.g. Canel & Sanders, 2013; Nxumalo, 2015; Sasser, 2015) maintain that public communication is there for the interest of organisation's objectives and goals on one hand, and public interest on the other hand. Therefore, unhealthy relationships between communication units and other units are unwelcome because they affect planning for communication activities, including budget and other technical issues, hence undermining communications functions.

Budget constrains

There was a general agreement from the respondents that budget allocations was insufficient however, the magnitude of the problem differed from one council to another. For instance, one respondent from AE council said:

Our budget is not enough to manage all communication activities, for example advertisements. I wish to have many adverts in the media, but the budget limits me. In my opinion, the communication unit within the council should be a separate unit with its own vote. With this, I can have more activities since I believe that in an institution, a communication unit is like a small media house. But this is only possible with sufficient budget.

The above quotation captures communication officer in a silly moody with the budget allocation for communication activities. Indeed, inability to have separate vote of communication is another challenge facing the respondent to plan her communication program. The responses imply that without independent communication unit with independent budget vote little will be done. This was also reported by some of the respondents; that the budget was not a serious problem but the procedural steps to access the located funds. For instance, one respondent from AD Municipality reported that:

To some extent the budget is not a problem. Our allocation is about Tzs. 200-300 million (approx. USD 100,000 to 130,000) per year. The problem is on acceptability of communication activities as per the budget allocated.

The above quotations from communication officers reflected the serious problem that despite the budget allocation being enough or not the procedural to access the allocation fund is the hitch for planning substantial communication programs. In general, these results indicate that because of financial constraints, public awareness promotion on matters that affect the public are limited. As such, most communication activities receive limited attention from the media. Overall, the interviewed PCOs work on a limited budget. As explained by Gezihagne (2018), skilled labour and budget limitations are among the barriers to communication officers' performance. This is echoed by Abukashawa (2013) who says that with insufficient budget, other problems such as lack of equipment and training are very likely to occur. Similarly, these experiences were evident in Dar es Salaam local councils.

With budget constraints, most communication related matters such as capacity building, media advertisements, publications, and equipment (such as camera and computers) availability were affected. Additionally, communication units were unable to conduct research and evaluate general communication landscape of their councils. This is bad considering that Solomon and Johnson (2013) argue that evaluation determines whether a program, method or tool used is effective or not and gives feedback that, in this case, could be sent to the council management. It

is imperative to note that effective communication can only be achieved if communication activities are planned, researched, implemented, and evaluated to measure results (Sanders & Canel, 2013). According to scholars (Canel & Sanders, 2013; Nxumalo, 2015; Sasser, 2015), communication officers should be involved in budgeting and other technical issues.

Common guidelines

The findings have also shown that local council's communication officers have no specific or specified directives to guide their communication activities. When talking about this challenge, interviewees mentioned the absence of a document detailing public communication officers' duties. For example, one respondent said;

I have never come across any working guidelines. However, due to what was mentioned as job a description during the job advertisement, as professional I know what I suppose to do on daily bases. I also go by directives from the management.

Following the quotation above, a communication officer in the local council has to guide her/himself based on professionalism and from the job description provided during the job advertisement. Each one has his/her own knowledge on what is supposed to be the guidelines as another communication officer responded "*in executing my roles I use the constitution, the Dodoma guidelines and government secular.*"

Generally the above answers provide the understanding that communication activities in local councils have no specified document known to guide communication officers' practice. The study shows that lack of common guidelines give room for varying treatment and handling of communication activities between councils. However, the interviewees' handling of their responsibilities appears to benefit from the presences of the constitution, guidelines such as Guideline for the implementation of Government Communication in Ministries, Independent Departments, Executive Agencies, and Local Government (Dodoma guideline, 2013), and the government secular No.26 of 2002, which provides details on government communication officers job descriptions, academic qualifications, and salary scales. However, there is no clear evidence if the mentioned documents are in understandings of the all communication officers and the management.

Nevertheless, it is imperative to note that there is a need for a harmonised document for facilitating communication processes in the local councils. The absence of a peculiar guidance creates room for the executive directors and the entire council to treat communication activities based on their will and wish of individuals. The true value of communication officer and his/her impact to council's development cannot be actualised in the absence of specified guidance. During an interview with Mr. Robert Hokororo, the former Assistant Director-Newspapers Registration at MAELEZO commented that during the establishment of the communication sector in the public service, there was a big debate on how government communication should be handled, who public communication officers are and their position in institutional structures (Personal interview on January 1, 2020).

Conclusion

This study has established that public communication officers face numerous challenges such as not being represented in management meetings due to problematic originated in the organisational structure of the councils they work for. The study also indicates that communication units are managed by Information Communication Technology experts rather than skilled communication personnel. Additionally, it has been noted that local councils' communication staffs are treated with suspicion, and mostly regarded as ordinary photographers, handlers of media relations and customer service. Limited budgets, poor cooperation from other departments and operating in absence of communication guideline were among the observed challenges. The study has also reported that communication officers' roles and responsibilities are not aligned with strategic plans of the councils because of the limited understanding among management and staff. To sum it up, without including communication officers in other departmental events, effective communication between the council and the public will not be realised.

Following the above conclusion, it is therefore recommended that communication activities should be planned and organised at management level by involving local authority's communication staffs in management meetings (CMT).

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