
Project Report

Mystery Shopper in Municipality

Project Title: “Mystery shopper in Municipality”

(Blerësi misterioz në Komunë)

Measuring effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery in municipalities of the Republic of Kosovo

Author:

Shpend Qamili, MA

Trainer:

Fatmir Haxholli, MA and Jusuf Thaçi

Kosovo Local Government Institute

www.klg-institute.org

Prishtina
02 March, 2012

Table of contents

Përmbajtja	2
I. Përmbledhje e përgjithshme	3
II. Çfarë është Mystery Shopping?	3
III. Konteksti	Error! Bookmark not defined.
IV. Përmbledhje ekzekutive	Error! Bookmark not defined.
V. Përzgjedhja e lokalitetit dhe metodologjia.....	7
VI. Gjetjet Kryesore	8
VII. Konkluzione dhe rekomandime	13
VIII. Përfundim	Error! Bookmark not defined.

I. General Introduction

Local authorities offer citizens a host of services (for example documentation, information, public services like road maintenance, primary health care services and education), but unlike private sector suppliers, residents are usually able to choose an alternate service provider. Ideally, citizens should not have objections to the services delivered and on performance of local authorities, but in reality that is not possible. Hence the need to measure and evaluate the performance and satisfaction in general.

Poor level of service or service quality may damage citizens' satisfaction and expectations, so anyone who went through a negative experience will often tell others about the experience in question. In this way, the negative perception on the work of local authorities in general and municipalities in particular, is perpetuated. The purpose of this initiative is to objectively evaluate and report about the delivery of a number of services and their quality, in order to obtain clear indications leading to citizens' perceptions about local authorities, in this case local government authorities.

"Mystery Shopping" is used as a comprehensive tool and methodology for performance assessment for bodies and institutions that provide services. It is common to expect that municipalities should be engaged in the most effective service delivery for consumers of their services (citizens), as well as various social groups. By using scientific research to monitor customer satisfaction levels of service users, we may be able to obtain/reflect concrete evidence on the commitment level of municipalities in delivering services. At the same, the survey assesses the level of user (dis)satisfaction, thereby contributing to generating opportunities for practical changes in terms of efficiency, quality, behavior towards citizens, including the range of services, as well as the civil and administrative ethics related to performance of local authorities in general and the municipal administration in particular.

II. What is Mystery Shopping?

The term "Mystery Shopper", in Albanian "blerësi misterioz" refers to the same activity and is defined as follows:

"Contracting of individuals trained to measure any customer service as a process, by acting as potential customers and by reporting through some standard and detailed ways regarding their experiences in an objective manner".

"Mystery shopping" is different from customer satisfaction surveys in that it examines the actual customer experience at the given moment in time (rather than require customers to review it in retrospective) and data as details and special experience. As such, this is a very powerful tool for service managers that can help to highlight clear action items for improving the quality of service delivery. The same research methodology can be used to provide a clear and objective assessment about performance of any institution mandated to deliver services. In concrete case, this method is used to address two levels: municipal authorities and citizens' satisfaction with them.

How does this function in practice?

"Mystery Shopper" contacts the municipality by paying a visit, through telephone, in writing or via e-mail, in order to experience the customer service from consumer eyes, citizens in this case. In this way, one of the daily but actual scenarios are used to measure or assess performance against established benchmarks of quality, for example, whether an officer answered the phone within five minutes or more? These are simple assessments of the expediency of service provision, but also of the content of the initial response, which should be taken into consideration.

Mystery Shopper - Researchers should always be informed/trained on scenarios that are required to practice and should have sufficient knowledge of space and services involved, in order to be credible. This is one of the main principles of this type of research. This is also the reason behind selecting citizens from the location where research is going to be carried out.

According to this practice, under the project/initiative, the training and research team, through the implementation of a pilot project established: relevance, reliability, practicality, discretion and personal safety and then proceed with the implementation of the project in five (5) other municipalities.

Relevance

- Testing from officials on trained scenarios?
- Is the performance being measured against special service standards established earlier?

Credibility

- Are the scenarios realistic and plausible and not too elaborate?
- Are users in practice similar to the "mysterious"?

Practicality

- Are the scenarios relatively short and straightforward, not overly complex?
- Are scenarios fairly simple to ensure accurate recording and reporting after the event?

Personal Safety

- Are necessary steps taken to ensure that the "mysterious" are not placed in situations where they may be compromised?
- Will the "mysterious" be prepared to achieve the goal set by the initiative/project?

Purpose

- The main focus is to gather factual information on visible behavior (to ensure compliance) as to how the "mysterious" feels?
- "Mysterious" answer specific questions about what is happening on the ground or during the contact?

Note: some subjective ratings and verbatim comments can be useful for elaborating the results.

Ethical Issues

As with any other research, here too is important to ensure that the work is carried out in an ethical manner. This means that:

- Public servants should be informed that this type of research can be undertaken to monitor the service. Municipal staff is always aware of the fact that they may be subject to assessment by public at large, and that we are able to proceed without any problem;
- Staff undergoing assessment and the mystery shoppers should not be identified and should remain anonymous during any form of reporting, therefore KLG I and ENCOMPASS have taken measures against such eventuality, even after reporting;
- The results of such research should not be used as a basis for disciplinary action. This is a warning that should be made for management and political leadership of the respective municipalities;

Other ethical aspects of dealing with research involving humans as the subject were also applied to this type of research.

Who should do “Mystery shopping”?

A large number of enterprises carry out their market research through "Mystery Shopper" service. We engage individuals from banks.

In this case, it was the KLG I or Kosovo Institute for Local Government and Encompass Centre, along with field support of D-Press NGO, under "Mystery Shopper in Municipality" carried out an independent research involving 25 shoppers in the municipalities of Gjilan region.



III. The Context

Recent developments in local government in Kosovo, after the transfer of powers, especially after the adoption of the Constitution and the Law on Local Self-Government, introduced additional new responsibilities for municipal administration and service delivery in general. These tasks have proved quite challenging for municipalities and their administrations. Soon after, the process of creating new municipalities began, which came as a result of implementing the Ahtissari package, which was a complex process and supported by various parties. However, there are few concrete mechanisms to assess functioning of municipalities. Specifically, there are no mechanisms to evaluate the functionality and quality of services in municipalities. The purpose of this project was to measure quality of services in the municipalities of Kosovo from the humanistic aspect, but less so from legal or conservative perspective, through new and creative ways.

What is “Mystery Shopper”- Blerësi Misterioz in municipality?

Mysterious buyer is an ordinary person (in everyday life, it can be any of us) who buys or uses services from a service provider or a seller, in order to assess the preliminary level of service and quality of the product or service offering. Mysterious shopper is usually instructed or trained to keep standardized records on how he she bought the product, by assessing not only the product and the service, but also the quality of experience. Personal experience was at the centre of our interest during the training of mysterious shoppers in municipalities. This way, the research is attributed a more humanistic character.

IV. Executive Summary

Mystery shoppers are trained through one-day training. First it began with municipality of Kamenica as a pilot municipality in March 2010, where six mystery shoppers were trained. These six buyers were given an option to choose from among the provided tasks, which they would use to examine the services provided by municipalities. Their previous training has proven quite effective to perform their duties as municipal shoppers in municipality of Kamenica. A month later, the same training was offered to mysterious shoppers of municipalities of Gnjilane, Novo Brdo, Klllokot, Partesh, Viti and Ranilug. This showed that the new municipalities are only a step behind the old ones and may soon catch up both in terms of range and quality of services offered.

While websites of municipalities of Ranillug, Partesh, Viti are being created, municipalities of Novobërdo, Vitia and Kamenica have well-maintained websites.

Another challenge is that the required contact information are not easily available on websites for citizens. Responses to emails from officials had no specific rule, except that in most cases there was no response at all. Grades given in this field of research by mysterious buyers are generally low. On the other, attempts to contact someone in municipality by telephone always ensures someone responding to the phone. Only in one case the caller / mysterious shopper did not understand the language of the speaker in municipality, partially at that. Also, only in one case, the mysterious

shopper failed to get someone on the phone, because no one responded. Personal visits to the municipal building show high sensitivity of municipal officials to citizens needs. It is in this aspect that the evaluations and ratings from mystery shoppers have begun improving. Of course, in this area too, as in other areas, there is room for improvement.

In any case, the mysterious shopper has proven to be a good method of humanist measure of the level of services. It would be appropriate that such a measurement was repeated after several years, in order to assess the level of progress.

V. Selection of target location and methodology

Selection of location is made based on the previous positive experience of KLGJ. Given the fact that the region of Gjilan has ethnic diversity and is part in which, under Ahtisaari package new municipalities are expected, as well as being a compact and accessible area, it was decided that the scope of the project will cover this region, i.e. the six municipalities above.

The project was launched by involving six mysterious shoppers through cooperation with NGO D-Press as partner from Kamenica area. The involved shoppers were trained and prepared by partner organizations KLGJ, ENCOMPASS. After the initial data collection from these shoppers, it was concluded that the project can continue to be implemented successfully, and achieve the set performance goals.

In this way, through a continued partnership with D-Press NGO, a total of 19 mysterious shoppers were identified and trained from five municipalities of the region. Those trainees were divided into two groups, led by Fatmir Haxholli and Jusuf Thaci, under the supervision of project manager, Shpend Qamili. Each of the leaders/coordinators was available to help mystery shoppers in selecting, collecting and processing information, according to empirical research methods.

From this moment, mysterious buyers were in regular communication by phone, email and held meetings with group leaders and in certain cases, with the project manager. The aim was to preserve the focus, discipline and reporting hierarchy.

All mysterious shoppers' efforts and actions completed by the end of 2010 and the data that were gathered from questionnaires were processed and entered into a table. Further processing of data was done by the project manager, Shpend Qamili, professor Nait Vrenezi, assisted by Besnik Tahiri and Fatmir Haxholli. Preparation of the report and its publication was postponed indefinitely due to early elections taking place. An evaluation of the kind of mysterious shopper ran the risk of being politicized, which led the KLGJ to take an imposed decision, to publish the results at the best possible time, free of any risk to be used for local politicization.

Results of this research, because of this very reason, represent only one side of our approach. Another additional tool that was used is "debriefing" with mysterious shoppers after performing all tasks assigned to them. For each task, mystery shoppers were paid and running costs were covered through the D-Press organization, which was also directly involved. NGO ENCOMPASS undertook training and quality of the research method. KLGJ assumed final data processing, presentation and publication. It should be emphasized that the main target audience of this report are municipal officials, civil society, but also public at large.

VI. Main findings

From website visit online and email

Mysterious shoppers were given a task to find, in any way they knew, the website of the municipality. The task then consisted of exploring the website, i.e., checking within 30 minutes what the site contains. Then, the required part of the questionnaire is completed. A topic was chosen in order to send an e-mail to the municipality, or to the address of the responsible officer on the specific issue. The email was then written and sent to the address provided, while the BCC has also involved the coordinator/leader of the concerned group. Eleven days were allowed after which the remainder of the survey was completed.

The results from this task indicate that at the time of research, the municipalities of Novo Brdo, Kamenica and Gnjilane had operational websites while new municipalities were still in early stages of website development. However, only the mysterious shoppers from Klllokotit were unable to find the website at all, as it was not operational. The other mystery shoppers have either found the website easily or with little difficulty. This is because the websites of the respective municipalities are not well linked to Search Engines.

The responses indicate that the quality of websites in these municipalities varies. At the given time, only telephone numbers of municipalities of Kamenica and Viti were published in the respective websites, while in other websites, they were either difficult to find or were not there at all. In the meantime, we noted that all municipalities have rectified this, and that all contact numbers are published.

With respect to e-mails sent to request specific information, only Viti municipality delivered a complete response, while in the municipality of Novobrdó some mysterious shoppers received a response, while others did not. From this we can conclude that communication via email with the respective municipalities is not the most effective and efficient method, therefore, needs improvement. With few exceptions, such as the case of Viti municipality and in one case in Novobrdó, shoppers awarded lower personal score for services received.

In some cases, mysterious shoppers would meet municipal officials on the street, who told them to come to municipality and not send emails. This only proves the extent of difficulties with respect to using such means of evaluation in areas where people have close personal connections, as the mystery shoppers have to be from the community using the services of respective municipality. However, if the mysterious shopper were not from municipality, but was rather located further or even abroad, then this indicates that a response via email, which might be very important, would never be received, and such an issue may cause difficulties for the person requiring service, who would then have to resort to another contact tool to request services and receive an answer.

Municipal websites have to be updated but also registered with “search engines” as otherwise they would be difficult to find and use. Our findings in municipalities indicate that the current level of websites leaves much to be desired.

A task that was initially assigned for online search of services and documentation was not completed as the systems were not functioning. This is quite damaging, as in

every official municipal webpage there is a tool for online applications, which is not utilized to be made functional.

Task: phone call in municipality

Mystery shoppers had to call municipality at the number retrieved through internet or information. If the appropriate number had not been found via internet and information, they were required to contact the group leaders for help. They were required to put a watch before them and measure the time of response from officials. If the line stayed busy or nobody would respond, they were asked to try again after 15 minutes. This was repeated three times in a row. If nobody would respond, there would be another attempt 1 to 3 days after, at a different time. This way, the questionnaire is completed based on clear instructions.

All but one mystery shopper from Vitia managed to find the contact number of the municipality and to place telephone calls. Only in three cases they were required to make more than one call, which indicates that the phone is a reliable means of communication between service users and municipal officials. A mysterious shopper from Kamenica municipality failed to talk with anyone because even after the required number of attempts, there was no response.

Notwithstanding, it may be concluded that with the exception of few rare cases, the telephone is the tool that allows for contact of all monitored municipalities.

In all cases, the shoppers were met with kindness and understandable language. This is of special importance, knowing that often when officials had to respond, they had to speak a language other than their native language and communication was still smooth. This emerged as a conclusion during the "debriefing" with mysterious shoppers of municipality of Novo Brdo, Kamenica and Gnjilane. Others had the chance to speak to municipal officials in their native language. Only in two cases, municipal officials were assessed as not so polite.

In terms of understanding the level of conversation and expressions used there, mystery shoppers awarded high grades for understanding. In three separate cases, grades vary only by one degree below full understanding, which indicates that officials are quite well prepared to provide appropriate information for each citizen, if the information is available.

With respect to responses and information provided, in 11 cases it is partial, indicating that there is room for improvement of the knowledge of officials for the services they deliver and information they need to know. Also, we should note that opinions of mysterious shoppers are subjective and often personal on the information received.

Asked whether or not the officials exhibited patience during the phone calls, there were eight mystery shoppers which responded: Yes, but not enough. This means that there is room for improvement, however, always considering that most of shoppers responded by: Yes, enough.

At the end of every phone call, the greeting was genuine. Average score awarded by mystery shoppers was 7.23¹. Such a score indicates that the telephone is also a preferred and efficient communication tool in terms of customer satisfaction.

¹ Mystery shoppers scores range from 1 to 10, 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest score.

Naturally, there may be room for improvement and that the desired score would be always 10.

For illustration purposes, the following presents some comments made by mysterious shoppers:

“During the phone conversation, they show uncertainty and inquire as to who we are and why we need this information”

“Politeness towards all citizens”

“I think they should behave a bit better, however, it’s not that bad”

“There was no official speaking Serbian language, but we did manage to understand each other”

“It was a good experience, I was properly informed”

“During the conversation, the lady I talked with was very polite and she provided all information”

“My experience was good. They were polite at all times”

“Yes, they were polite and provided information”

“Everything was in order”

“The response is timely, however they are hesitant about questions and seem to be evasive”

“This is a major disaster and even after several days of attempts, no municipal official responded”- wrote the person who got no response even after repeated attempts on different days and times.

“Beginning of the conversation was good, later became insecure and confused, however I did end the conversation feeling somewhat satisfied”

“Lack of experience in communicating with telephones and emails, more should be done in this regard”

“Telephone and internet should be used more so that the people would not need to visit municipality for every petty work”

“He was polite and tactful, I obtained the necessary information”

From the comments above we may conclude that although the current level is quite good, there is room for improvement. The case of inability to talk in one’s native language is concerning. However, this too is one of the challenges that need to be addressed not only at local level with its limited capacity, but also the central level along with international community. A capacity building effort would be more welcome than assistance in doing the work.

Task: visit municipality in search of information

The following task was visit to municipality to request detailed information on one of the issues below, including the last question:

a. Constructing an annex to a house!

b. How to pay property tax!
c. How to change the surname!
d. How and who is eligible for social assistance! (e.g. a case of a neighbour)
e. Work permit, or business certificate!
f. Issuance of civil status certificate!
g. Late registration of children!
h. Chimneysweepers' services!
<i>How and when can I apply to work voluntarily!?</i>

Mysterious shoppers experience speaks of variety of conclusions. Municipal building is easy to find, moreover, it is a landmark in all locations where research is done. Small problems to enter appear in some cases, while in one of the cases no access is possible at all. This isolated case should not occur as all citizens should have unimpeded access to institutions.

In 10 cases, mystery shoppers have identified the availability of entrance for disabled persons. In other cases they reported that it does not exist. This may be the result of improper placement of this mechanism, or failure to adequately mark this facility, which is necessary for movement of persons with disabilities. In one municipality, it is identified as being used for access only to the first floor. In another case, there is an elevator with access to different floors.

As far as sufficient space is concerned, 18 shoppers think that it is enough to wait inside, but 9 buyers feel it is inadequate. Such a split of opinions is a sufficient indication that the offices and rooms are quite large and sometimes customer demands may not be wholly realistic.

Some of shoppers' responses on the matter:

“There was no space in municipal building”

“There was no space to sit”

“There was a long queue of people but no places to sit”

In terms of physical security, it seems that everything is in order. It also seems that the reference system is working, taking into account that majority managed to identify the right place for question, i.e. they were referred to a proper place.

A shopper responded that there was no queue, while the others said that the queue was kept by the present citizens.

Evaluation on behaviour ranged from the average “neither good nor bad” to “very good”, which speaks of possible improvements in behaviour. Mysterious shoppers reported similarly also on behaviour of officials towards other people present in the building on various issues they were dealing with.

Assessment of the overall experience related to search of information in municipality was awarded an average of 7.70 out of 27 hired mysterious shoppers. This otherwise high score may be improved even further.

None of the approached municipal officials managed to respond to the question: “how and when can I report for volunteer work!?”. This indicates that the municipality does not use the benefits of volunteer work and internship.

Some of the comments of mysterious shoppers related to this experience are:

“Good reception, but more needs to be done, especially in administration reform.”

“Well received by municipal staff, service delivered on time.”

“Mostly satisfied with the reception and services of civil status office.”

“In the municipal building, offices are overcrowded and we don’t know who to approach. They are somewhat polite.”

“No information could be obtained because of the crowd.”

“Good, not many people on queue/waiting.”

“I was well received during my stay in municipality.”

“During this exercise I have seen that persons working here only do the work for salary’s sake.”

“Everything was in order.”

“I think services were done well and a commitment of municipal officials to help was visible.”

“I think the building needs to be cleaner”

“Officials inside the building do not respect the no smoking ban”

Task: Visit to municipality for civil status certificate

Mysterious shoppers were instructed not to forget to bring along a watch in order to measure time, if applicable. They were required to ask for one of the following services:

- a. Price list of municipal business-related services;
- b. A form related to specific services and ask if anyone would be able to help with filling-in the form;
- c. Etc;

All online applications failed, but those made on the spot were successful and were responded to on time or with minimal delay, there was only one document containing mistakes. The issue was corrected and arranged, while the others complaining of delays did not complain of anything else. In the end, all the work of the officials in their service was awarded a very high score of 7.61. This leads us to conclude that the more work is needed towards improving expediency of performing tasks. On the other hand, considering that in one case, the document contained errors, corrections would be made as part of the overall improvement of circumstances and working conditions

for municipal officials. We must not forget that the officials face serious lack of capacity and often funding, and are under constant pressure of service requests.

Some of the comments of mysterious shoppers are listed below:

“In some cases, pretty harsh behaviour towards citizens, but not always.”

“Issuance and signing of documents done with considerable delays.”

“Services are appropriate, but municipal staff needs to be more polite and exhibit better culture.”

“It is not the best possible service, there is room for improvement.”

“It was a very good experience.”

“We were very well received.”

In view of evaluations, comments and analysis drawn from empirical study, KLGJ finds it appropriate to draw the following conclusions and issue the following recommendations. The purpose of this research was to serve the improvement of local government, democratization and social emancipation.

VII. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions and recommendations about the website

- Municipal websites should be more user-friendly;
- Websites addresses should be properly connected to “search engines”;
- Website addresses should be published in all municipal documents;
- Contact information should be displayed in all official municipal websites, along with the name of appropriate office that should respond to relevant query;
- Main email addresses have to published in conspicuous places, as at present they are difficult to retrieve;
- The visual appeal of websites has to be improved with all Kosovo municipalities website;
- Problems of access in various languages should be resolved, and the full content of websites should be available in all official languages of the municipality;
- E-mail at present is not the most effective way to seek information or services in municipality, however this practice is expected to change soon;
- Additional services for online application for documentation do not function in any municipality, not only in those under review, but with major municipalities as well. The online application tool has to be made functional for citizens. This would expedite the process of application for civil status documents.

Conclusions and recommendations regarding telephone contact

- The telephone is the most effective way to contact municipality. The numbers should be displayed at all documents and publication materials;
- Persons answering the telephone calls in municipalities should be polite and understanding. They should compare with other municipalities and establish a standard of communication, in case that is deemed necessary by other municipalities;
- Officials may need to be better prepared with respect to information they need to provide on issues raised. Training on providing information that they are responsible for should be organized and delivered;
- Exhibiting patience under pressure for information and services is sometimes very difficult. However, officials should take into account that their clients, in this case citizens, are as important as clients of a bank and that they contribute to the municipal budget;
- Official languages should be complied with. In case a client of non-majority communities tries to make contact on the phone, an official who speaks his/her language, or of the same community should be asked to respond. If necessary, such a thing is arranged after the initial phone call, in which the citizen is asked to call again after some time, when such a person will be made available;

Conclusions and recommendations from visits to municipality in search of information

- Even one single case of denied entry to municipality is unacceptable. Such an occurrence should be prevented and access to information and services should be assured. The statement is made while also allowing for the possibility that this may have come as a result of misunderstanding from one mysterious shopper;
- In every municipality, there should be full access for all, including persons with disabilities;
- The behaviour of officials in general is adequate, however, improvement and enhancement may be needed;
- Queues should be established by the officials, so that the citizens may easily abide by it;
- Physical safety in municipalities should be adequate;
- Space should be sufficient, however, often there is lack of chairs and waiting is done standing. This may be easily rectified;
- The referral system in municipalities is inadequate, but even if you don't know who you need, according to mystery shoppers, upon inquiry with any official citizens are easily referred to appropriate source of information;
- With respect to behaviour, the research indicated that it was quite good overall;

- Volunteer work is not used as a possible resource in spite of availability through internships and other options. This should change especially with new municipalities, which require more staff than they are allowed to recruit;
- Volunteers may also help during various events in the community and it may be useful for municipalities to draw lists of volunteer pools that are available and may be engaged at any time. This is certainly advisable in emergency cases;
- Cleanliness and maintenance of buildings needs to be improved;
- Smoking inside the government and public buildings is forbidden and should therefore be complied with.

Conclusions and recommendations from visit to municipality to obtain civil status certificates

- Preparation and issuance of civil status documents should be improved across all municipalities that were subject to monitoring;
- Quality is good, but there is room for improvement, especially an effective and quick mechanism should be established to correct errors;
- Work in capacity building should not be borne by officials alone but also by representatives of international community as well as central and local level government. New municipalities are especially in need of capacity building, as found by mysterious shoppers themselves.

VIII. Conclusion

Experience has shown that there is a need to introduce new and creative methods to assess services delivered by municipalities. This method has proven quite successful in assessing the humanistic aspect. This may best be illustrated by the example of a comment of a mysterious shopper, requiring municipal officials to exhibit “more culture”. Such humanist conclusions may not be drawn by any other methods. It is clear that this approach has to be nurtured and updated as experience grows. However, even now it may be used for further assessment of other municipalities.

The reason why specific municipalities were not single out during the evaluation was to protect the identity of mysterious shoppers.

It is recommended that future research related to customer services in municipalities be combined, especially with qualitative methods such as focus groups.