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Integrated Approach of the Citizen's Role in Relation to the Public Services

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INTRODUCTION

On the background of the current economic and financial crisis, the world economy and implicitly the public sector are facing several challenges and pressures.

Globalization, Europeanization of economy (Matei and Matei, 2007) and technology represent the main drivers leading to significant reforms (Pollit and Bouckaert, 2000) in the past decades, building “a synchronized fragility” (Kotler and Caslione, 2009) in the world economy, thus encountering today the same problems that characterised “a large part of the economic activity in the 1930s”, as stated by the well known American economist Paul R. Krugman (2009).

The world has encountered multiple and different changes.

The macro-economic unbalances and the issues of competitiveness have been at the origin of the economic crisis (European Commission, 2010). It is well known the fact that today, there are relations of interdependence between the national economies, powerfully interconnected, economies marked by a certain degree of risk and uncertainty for producers and consumers and “market turbulence”.

The political context of the actual crisis is marked by a high turbulence, uncertainty and an accelerated pace of changes (OECD, 1995, OECD 2000) and reorganizations.

The European Commission (2009) appreciated the intervention of the collective action to save the financial system, to boost demand and to render confidence through public intervention, drawing up a new generation of public policies, marking at the same time “the shift to a new sustainable social market economy, a smarter and greener economy”.

The economic and financial crisis has important consequences on public finances, enterprises, jobs and families.

The impact of the economic crisis in Europe, as well as in other parts of the world has revealed at the European economies level the GDP reduction by 4% in 2009, unemployment increasing to 10%, public finances with deficits reaching 7% of GDP, debt levels increasing by 20 percentage points over two years (European Commission, 2010).

Since the deficit in the public sector is under control, the public expenditures should be reorganized and the fiscal unbalances should restrict the margin of action for governments.

In fact, the public expenditures reflect the governments’ political choices, representing costs of the economic policy elements, aimed at delivering public goods. Those costs are incurred by goods delivery through the public sector budget (Matei, 2008).

1. CHALLENGING THE CAPACITY OF PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

The intervention in the government’s economic policy aims at creating the legal, functional, steady framework for economy, as guarantee for the economic growth and social security (Lafontaine and Müller, 1998), enjoying the confidence of the economy and citizens.

Accountable of meeting the society’s needs and requirements, the governments focus for the time being, on one hand, on the fast changes of the action policies, budgetary reduction at national and local administration level, leading to consequences on the economic actors, and on the other hand on the “new normality”, challenging a better understanding, in view “to accept it totally” and to develop strategies, thus changing the behaviour and attitude of governors and those governed.

Today we assist at a change of behaviour of the “governmental authority responsible for public service delivery”, determined fundamentally by financial constraints, pressures exercised by “market turbulence”, accelerated and intense competitiveness leading to consumers’ fragmentation, by the new wave of “green movement” inviting the citizens to consume more responsible or by the citizens’/ consumer’s need for information; in the last decade the consumer was identified as an active “partner” of the marketing process, playing a role of catalyst.

A new relation between administration and society has been developed, involving greater transparency and citizen participation.

The traditional administrative structures should develop the capacity to adapt continuously to the changing conditions in order “to protect” the governance action and public service delivery.

2. CITIZENS VERSUS PUBLIC SERVICES

People “buy” the “experience”, the “ownership” of the service, not the service which is meeting their need, thus feeling that their expectations have been achieved.

The initiative to place the citizen in the center of government’s attention (Doherty and Horne, 2002; Shand 1999, Pollit and Bouckaert, 1995) is expressed visible in Western European countries and reticent in the new EU Member States. The initiative is dominated by the special relation between the citizen and the public sector, the public being more circumspect regarding the public governmental services, even avoiding the interaction.

The political leaders establish what services will be provided, the conditions and for whom will be provided; “the bureaucrats and professionals organize and provide public services” (EIPA, 2008)

The citizen represents the most important governments’ priority; the governments are concerned to enlarge the area of choice for citizen, being more sensitive to the needs and requirements of society, more “understandable” versus the citizens.

The citizens require more responsive services, larger options in the limit of the actual budget, insisting on a better value for money.

The public services should be provided in a large variety towards community, based on the evaluation of its needs and interests, the latter representing starting points for the public sector organizations as providers of public services.

But, what do we understand by public service?

The public service is a social entity comprising activities and structures placed under “the dependence of public communities”, relevant for the “public sphere” (Chevallier, 2003), aimed at meeting a public need.

The public service is the activity or ensemble of activities of general and/or individual interest provided by a public institution or bodies belonging to an administrative ensemble in view to meet the public needs. It is a useful activity provided to a user [the user has no alternatives to obtain services (Shand & Arnberg, 1996)] / customer [a customer has the right to choose the service provider, either a public or private organization] / consumer/ beneficiary [the customer/ user is the beneficiary of a service under the form of a payment or fee and the provider has the market monopoly].

The public service represents an outcome of a process, “an activity organized or authorized by a public administration authority” (Iorgovan, 1994), an activity that “the governors are obliged to provide for the interest of those governed” (Duguit, 1913), characterized by the following fundamental features:

- 1) it resorts to a socio-political reality, determined in time, representing activities, bodies, agencies holding a certain place in social life;
- 2) the state is involved in service delivery;
- 3) the vision on the public service in light of its key elements: the organic element (public person), the functional element (general interest) and the material element (specific legal regime of public law)

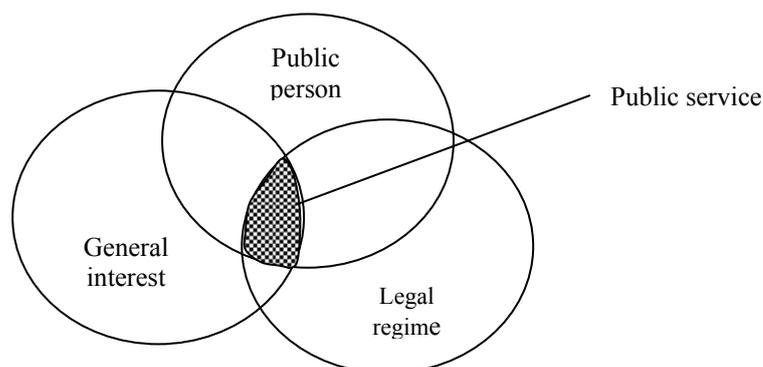


Figure1. Premises of the public service

The public services bear characteristics that make them special (Ross, 1999) and we individualize them through intangibility, inseparability, variability, perishability, heterogeneity (Hoffman and Bateson, 1997; Matei, 2001, Zeithaml et al., 1992, Kotler and Armstrong, 2006).

3. PUBLIC SERVICE MODEL

In light of the systemic approach, the public services represent subsystems of the public administration system, whose aims are defined in relation to meeting social needs.

We developed a public service model representing the *model of the system of expectation* (Figure 2), bearing the following characteristics:

- the model turns into account the probabilistic modelling of the administrative-social facts, specific for the operation of the public services;
- cybernetic characteristics of the public service system are defined and highlighted;
- the model achieves the systemic substantiation of decision in the public services;
- it uses also modelling of the consumers' expectation levels.

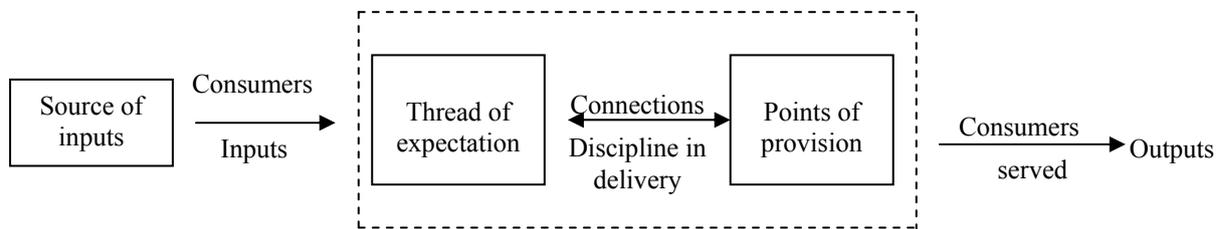


Figure 2. Model of the system of expectation

1) The inputs in the system will be modelled by a random variable X, whose law of distribution is even Poisson distribution, with λ parameter (Jaba, 1998:220-223).

$$P_n(t) = \frac{(\lambda t)^n}{n!} e^{-\lambda t}, \lambda > 0, n \in N$$

$$P_n(1) = \frac{\lambda^n}{n!} e^{-\lambda}, t=1$$

t – interval of time, $t > 0$

n – number of inputs in the system

λ = coefficient of proportionality, constant > 0

P_n is the probability that in the interval of time (0, t), n inputs will be in the system.

(2) The outputs are modelled by a random variable Y, whose law of distribution is Poisson law, with μ parameter. The time between two consecutive inputs is also variable, and it may be described as an exponential random variable T, with λ parameter. Similar, the random variable of time between two consecutive outputs, U, has also an exponential distribution with μ parameter.

In the description about the citizen's relation with the public sector organizations as providers of public services, traditionally, the citizen plays a passive role, being less involved in the decision-making process concerning the public service (which takes into account the entire process related to conceiving, developing the public service, providing, monitoring and assessing).

That direction of the public organization turns into account the property of the close dynamic system (Matei, 2006) or even "black boxes", as the entire process related to the public services belongs to the internal relations of the public organization, the offer dominating the service market.

That feature is justified also by the legal framework (fundamental law and specific laws), fundamental principles of public services - Rolland's laws: equality, continuity, mutability, adaptability (Matei, 2004: 55-59), emphasizing the equal, impartial treatment of citizens concerning the access to the public services.

Today, the evolution of the needs for public services is emphasized by the transformation of organizations from a close, dynamic system into an open, dynamic system (Matei, 2000: 162 – 182); in that system, the organizations are exterior-oriented and they are concerned to achieve a functional, optimum ratio between the demand and offer related to the public service, creating new types of interactions and relations with citizens.

The public sector organizations provide the services, without the possibility to "make the segmentation" of the favourite customers or most advantageous customers. For many public services, "the customers" considered important for the government are those customers revealing no interest for most commercial service providers.

Any person in the public organization may play several roles, such as: *provider, processor and customer*. That quality of the organization enables better understanding of the customer's perceptions, transforming them in a competitive advantage for the organization.

Acquiring knowledge about the needs represents a complex, difficult process as the customer declares the needs according to the way he/she considers them, in an own language, bearing in mind that there are always differences between the customer's wish and benefit of his/her needs, which may also include non-specified aspects.

A series of investigations can lead to "n" versions of answers, depending on respondents. For example:

- Why do you want that service?
- What are your expectations after taking advantage of that service?
- Have the expectations been met?
- How do you use the service?
- What would be your complaints after using the service?
- Which will be the real use of the service?
- Are any associated costs in order to use the service?
- Do you believe that the service provider is well chosen?

The needs are in a continuous change. Discovering the needs and understanding with accuracy the customer's expected benefit represent "an art and science".

The collection of marketing instruments in view to check frequently the customers' needs and monitor the public service market is hard to be achieved and at the same time it is expensive for the public sector.

The most frequent are as follows: inquiries addressed to the customers; analyses, periodical reports on the public service; emphasizing the system of complaints and the responses; employing specialized staff for service delivery; organizing the special department for service promotion and dialogue with the customers; tests carried out by provider concerning customer's behaviour and proposals in order to improve the access and public service delivery; conformance rules for the public service.

4. THE CITIZEN AS CUSTOMER – A DUAL ROLE

The citizen inside the relations with the public service providers may “play” the role of customer, co-designer, co-decision-maker, co-producer and co-evaluator in different stages of the “life cycle” of the public service (Figure 3).

The beneficiary of the public service, the citizen is the customer of the services provided by public sector organizations.

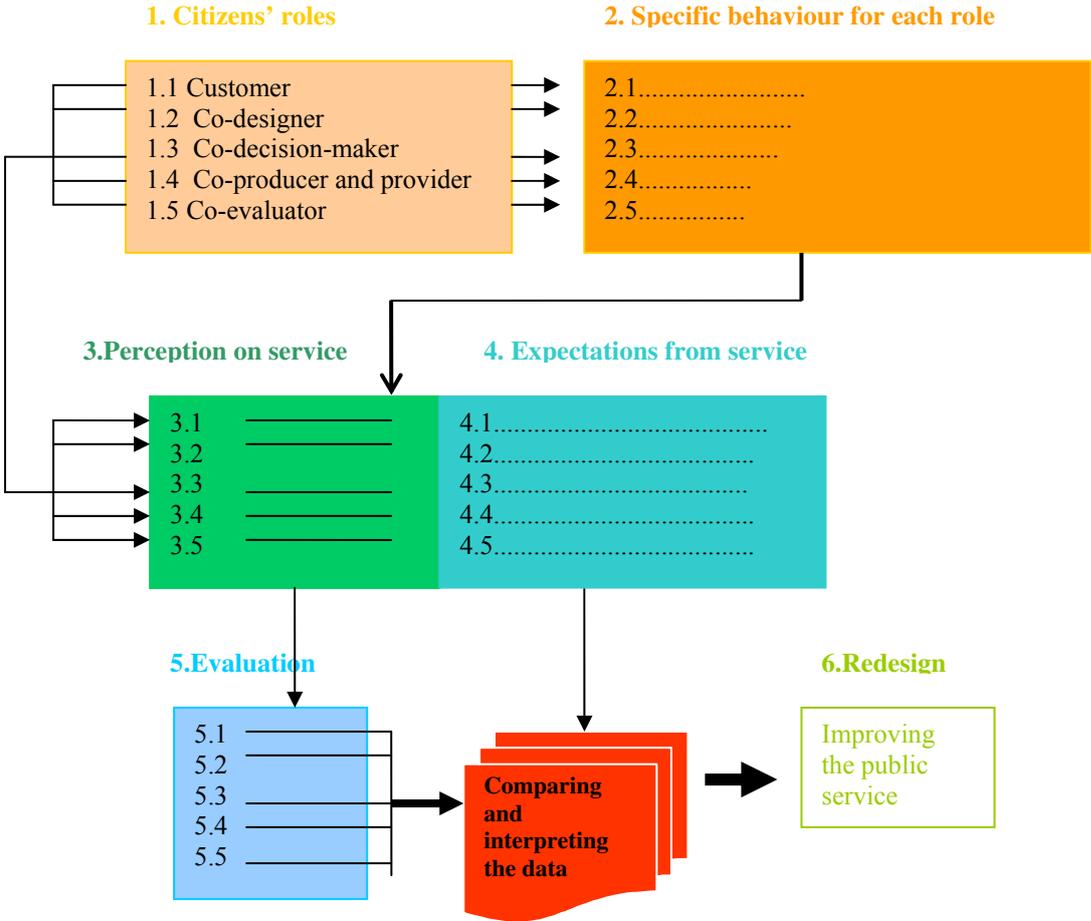


Figure 3. Image of the citizens’ role versus public service provider

A complex relation is developed between the beneficiary and the organization; we may characterize that relation as a relation with the customers – when the services are provided directly by the public sector organization or a relation with the citizens, when the organization is involved in determining and creating the environment for the economic and social life. The relation is determined by diverse and complex needs.

The customer’s role is different in the public sector, the citizen has the right to be treated as customer according to the provisions of the public sector stipulating equity for everybody. Every citizen expects that his/her needs are respected at individual level according to the status of citizen and taxpayer; those *needs are genuine* (transport, safety, comfort, education, health, culture etc.).

Usually those needs are known as the “benefits” they consider that they will receive. For example, the customer decides to go by underground, to buy the card so the benefit of the customer’s needs may include transport, comfort, safety, quick access to other transportation means.

5. THE CITIZEN AS CO-DESIGNER

The public administration is a public service. Its evolution has been decisively influenced by the society development, the evolution of the citizen’s behaviour and needs in different historical stages. At the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, we identify easily the amplification of the citizen’s role in designing, re-designing the public services, the citizen playing the role of co-designer.

Thus, the architecture for public service delivery is complex, involving both internal and external factors within the process related to creating, using, re-creating the public service (Figure 4).

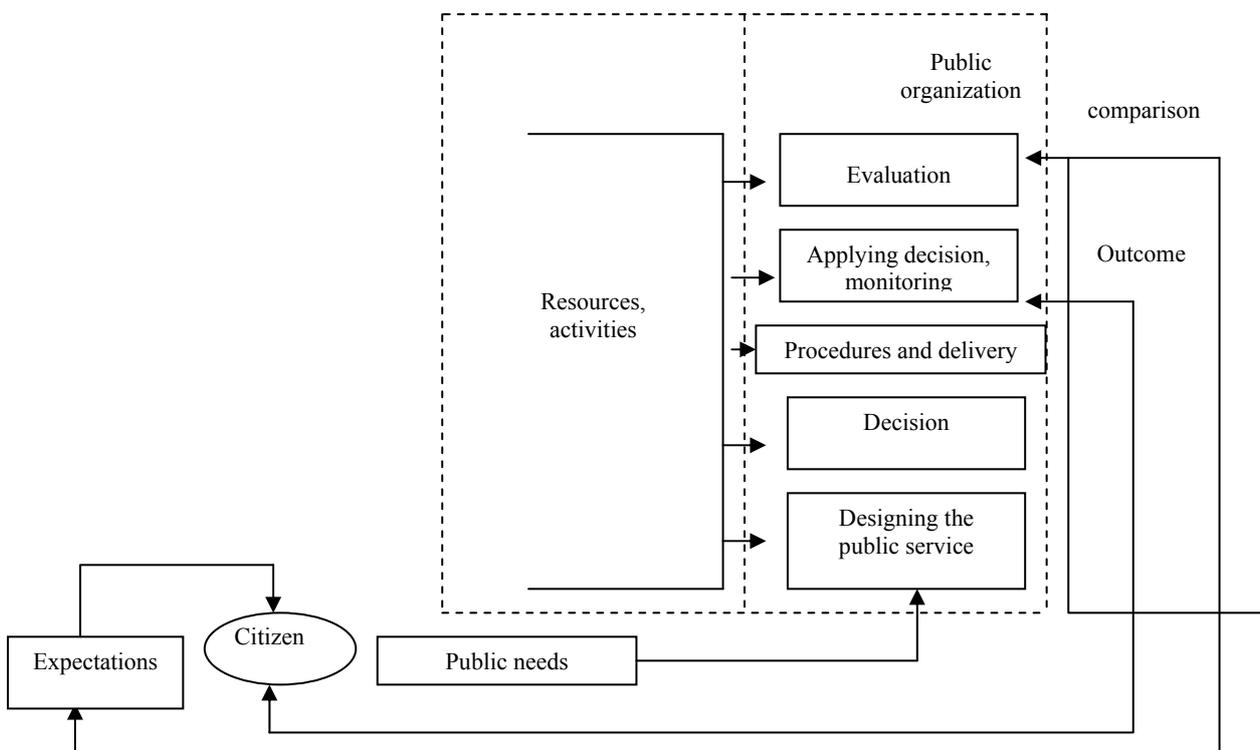


Figure 4. Architecture of public service delivery

Taking into consideration the characteristic of the public service, namely to use it in the moment of its production (emphasizing the inter-relation between the public service provider and customer), the citizen’s intervention is possible in the moment of turning into account the effects and achieving the comparison with the citizen/customer’s expectations. The intervention may come as suggestion aimed at improving, developing various components of the public service delivery process (from design to achievement, delivery, evaluation).

The citizen’s intervention may be expressed not only at the service level, but also at the level of the legislative, normative framework, regulating the respective service.

In this respect, we provide examples of stakeholders’ intervention in approving the draft on “Law on National Education”. The draft was subject to public debate, evaluation by the citizen-customer in an information campaign concerning the “Law on National Education”:

- a) creating a website specific for debating the draft law “A Step Forward”. Debate the Law on National Education on www.unpasinainte.edu.ro

- b) public debates with stakeholders (parents, student organizations, teaching staff, trade unions, NGOs etc., specialized commissions), organized by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport
- c) debates on the educational forum, created for that purpose.

6. THE CITIZEN AS CO-DECISION-MAKER

The decision-making process for a public service is substantiated on complex, specific information. Citizen participation together with other stakeholders (Freeman, 1994) in the decision-making process concerning the public service may be achieved at local level through citizen representation in local councils and their participation to the decision-making process, citizen consultation on issues specific for the public services, involvement of citizen advisory committees, thus creating a high level of responsibility and transparency for governance.

In Romania, citizen participation in the decision –making process is regulated in the laws on public administration, starting with Law no. 69/1991 of local public administration, abrogated in 2001, current law on public administration, Law no. 215/2001 on local public administration, Law no. 52/2003 on decisional transparency in public administration.

Citizen consultation is considered a double fold relation (OECD, 2001b), where the public organizations and authorities are discussing with the citizens and the citizens are providing “responses concerning the respective public service”. It is an instrument for introducing citizens’ option.

Citizen involvement in the decision-making process, as co-decision-maker, individual or “group” belonging to a social, economic entity may be represented for example taking into consideration a decision concerning social assistance at the council level of a local community (Table 1) – matrix of stakeholders

The analysis of stakeholders enables to identify and evaluate the citizens or groups of citizens, the legal persons that may influence the public service in various stages of its life cycle.

Groups of stakeholders		Representation	Service impact on groups of stakeholders	Influence of groups of stakeholders on the public service
1	Executive of city hall of Municipality/ town	LG	5	5
2	Local Council, Social Commission	LG	3	5
3	Public service of social assistance	LG	4	4
4	Beneficiaries of the social services			
	- citizens		4	4
	- NGO		4	4
5	Providers of social services:			
	- public		5	3 - 4
	- private		3	2
	- NGO		3 - 4	4

Table 1. Matrix of stakeholders

Legend:

N – unknown; 1 = without importance, 2 = low importance; 3 = relative important; 4 = very important; 5 = critical

At the level of many local authorities all over the world, an example is the citizen participation in the decision-making process concerning the participative drafting of the local budget; thus within the information stage the citizens may be better informed through public debates, that stage preceding the decision on passing the local budget (Barnett, 1995; Bouckaert, Loffler and Pollitt, 2006; Matei et al. 2001, 2002).

In this respect, it is worth to mention the case of participative drafting of the local budget in the city of Porto Alegre, Brasil (Bouckaert, Loffler and Pollitt, 2006). The community (16 community associations and 5 groups of stakeholders) organised meetings in order to make the planning and establish the budgetary priorities of the year. The city hall made the budget on the basis of those priorities, working with a committee (Chetwynd and Chetwynd, 2001).

Consulting the citizens offers a major alternative, completing the market forces (Pollitt,1996), providing them the possibility to influence decision-making on a conventional market.

We should consider the direction of consultation in light of modelling the public service, progressively, related to the evolution of citizens' needs.

7. THE CITIZEN AS CO-PRODUCER AND PROVIDER

We understand co-production (EIPA, 2008) as the action to involve the stakeholders in different stages of the cycle related to production and delivery of the respective public service.

The experience emphasises the forms of co-participant in service production, in public-private partnerships, service sub-contracting; the partners are legal persons and individuals, citizens who may be involved either individually or collectively. Examples of co-participation: services for the benefit of the community, social assistance, e-services etc.

The citizen involvement may be active or passive, permanent or temporary.

The citizen may be involved in direct service production in a structural way, i.e. e-governance, or in supporting the service delivery. The citizen involvement may range from the "back-office" (back of the desk-office, accessible only to staff) or "front office" (visible part, the public relations department – services at desk-office).

The citizen's role of co-producer is "shaded" many times taking into consideration the fact that the relation of public service production or delivery comprises "professionals" on one hand and "volunteers" on the other hand; it requires a compromise between professionalism and citizen representation in the organization, a clear establishment of citizen responsibilities and accountability.

In the relation with the organization providing services, the citizen may play the role of provider for the organization, i.e. provider of information about the service.

The information provided by the citizens as user or consumer of that service is less pleasant for the organization, taking the form of complaints and reflecting the consumer's dissatisfaction within the "consumption" relation.

8. THE CITIZEN AS CO-EVALUATOR

The evolution of the relation between citizen and public administration, in our case the public organization as public service provider, demonstrates the shift of the organization from a close, dynamic system to an open, dynamic system, the public services being subsystems of the public administration system (Matei, 2003).

A key feature of that system consists in the variability of demands in quantitative and qualitative terms. As shown, the public service system is similar to the model of the system of expectation, which has the main role to ensure adjustment in the public service system in order:

- to achieve the consumers' satisfaction;
- to use completely the public service capacity.

Whenever the citizen as evaluator of the public service “bought” is acting, the feedback should provide information about the decisions concerning the capacity and quality of the public service delivery.

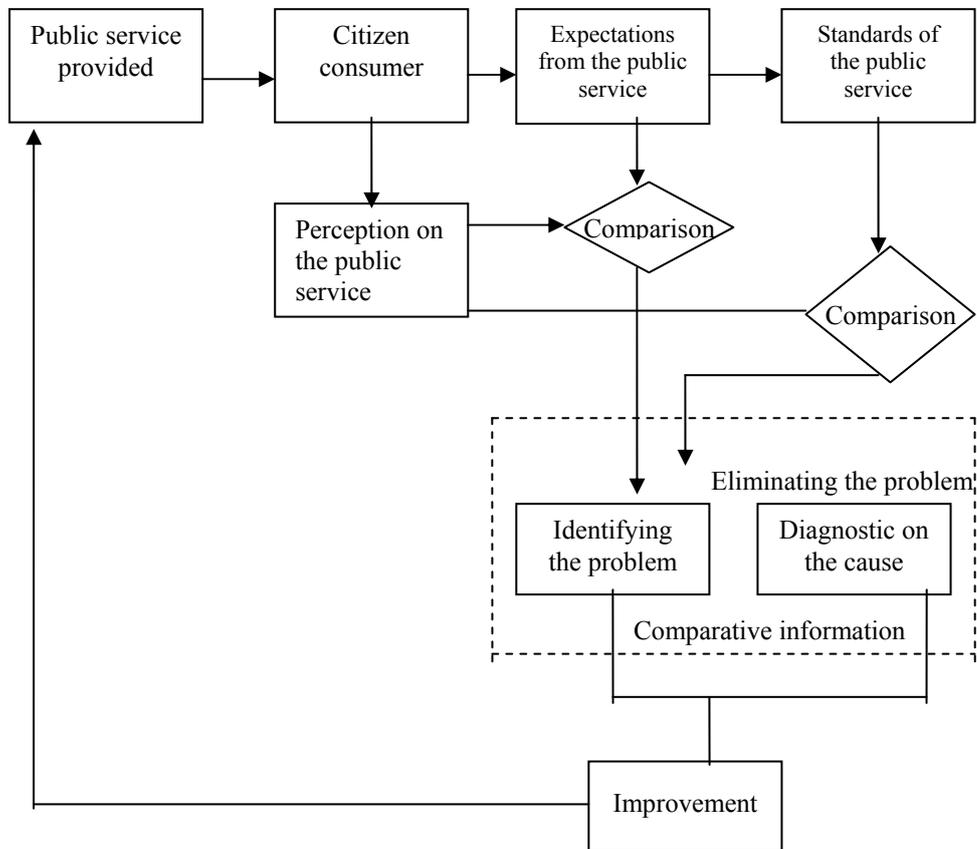


Figure 5. Servqual model

In the specialised literature concerning service quality (Juran et. al. 1999), the perceptions on service delivery and the customers’ expectations are measured distinctly and the difference between perceptions and expectations provides the measure for service quality, determining the satisfaction level.

Servqual model (Parasuraman, et. al., 1985 – 1988; Zeithaml, 2006; Veljković, 2006), measuring both the citizen perceptions and expectations concerning a series of public service characteristics is used by the public organizations providing public services in order to argument a better orientation of the management team in defining the priorities for improving the public services, thus offering a useful structure for the aspects influencing the quality.

The model starts with the core difference between perceptions and expectations, being known as „model of differences” in the specialised literature. Analysis on the five core differences („Customers expectations versus management perceptions”, „Management perceptions versus service specifications”, „Service specifications versus service delivery”, „Service delivery versus external communication” and „The discrepancy between customer expectations and their perceptions of the service delivered”).

The mathematical representation of the model is as follows:

$$SQ = \sum_{j=1}^k (P_{ij} - E_{ij})$$

where,

SQ = Service Quality

P_{ij} = Performance perception of stimulus i with respect to attribute j

E_{ij} = Expectations of the organisation for item i in dimension

The attributes of the public service at the level of citizens perceptions, respectively the technical, functional, financial, relational and institutional level and their importance in defining the citizens expectations are scored on Lickert scale, ranging from 1 to 5 (Figure 6)

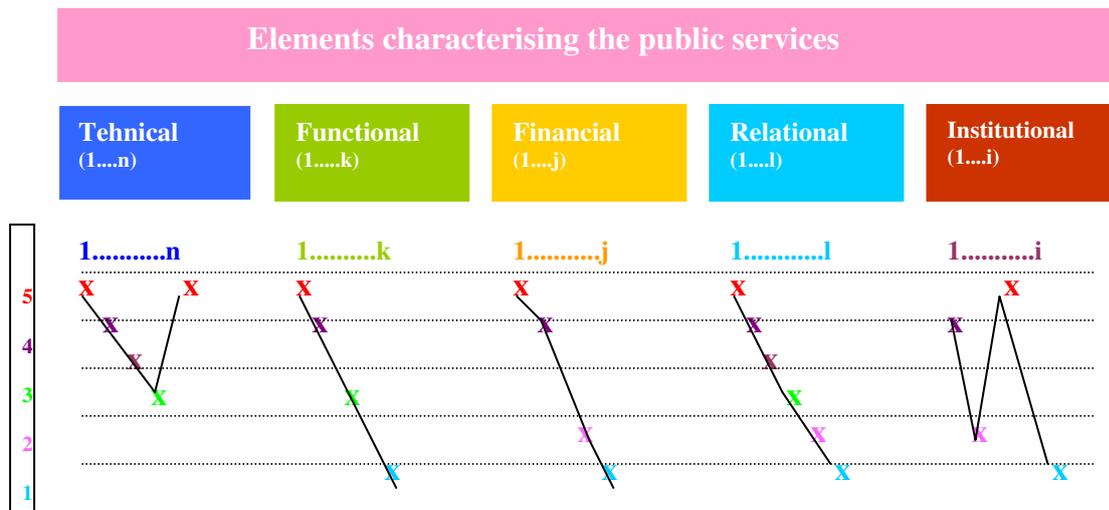


Figure 6. Scoring the citizen expectations related to the essential elements of the public service

The availability of useful information, derived from the feedback on public service performance can not improve its quality but it may contribute to designing a new system (service), or to redesigning an improved system.

The information resulted further the comparison of various measures of the system with values of reference belongs to the set of formal processes of the organization, supporting the improvement and continuous service adaptation to customers' needs.

CONCLUSIONS

The increasing attention awarded to the effects of the world economic and financial crisis has highlighted the risks of economies, uncertainty of producers and consumers, consequences on public finances, enterprises, jobs and families.

The increased degree of transparency required today from the governors, high accountability for meeting the public needs in terms of budgetary reduction represent only some key factors for changing the "governmental authority's" behaviour and attitude versus public service delivery. The political leaders establish what services will be provided, the conditions and for whom will be provided. The professionals and civil servants organize and deliver public services and the citizens "buy" the "ownership" of the service, not the service which is meeting the need. Discovering the needs and understanding with accuracy the customer's expected benefit represent "an art and science".

The paper emphasises the citizens' possible roles related to public service providers, roles revealed through the active dimension of citizen participation in different stages of the life cycle of the public

services in the past decades. Thus the citizens become co-designers, co-decision-makers, co-producers, co-providers or co-evaluators. Those roles are highlighted in the systemic approach of the public service model.

The specific dynamics determines the efforts to involve the citizens in the public services, acknowledging their status of customers and the differences between public service delivery in the public sector and service delivery in the private sector.

The public services were created by public communities in view to achieve objectives for their development. For the time being the need to combine the economic efficiency with the social size represents a genuine reality.

Public services cannot be designed without involving all stakeholders, mainly the citizens. The citizens become active and competent users of public services and taking into consideration the continuous increase of the aspiration levels, the public service finality is updating permanently.

That context is overarching the paper and is re-turning into account the contributions of the specialised literature in view to create a comprehensive vision on the genuine issue of public service development in the beginning of the third millennium.

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