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**South African Government Library Services And  
The *Batho Pele* Principles: How The Eleven Official  
Languages Impact On Service Delivery**

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**ABSTRACT**

*South Africa, as a developing country, tries its best to satisfy the needs of its citizens. Government institutions are expected to provide people with quality services in every area. However, there have been complaints that many government departments do not deliver services to the public as expected by the Constitution and the White Paper on Transformation of Public Service Delivery. In order to rectify the escalating problems in the public sector, the South African government came up with the idea of Batho Pele (People First) principles, requiring all departments rendering public services to follow these principles. Batho Pele, an initiative of the national government for transforming public service delivery, is all about providing good customer service to users of these services. All public servants are required to practice these principles, and libraries are included. Each government department in South Africa has a library or information centre that renders services to departmental staff, researchers from*

*other institutions (with permission), and indirectly to members of the public. Thus, quality service delivery by government libraries will lead to satisfied users and quality through-put, which can in turn lead to economic development of the country.*

*This paper investigates the extent to which the eight Batho Pele principles are being implemented or applied by government libraries in service delivery, and the impact of the eleven official languages in South Africa. Libraries need to provide information and resources in the different official languages, as well as other programs to engage people from different backgrounds, including outreach programs. However, the type of services offered by these libraries will differ from one library to another, since each has a different focus and hence, collection of material. This paper bases its arguments on the results of a questionnaire survey sent to all national departmental libraries.*

## **1 Introduction**

The society we live in today is faced with changes and challenges, and therefore, an excellent quality service to customers by government departments is vital. South Africa has 11 official languages: isiNdebele; isiXhosa; isiZulu; siSwati; Sepedi; Sesotho; Setswana, English; Tshivenda; Xitsonga and Afrikaans, and there are 37 government departments, each of which has a library or information centre that serves internal customers which is staff and external customers as the public .

The South African government realised that most of the customers were dissatisfied with the services they received from public sectors, so it came up with the initiative of “Batho Pele Principles”. Batho Pele is a Sesotho phrase meaning: “putting people first”. The government stipulated that service delivery must be transformed, in order to create satisfied customers. Departmental libraries form part of the public sectors that must transform service delivery through the application of the Batho Pele principles. Thus, departmental libraries are expected to provide staff with information that specifically addresses their immediate needs, which may in turn contribute to the development of social well-being and economic stability of the country. The Batho Pele principles commit public sectors to serve all customers effectively and efficiently, and the Constitution of the Republic supports this by saying that “everyone has the right of access to information (Section 32 (1)) and the right to use his/her language” (Section 30). The question is: Do staff members in all these departments access information from libraries or information centres in their preferred languages?

The main purpose of this study was to find out if information specialists in different departmental libraries render services through applying the Batho Pele principles, by providing information in the 11 official languages. Secondly, it is to determine how the 11 official languages impact on service delivery. Thirdly, this study aims to challenge information specialists to improve service delivery through customer care skills in libraries or information centres. Furthermore, it also aims at investigating whether or not these principles are adhered to by libraries, and if implemented, are there any improvements in service delivery? Finally, it seeks to provide some recommendations to departmental libraries or information centres.

## 2 Background

According to Section 195 (1) of the Constitution of South Africa (Act no. 108 of 1996) it is stipulated that public administration must be governed by democratic values and principles, including the following:

- a high standard of professional ethics must be promoted and maintained.
- efficient, economic and effective use of resources must be promoted.
- public administration must be development-orientated.
- services must be provided impartially, fairly, equitably and without bias.
- people's needs must be responded to, and the public must be encouraged to participate in policy-making.
- public administration must be accountable.
- transparency must be fostered by providing the public with timely, accessible and accurate information.
- good human resource management and career development practices, in order to maximise human potential, must be cultivated.
- public administration must be broadly representative of the South African people, with employment and personnel management practices based on ability, objectivity, fairness and the need to redress the imbalances of the past to achieve broad representation.

The above constitutional principles help in guiding the transformation of public services to provide appropriate services to all the people of the country.

### 2.1 Language policy

Much has changed in South Africa since the 1994 democratic elections, won by the African National Congress (ANC). According to Mgqwashu (2004), "these changes include the recognition and elevating of the previously marginalized indigenous languages in South Africa". A multilingual language policy adopted in 1994 gives official recognition to eleven languages, and that is why South Africa's Constitution recognises and guarantees equal status to all 11 official languages. In 2003, the South African Cabinet approved the *National Language Policy Framework* (NLPF), whose aim is to:

- "promote the equitable use of the 11 official languages;
- facilitate equitable access to government services, knowledge and information;
- ensure redress for the previously marginalized official indigenous languages;
- encourage the learning of other official indigenous languages to promote national unity, and linguistic and cultural diversity; and
- promote good language management for efficient public service administration to meet client expectations and needs" (DAC, 2003a: 13).

From the above, it is clear that citizens have the right of access to information in the language they prefer, and this policy targets all government structures, with the private sector being excluded in this case. According to Beukes (2004:9):

- Each government department must designate a working language(s) for both intra- and inter-departmental communication.
- Communication with the public via official correspondence must take place in the language of the citizen's choice.

- Official documents of national government departments must be published in all 11 languages where the effective and stable operation of government would require such action.
- Communication at an international level should be in English or the preferred language of the country concerned.

The above provisions clarify the fact that government libraries or information centres should provide access to official documents in all eleven official languages. Another argument is that one language from the Nguni group (isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, and siSwati) can be published in rotation, and one language from the Sotho group (Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana) can also be published in rotation. Tshivenda, Xitsonga, English and Afrikaans are not grouped together, and as a result, a six-language formula is a standard approach to publishing official documents which may be accessed in departmental libraries or information centres.

### **3 Research Methodology**

A literature review was conducted in order to confirm the requirements, stipulations and expectations of the government in terms of the Batho Pele principles and language policy. E-mail questionnaires and telephonic interviews were then used to obtain information from the 37 government departments regarding their current practices. Further information regarding the 37 departmental libraries or information centres was obtained from the government website: <http://www.gov.za>. Each department was contacted telephonically to explain the study being conducted, and to emphasise that their responses would be critical to its success.

Of the 37 departmental libraries, questionnaires were e-mailed to 32 information managers, because it was not possible to get hold of the other 5 departments telephonically to inform them of the study, and they were therefore excluded from it. A follow-up telephonic interview was conducted with those departments (27) that failed to return the questionnaires. Finally, literature relating to this study was consulted in order to obtain more information on the topic.

### **4 Findings**

Firstly, the findings of the literature review will be briefly discussed. Then, in section 5, these findings will be discussed in terms of their application to government department libraries or information centres.

#### **4.1 The impact of the 11 official languages on service delivery**

In the 1996 Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) of South Africa, Section 30 (1) stipulates that “everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights.” The right to use the language of one’s choice is in line with the right to free and equal access to information in the preferred language. In this way, a new mandate for information providers is established, that of providing information in the preferred language of users. Do government libraries comply with the above mandate?

Of the 32 government libraries that responded to the questionnaire, all of them (100%) responded to question 10 (see Appendix 1) with “No”, meaning that they do not provide information in indigenous South African languages. They only do so when the publication in question was originally published in one of these languages. The issue of information professionals providing information in the language preferred by the user can therefore be addressed through internal consultation, although this has financial implications. Statistics show that the majority of indigenous South Africans are illiterate, which means that any information available in English or Afrikaans will not be able to be accessed and used by them. These people cannot positively participate in the upliftment of the country’s economy, because of their lack of information.

## **4.2 The eight Batho Pele principles**

Batho Pele (“People First”) can be viewed as an initiative that helps to achieve the best delivery of public services. It is a vision that guides and directs public services, and addresses the imbalances of the past. According to Kroukamp (1999:329), Batho Pele means “a complete change in the way in which services are delivered”. The Batho Pele White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery, which was published in 1997, states that “all public sectors should follow the eight principles that will be used as a guideline to quality service delivery. The principles include Consultation; Service Standards; Access; Courtesy; Information; Openness and Transparency; Redress; and Value for Money”. In implementing these principles, government department libraries or information centres use different approaches.

### **4.2.1 Consultation**

Consultation is the interaction which staff have with customers on a daily basis. Kroukamp (1999:330) argues that “it is important that consultation not only cover aspects about services currently provided, but also about the provision of new basic services to those who lack them”. For example, information professionals in government department libraries should consult customers regarding the type of information they need to access in the library, by conducting a customer audit. Consultation can also be done by conducting customer surveys, and by holding interviews with a group of users or individual users. Consultation, in this case, may reduce the chances of receiving complaints from the public or users about services rendered by the library, and will help in improving such services. According to Tsenoli (2006:48), “consultation and participation are the backbone of the country’s legislation”. The most common consultation approach used by libraries or information centres is the use of a ‘suggestion box’, whereby customers write down their problems, concerns and comments regarding the services rendered or any improvements thereof.

### **4.2.2 Service Standards**

Government departments are expected to set service standards by informing customers as to when they will receive services, or when services will be delivered to them. The level and quality of service should be communicated to all customers who are using the library or information centre. For example, information regarding

services rendered must be readily available. An intranet, word-of-mouth and notices are used by departments to inform customers about available services.

#### **4.2.3 Access**

According to the Constitution, all citizens should have free and equal access to the services to which they are entitled. For example, the public should have access to services, irrespective of their age, colour and language. Information professionals in different libraries should ensure that access to all current sources of information is promoted, encouraged and achieved. The Department of Arts and Culture is on a mission of making information available, by translating documents for citizens into all 11 official languages.

#### **4.2.4 Courtesy**

Public servants should treat their customers as employers. This principle requires public servants to behave courteously, with a polite smile, and to be humble. The code of conduct for public servants, which was issued by the Public Service Commission on 10 June 1997, indicates that “the public servants should treat their customers with courtesy and that customers are entitled to receive the highest standards of service. The following should be covered: greeting and addressing customers; simplification and ‘customer friendliness’ of forms; dealing with people who have special needs, how complaints should be dealt with and the language used”.

#### **4.2.5 Information**

Citizens should be given full and accurate information about the public services they are entitled to, especially those who have previously been excluded from the provision of public services (Kroukamp, 1999:330). The Promotion of Access to Information Act is perhaps the most tangible proof of the commitment of public services to information creation, dissemination and access. The government department library, in this case, can promote a current awareness service for customers by informing them where certain information can be accessed, and by providing full details and sources of information.

#### **4.2.6 Openness and Transparency**

In order to show that we are living in a democratic country, public service delivery should be transparent. In the past, the public did not know how the departments worked and how much money was spent, but now they have the right to know. Government department libraries or information centres should provide information about the department - this can be anything from budgets to who is in charge. In this way, openness and transparency is practised.

#### **4.2.7 Redress**

This principle focuses on the willingness and ability of service providers to apologise when things go wrong. This is considered to be the best remedy for mistakes and failures. The public appreciate being offered alternatives or apologies for undelivered

services, since it is not always possible to deliver what one has promised. Things such as technology, finances and political situations can be causes of failure. Information specialists in various government departments should offer a full explanation of the causes of failure, as well as an effective solution. Keeping statistics of lodged complaints will help the organisation to identify gaps that need to be closed in terms of customer satisfaction. Complaints should not be viewed negatively, but rather as a tool that will help to audit services, identify gaps and improve on service delivery.

#### **4.2.8 Value for Money**

How do we measure value for money? Public services should be provided economically and efficiently, in order to give citizens the best possible value for money (Kroukamp, 1999). From a political viewpoint, Liddle (1999:206) describes best value as “central to government’s objective of reinforcing and reinvigorating local democracy through consultation with and the involvement of service users and the wider community”. The best value for money concentrates on areas in which cost savings can be achieved. In the case of libraries or information centres, users are always looking for value for money in services rendered. In simple terms, value for money looks at the quality of standards and timeframes, at an affordable cost to the public, in terms of services rendered.

### **5 Discussion of findings**

Since the questionnaires were administered electronically to 32 government department libraries or information centres, only 5 responded by e-mail. This response rate was too low, and would not be a true representation of the total number of government libraries included in the study. Therefore, telephonic interviews had to be conducted with the 27 government department libraries or information centres that did not respond to the questionnaire. Thus, a total of 32 (86.5%) libraries or information centres participated in the study, and each department had to respond to the questions that appear in Appendix 1.

#### **5.1 Responses from the questionnaires**

From the responses, 30 (93.75%) government libraries or information centres acknowledged that they knew about Batho Pele principles and that they had implemented them. The question on how they implemented these principles differs from one library to another. For example, the Department of Education’s response was: “by putting people first and going the extra mile to help people; not being quick to turn people away and saying we do not have something; by exploring all avenues of information when helping people; to be inviting and willing to assist; by telling people about our services and encouraging them to make use the library”.

Responses pertaining to the application of Batho Pele principles and the improvement of service delivery vary, because one department sees this as an opportunity for providing excellent services to internal and external customers. Others are of the opinion that all stakeholders should be committed, so as to improve service delivery. The application of these principles has improved services rendered by the libraries and information centres, in the sense that customers have a say in the running of the library and its collection development. The relations between customers and

information specialists have also improved. However, there are challenges, and some of the challenges in implementing Batho Pele principles, as noted by the departments, are:

- the availability of resources will determine how far one can go in terms of Batho Pele.
- the kind of support received from colleagues, team work, and commitment of all stakeholders, will contribute to the success of the application of Batho Pele principles. If there is no culture of commitment in providing quality services and putting people's needs first, then the Batho Pele principles will tend to suffer.
- the kind of culture that prevails in a department, directorate or unit will affect the success of the application of Batho Pele principles.

It is unfortunate that, although government department libraries have implemented these principles, there are no existing mechanisms being employed by the government to monitor the application of these principles. Some 14 (43.75%) departments have a monitoring system, for example, the South African Revenue Services (SARS) indicated that the Auditor-General conducts audits, as well as internal audit departments.

It has been mentioned that each government department must designate a working language(s) for both intra- and inter-departmental communication. The responses from all departments about the language policy were that English is used as a business language. This therefore influences collection development in libraries or information centres because most of the books purchased are in English. In this way, the library collection is available in English, except when accessing the government website for government services: [<http://www.services.gov.za>], where information is available in all 11 official languages.

In cases where illiterate people request information, they are helped verbally by the information specialist and in the case where they can read a bit, they can be provided with information in African languages. Another challenge facing these libraries is that illiterate people do not use the library, except when they want to make copies of their identity documents, and to check lottery or horse racing results in the newspapers. Some government libraries have ABET (Adult Basic Education and Training) and African language collections, which are under-utilised. The recommendation is that supervisors or line managers in different sub-directorates should provide information to their illiterate subordinates in a language that they understand. Alternatively, they can use the services provided by the Department of Arts and Culture to translate official documents into any of the African languages.

Information on translating official documents is available on the following website: [[http://www.dac.gov.za/projects/language\\_service.htm](http://www.dac.gov.za/projects/language_service.htm)]. It is the vision of the Department of Arts and Culture to promote multilingualism, by ensuring that all eleven official languages enjoy equal treatment, development and protection. This is an indication that the problem of not being able to access information in all 11 official languages is being addressed in order to meet the language requirements of the Constitution.



## 5.2 Successes

The collective response of “Yes” regarding the introduction of the Batho Pele principles and the improvement of service delivery was 100%. This is an indication that libraries adhere to the principles of Batho Pele. Although these libraries can measure the level of success through service delivery evaluation forms issued to users, it is worth noting that different libraries use different approaches in the application of these principles.

## 5.3 Failures

It came to the fore that information centres or libraries do not supply information in the 11 official languages, due to the fact that this would be an expensive, time-consuming, and staff-intensive exercise. In this case, the centres are dependent on the departmental language policy, and the information they provide is in accordance with this policy.

Secondly, there are no existing mechanisms being employed by libraries to monitor the application of Batho Pele principles in libraries, although the collection development of such libraries is guided by the vision and mission of the individual department.

## 5.4 Challenges

This study identified the following challenges:

- It is very difficult for the different government library services to apply a standard procedure in the application of the 11 official languages, since they cater for different user needs.
- To be able to do so, translators need to be recruited if information specialists do not have the necessary skills.
- Libraries, in most cases, do not have adequate budgets for the training of staff, and in this case, if an information specialist is to be sent for training, sufficient funding is required.

## 6. Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations:

- Staff and customers should be educated about Batho Pele principles through seminars, workshops and *imbizos* (a Zulu/Xhosa word for “Biza”, meaning “to call”, suggesting a calling together of the community for consultation). A joint effort in training will help to conscientise both parties concerning their roles and the importance of implementing and using the principles to improve service delivery.
- Libraries should have policies that put its customers first. Usually, there are no documented policies in most libraries, and this makes it difficult to measure users’ level of satisfaction. Having a policy and an instrument to measure customer satisfaction (customer audit) will help in satisfying users’ needs, and

in achieving the vision and mission of the department, by putting customers' needs first.

- The six-language formula should be practised by libraries when providing information to clients. The issue of language in South Africa is a very sensitive one, and this means that one cannot overlook other languages. The six-language formula will help in accommodating all 11 official languages when providing access to information – see 2.1 for how this can be implemented.
- Libraries or information centres should have a Service Delivery Improvement Plan (SDIP) that will help them to satisfy their users' needs. The SDIP will help in establishing a uniform, simple and user-friendly approach to developing effective and efficient service quality, access to services, and equity in service provision. Overall, the SDIP will help libraries or information centres to address the gap between current practices and desired outcomes, and will also provide a mechanism for continuous service improvement levels.

## 7 Conclusion

This study has determined that a consultative process between information specialists and users about accessing information in all 11 official languages should resume. It is imperative for libraries or information centres to introduce a service delivery plan for each financial year, which aims at highlighting successes, challenges and ways of improving service delivery in each library.

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**APPENDIX I**

**NATIONAL GOVERNMENT LIBRARY SERVICES**

**QUESTIONNAIRE ON:**

***“SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT LIBRARY SERVICES AND THE BATHO PELE PRINCIPLES”***

***PLEASE TICK AND PROVIDE FULL ANSWERS WHERE NECESSARY***

***Name of Department:*** .....

**QUESTION 1**

Do you know about the Batho Pele /People First principles?

Yes .....

No .....

**QUESTION 2**

Have you implemented/introduced these principles in the services you render in your library/information centre?

If Yes: How have you implemented the principles?

.....  
 .....

If No: Give reasons why not

.....  
.....

**QUESTION 3 (only answer if you responded “Yes” to Question 2)**

Do you think the application of the Batho Pele principles have improved service delivery in your library/information centre?

.....  
.....

**QUESTION 4**

What are the challenges of implementing the Batho Pele principles?

.....  
.....

**QUESTION 5**

Do you know of any failures/shortcomings in the application of these principles?

.....  
.....

**QUESTION 6**

What are the existing mechanisms employed by government in order to monitor the application of these principles?

.....  
.....

**QUESTION 7**

What are the consequences of failing to implement these principles?

.....  
.....

**QUESTION 8**

What is the language policy of your department?

.....

**QUESTION 9**

Does the language policy influence your collection development and service policy?

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.....

**QUESTION 10**

Does your library /information centre provide services to users in their own language?

Yes .....

No .....

**QUESTION 11**

Do you receive/order books/journals etc. in the 11 official languages?

Yes .....

No .....

**QUESTION 12**

Who are the users of your library/information centre?

.....

.....

**QUESTION 13**

Is your website designed for all the 11 official languages?

Yes .....

No .....

If No: what are the reasons for this?

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.....

**QUESTION 14**

Does your library have any Service Delivery Improvement Plans (SDIPs)?

If Yes: What are they?

.....  
.....

If No: Are your customers satisfied?

.....

**QUESTION 15**

Do you conduct customer service audits?

If Yes: How?

.....

If No: Why not?

.....

**QUESTION 16**

What else do you think can be done to improve service delivery in your library/information centre?

.....  
.....