

Compliance with Complaint Management Standards in Local Government Authorities in Tanzania: Examining Enforcement Means and Institutional Practices in Bahi and Mpwapwa District Councils

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Abstract

This study examined the enforcement of complaint management standards in Tanzanian local government authorities, focusing on senior leadership roles in the Bahi and Mpwapwa District Councils. It assessed strategies for appointing and empowering complaints management officers, presenting reports in Council Management Team (CMT) meetings, integrating complaints handling into development plans, and enforcing accountability for noncompliance. Using an explanatory case study design and a mixed-methods approach, quantitative and qualitative data were analysed. Findings indicate that complaints officers were formally appointed and trained, but reports were rarely discussed at departmental or CMT levels. Complaint management was also weakly integrated into development planning and largely excluded from budgeting processes. The study recommends institutionalising complaint management within the Administration and Human Resources Division, making the responsible officer a permanent CMT member, and establishing an internal oversight body comprising the District Executive Director, councillors, and the council chairperson to strengthen accountability and ensure effective enforcement.

Keywords: *Compliance, complaint management standards, local government authorities, senior leadership, Council Management Team.*

1.0 Introduction

Public sector accountability and citizen engagement are foundational to democratic governance. Across the globe, governments have adopted complaint management standards to improve service delivery and responsiveness (OECD, 2021). ISO 10002 (2018) proposed international guiding principles for complaints management, including information integrity, commitment, accessibility of both physical and online complaints mechanisms, timely responses, confidentiality, customer focus, transparency, accountability, and the empowerment of complaints management offices and officers. Moreover, ISO 10002 (2018) recommends an institutional framework in which leaders are committed to complaints management and customise complaints management guidelines to fit service and service-provision environments.

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In line with international standards, countries with high, middle, and low incomes have customised and institutionalised complaint management standards. For example, New South Wales has updated the complaints management guidelines to align with Australia's complaints management standards (Miller, 2025). The updated guideline insists on the six effective principles of complaint management. The key principles for effective complaints management are accurate complaint management information, accessible mechanisms, effective communication regarding the complaints management handling process, respectful treatment, taking ownership of complaints management mechanisms and practices, and correctness and transparency. In Kenya, the Commission on Administrative Justice (2016); in Indonesia, Statistics Indonesia (2023); and in Tanzania, the President's Office, Public Service Management and Good Governance have developed customised complaints management guidelines incorporating the ISO 10002 principles of accountability, transparency, capacity building, responsiveness and the like.

Pragmatically, studies have identified challenges in handling complaints. For example, in Indonesia, complaints management practices were found to be ineffective due to gaps between policies and practices, and complaints management standards were weakly socialised (Theresia et al., 2025). Similarly, a study in the Free State Province in South Africa revealed challenges in complaints management practices, as complaints management officers were poorly trained in complaints management-related policies, leading to poor communication and coordination (Mogotloane, 2022).

Existing studies have focused on interactions between human and digital complaint management channels (Jeanpert et al., 2021), causes of complaints in cities (Anityasari & Indriasani, 2023), and the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction (Rohmayati & Hidayat, 2022; Preuss et al., 2022). Moreover, many studies have been conducted in states/provinces, districts, cities, public and private universities, and health facilities in the countries of Nigeria (Husseini et al., 2025), Rwanda (Nsengimana, 2020), Ghana (Acheampong & Domfeh, 2021), Botswana (Tshotlego & Chukwuere, 2024), and South Africa (Mogotloane, 2022). Outside of Africa, similar studies have been conducted in Indonesia (Anityasari & Indriasari, 2023; Rohmayati & Hidayat, 2022; Nur, 2025), Brazil (Preuss et al., 2022), France (Jeanpert, 2021), British Columbia (Presser, 2022), and Poland (Zepek et al., 2024).

In Tanzania, the President's Office, Public Service Management and Good Governance (PO-PSMGG) has issued comprehensive public feedback prescribing standards to guide public institutions, including local government authorities (LGAs), in handling citizen complaints effectively (The United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2012, 2022, 2023). The guidelines require public institutions to institutionalise both physical and online complaint management mechanisms. To make complaint management effective, public institutions are required to comply with the standards by institutionalising the complaint management office with all necessary resources and appointing and empowering complaint management officers (URT, 2012; 2023). Moreover, the guidelines require public institutions to prepare and integrate complaint management reports into institutional development plans and to take accountability measures for noncompliance.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualisation of Key Terms

There are two types of literature reviews. The first is the conceptualisation of key terms. These include compliance and complaints, complaint management, and complaint management standards. The second type is the presentation of guiding theories. The guiding theories are the old institutional and compliance theories.

According to Etienne (2010), adhering to standards, principles, rules, and regulations involves acting in accordance with prescribed or expected guidelines. Governments and internal management bodies have established various standards to guide performance (URT, 2014). Compliance involves implementing established policies. In this study, compliance refers to senior leaders appointing and empowering complaint management officers (URT 2012, 2014). Senior leaders are responsible for demanding complaint management reports, integrating them into development plans, and sanctioning accounting officers who do not adhere to the established complaint management standards (URT, 2012).

A complaint is defined as any negative expression regarding a service, product, service provider, system, law, act, or guideline (URT, 2012, 2014, 2023; Miller, 2025). Moreover, dissatisfaction with the quality of service or the products served is also considered a complaint (Miller, 2025). In this study, a complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction over noncompliance with established complaint management standards, especially when senior leaders neglect them (URT, 2014).

Complaint management refers to an organisation's efforts to eliminate customer dissatisfaction and establish service provisions that ensure customer satisfaction (URT, 2012, 2014; Miller, 2025). Any effort by an institution to recover from a service that fails to meet customer expectations involves complaint management. In this paper, complaints management means senior leaders fulfilling their roles by appointing and empowering complaints management officers, demanding complaints management reports, integrating them into development plans, and holding them accountable for those who fail to comply with the established standards (URT, 2012, 2014, 2023).

Countries set standards according to their requirements. For example, monitoring, evaluating, benchmarking, rewarding, sanctioning, and creating awareness and empowerment are standards (URT, 2012; ISO, 2018). In this study, the selected complaint management standard was the senior leadership's role in complaint management. The roles include appointing complaints management officers, empowering them, monitoring complaint reporting, integrating complaints reports into the council's development plans, and holding accountable those who fail to comply (URT, 2006, 2012, 2014, 2023).

2.2 Guiding Theories

The old Institutional Theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1970) and the Compliance Theory (Etzion, 1969) guided the examination of compliance with established complaint management standards in the Bahi and Mpwapwa district councils. The old institutional theory was important due to its focus on the formal rules and structures of an institution that guide

actors' behaviour (Zucker, 1987). Formal rules in this paper are referred to the guideline on the preparation and implementation of Client Service Charters (CSC) for the Public Service (2006), the Public Service (Revised Edition) Act (2019), the Management Standards Checklist (2011), the Complaints Management Guideline (2012), the Ethics Compliance Monitoring Guideline (2014) and the Public Feedback Reporting Guideline (2023). Formal structures are organisational structures that include different levels such as top management, line managers, Heads of division/department, units, and support staff.

Compliance theory focuses on explaining actors' relationships within an organisation. This theory assumes that compliance with rules, regulations, and standards depends on the relationship between two levels in an organisation: high-level and low-level participants (Dodge, 2016; Lunenburg, 2012). Lunenburg (2012) clarifies that high-level participants are power holders, and low-level participants are subjects of that power. The compliance theory posits that coercive, remuneration, and normative powers influence compliance in an organisation (Lunenburg, 2012). In this study, compliance theory was applied to examine compliance with complaint management standards among local government authorities (Bahi and Mwapwa district councils). Contextually, the power holders (high-level participants) in the case of compliance with complaint management standards in local government authorities are council directors and Heads of units and divisions. In contrast, the subjects (low-level participants) of the power holders are complaint management officers and other staff members who are under units or divisions.

2.3 Empirical Review

Compliance with complaint management standards in public institutions is of importance (URT, 2023). Managing complaints is challenging when noncompliance with established standards persists. Poorly managed complaints ruin an institution's image (URT, 2014). However, when they are well addressed, they offer an opportunity to restore services and enhance an institution's reputation (URT, 2023).

Yusof (2021) found noncompliance with the expected and desired values of the complaint management process in Malaysia. Mechanisms for realising the value of complaints were unavailable. The investigation also uncovered inconsistencies in the complaint management process. Only a few departments manage complaints cost-effectively. Public institutions failed to institutionalise accessible complaint management mechanisms, and appointed complaint management officers were unqualified to manage complaints.

On one hand, Acheampong and Domfeh (2021) in Ghana, Olatunde et al. (2020) and Hussein et al. (2025) in Nigeria, Tshotlego and Chukwuere (2024) in Botswana, Mavimbela (2025) and Mogotloane (2022) in South Africa, and Nsengimana (2020) and Presser (2022) in British Columbia revealed noncompliance with established complaints management requirements. They reported unresponsive complaints management officers who often neglected reported complaints. Based on established standards, they also found deficiencies in accountability and authority to oversee the complaint process, insufficiently skilled personnel, insufficient funds, and limited technological capacity. Similar studies in Indonesia by Anityasari and Indriasari (2023), Rohmayati and Hidayat (2022), and Nur (2025) found ineffective complaint management, characterised by inadequate socialisation

and dissemination of complaint management practices. On the other hand, Jeanpert et al. (2021) in France, Preuss et al. (2022) in Brazil, and Mnzava (2024) in the United States of America (USA) reported compliance with complaints management standards, as customers in France were satisfied with efficient and responsive complaints-handling mechanisms, while in the USA, the integration of humans in digital complaints channels enhanced the practices. Moreover, compliance was reported in Poland because of the helpfulness and proactive support of employees and managers in collecting public complaints (Zelek et al., 2024).

Similarly, current research in Tanzania has revealed the ineffectiveness of implementing established complaint management standards. A study by Maduhu (2023) in Arusha City revealed poor attentiveness and resistance to taking ownership in complaints management practices. In addition, a study by Mnzava (2024) that compared the integration of alternative dispute resolution in tax Ombudsman offices in Tanzania and the United States of America (USA) found inefficiencies in the management of taxpayers' complaints in Tanzania. Weak adherence to standards and practices expected and planned by the government implies noncompliance.

Existing research has focused on urban municipalities and national institutions (Maduhu, 2023; Mnzava, 2024), leaving a gap in understanding how rural councils comply with complaint mechanisms. This gap is significant because examining and identifying how local district councils comply with the established standards would inform policymakers and implementers on how to enforce compliance.

A report by the URT (2022) showed improvements in the complaints management implementation process in the Bahi District Council and unimproved practices in the Mpwapwa District Council. This improvement attracted research attention at the Bahi district council Headquarters to examine how it had achieved success, while other local government councils, such as Mpwapwa, showed no improvement.

This study addressed the identified gap by examining how senior leaders in public institutions enforce compliance with complaint management standards. The URT (2022) stipulates that senior leaders own the complaint management process and are responsible for controlling, monitoring, and evaluating its implementation. In district councils, the internal senior leaders are the District Executive Directors (DED) and the District Human Resource Officers (DHRO). Specifically, the study examined how complaints management officers were appointed and empowered, how reports were presented in the Council Management Team (CMT) meetings, how they were integrated into council development plans, and how accountability measures were applied for noncompliance.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted an explanatory case-study design and a mixed-methods research methodology. Complementation and triangulation of the data highlighted the need to use a mixed-methods approach. The mixed-methods research approach enhances the study's significance and maximises data interpretation (Bougie & Sakaran, 2025). The mixed-

research methods approach enhances the fidelity of the instruments and enriches the participants. The study used a survey questionnaire, a semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interview, and a review of official documents to examine the factors influencing compliance with complaint management standards.

The selection of the Bahi District Council Headquarters was based on the URT's (2022) improved complaint management practices. The selection of the Mpwapwa District Council Headquarters was based on the worsening of complaint management mechanisms and processes (URT, 2022). These councils were selected to examine what worked in the Bahi District Council and what did not work in the Mpwapwa District Council regarding compliance with complaints management standards. According to Hancock et al. (2021), the typicality criterion was used to select the Bahi and Mpwapwa district councils. These councils are under local government authorities (LGAs) and district councils in the Dodoma Region. Based on typicality, the Bahi and Mpwapwa councils were guided by similar laws, guidelines, principles and motivations.

The DED and Heads of divisions and units were purposively sampled for interviews (Tables 1 & 2). As Bougie and Sekaran (2025) note, key informants provide key insights into a research question. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) officers, the former Bahi DED, the Assistant Director of Ethics Compliance Monitoring at the President's Office-Public Service Management and Good Governance Office, and the Assistant Administrative Secretary of Staff Services at the Dodoma Region Administrative Secretariat were sampled as confirmation or disconfirmation respondents. Confirmation or disconfirmation, respondents were selected based on the initial conflicting data collected through interviews and document analysis at the Bahi District Council. Bougie and Sekaran (2025) maintained that confirmation or disconfirmation cases are selected to either support or disprove initial findings, increase the credibility of findings, and enrich and deepen understanding of the phenomena under study.

Simple random sampling was used to sample questionnaire respondents (other employees) within the two district council offices. The population sizes for the Bahi District Council Headquarters and Mpwapwa were 63 and 48, respectively. Nineteen respondents from the Bahi District Council Headquarters and 16 from the Mpwapwa District Council Headquarters, who were selected for interviews, were removed from the questionnaire sample size calculation. The remaining population sizes for questionnaire respondents at the Bahi District Council Headquarters and Mpwapwa were 44 and 32, respectively. The researchers used a confidence level of 0.95% (Z-score of 1.96), a confidence interval (margin of error) of $\pm 5\%$, and a population proportion of 50%. The sample sizes for Bahi and Mpwapwa were 40 and 30, respectively. As the sample size was small, questionnaires were administered to the remaining population (44 from Bahi and 32 from Mpwapwa). 41 questionnaires were collected from the Bahi District Council Headquarters, and 30 from the Mpwapwa District Council Headquarters. The selected respondents answered the questions outlined above. Data was collected through questionnaires, interviews, document reviews, and observations. Questionnaires were developed based on the four research objectives. It includes questions about the role of senior leadership in enforcing compliance. The selected roles were appointing and empowering complaint management officers, integrating complaint management into development plans, and taking accountability measures.

Client Service Charters and complaint management reports from both the Bahi and Mpwapwa district council Headquarters were reviewed to confirm their presence. A strategic plan for 2021–2025, the third-quarter Council Management Team meeting minutes for 2021/2022, and a new structure, division of responsibilities, and management level from Mpwapwa were reviewed to determine whether complaint management should be prioritised. A strategic plan, a document for the new structure and division of responsibilities, and Council Management Team meeting minutes were not available at the Bahi District Council Headquarters at the time of data collection.

Data obtained from interviews were coded and analysed using MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2022 (Release 22.5.0). The thematic inductive analysis generated interactive quotes and related themes. Nominal and ordinal data were quantified and analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 16. The frequencies and percentage distributions were the only statistical analyses involved. Experienced experts thoroughly reviewed the data collection tools to enhance validity and reliability. The questionnaires and interview guides were piloted at the Ilala City Council in Dar es Salaam. Some questions were removed, and others were changed to enhance consistency. Data triangulation was used, and confirmation and disconfirmation respondents were sampled to increase the validity and reliability of the data.

4.0 Findings

This section presents findings on the four research objectives, which sought to understand whether complaints management officers were appointed and empowered, whether complaints management reports were presented at Council Management Team (CMT) meetings, whether the reports were integrated into council development plans, and whether accountability measures were undertaken for noncompliance.

4.1 Appointments and Empowerment of Complaints Officers

The results indicate that 35 (85%) respondents affirmed that senior leaders appointed employees to handle complaints in the Bahi District Council. Only six (15%) indicated they had no appointment and claimed it was the DHRO's office's responsibility to handle complaints. In the Mpwapwa District Council, 15 (52%) respondents reported no appointments; instead, the DHRO office handled the complaints. Fourteen respondents (48%) said that DED appointed employees to handle complaints. Similarly, the interview data confirmed the appointment.

"I was appointed in April 2018 ... Yes, I was appointed by official letter (telephone interview with CASE5, 15th August 2022) "... Yes, I was officially appointed in 2020."
(Interview with CASE 22, 12th August 2022).

Regarding empowerment, the results indicate that 31 (76%) respondents from Bahi agreed that complaint management officers were empowered, and seven (17%) were unsure. Only three respondents (7%) confirmed that complaint-management officers were disempowered. Fourteen (48%) respondents from Mpwapwa were unsure whether complaint-management officers were empowered. 9 (31%) respondents were sure that the officers were empowered, and 6 (21%) were sure that officers were not empowered.

A reason for the high number of agreements at Bahi could be the conduct of a special capacity-building programme and visits by the USAID people. USAID conducted a special programme to strengthen public-sector systems. Complaint management was one such system. There were no capacity-building programmes or visits to the Mpwapwa district council by the USAID people. These factors may be the reason for the high number of people who are unsure.

Training as a form of empowerment was more prevalent than other methods of empowerment. 20 (63%) respondents from Bahi and 10 (67%) from Mpwapwa reported training in customer care and complaint management skills. The results showed less reliance on other means of empowerment in both councils. 31 (97%) respondents from Bahi and 13 (87%) from Mpwapwa reported that officers were not provided with stationery. 29 (91%) respondents from Bahi and 13 (87%) from Mpwapwa substantiated that no funds were provided. Similarly, 24 (75%) respondents from Bahi and 14 (93%) from Mpwapwa verified that complaint-management officers were not assigned specific duties and responsibilities. 29 (91%) respondents from Bahi and 13 (87%) from Mpwapwa confirmed that senior officers did not mentor. Complaint management officers from Bahi and Mpwapwa were empowered through training (interview with CASE5 & CASE22, 12th & 1st August 2022). The study found it challenging to address budget complaints. The interviewees claimed that budget items originated with departments and units, and that complaint management was reported to be outside both. CASE8 reported:

"The thing is, budget ceilings limit us to budget for complaints. Priorities are set, and if the activity is not important, we cannot budget for it. A budget guideline sets the amount to be budgeted." (Interview with CASE8, 9th August 2022).

4.2 Compiling and Presentation of Complaint Reports

On presenting complaints reports at department and unit levels, results showed 31 (76%) respondents from Bahi chose "no", literally meaning that complaints management reports were not presented in departments. Results from Mpwapwa revealed that 21 (72%) respondents selected "yes", signifying the presentation of complaints management reports in departments. The heads of departments and units opposed the results from other staff members. Interviewees reported:

"There are no departmental meetings to discuss employee complaints (Interview with CASE6, 31st July 2022)." "... At the council level, reporting should be a must. If every department is required to report on complaint management, people will comply. Because everyone will keep in mind that, at the next monthly meeting, they will be asked about the complaint reports." (Interview with CASE4, 28th July 2022).

Although complaints were received and resolved at both the department and unit levels, the interviewees confirmed that their management was informal, as they were handled without a record.

"No, I do not have a register (interview with CASE10, 25th July 2022)." "No, we do not have complaints registered in this department ... (interview with CASE27, 12th August 2022)." "No, we do not have a register, but we receive complaints and resolve them ..." (Interview with CASE29, 11th August 2022).

The study found that inactive complaints were registered at both the Bahi and Mpwapwa district councils. The register at Bahi was last used on 5th September, 2017 while at Mpwapwa, it was last used in December, 2021. If the heads of departments and units did not record complaints and the registers were inactive, the two councils missed this data, suggesting a lack of reporting.

4.3 Integrating Complaint Reports in Development Plans

Integrating complaints into development plans was average for both councils. On a five-point agreement scale, 19 (46%) respondents from Bahi and 11 (38%) from Mpwapwa chose the average level of integration. Complaint management guidelines should integrate complaints into development plans and budgets. The responses on empowerment suggest a lack of integration of complaint management into development plans.

4.4 Accountability Measures

Regarding accountability measures, the results indicated a high level of usage of informal discussions and verbal warnings whereby 16 (39%) respondents from Bahi and 10 (35%) from Mpwapwa opted for a higher usage of informal discussions and verbal warnings, 15 (37%) and 18 (44%) respondents from Bahi indicated an average use of written warnings, while 18 (62%) and 8 (28%) respondents from Mpwapwa indicated an average use of assigning other duties. These findings concur with the Public Service Subsidiary Legislation of 2007, which requires the use of informal warnings and corrections rather than formal proceedings.

4.5 Other Means

The inductive thematic analysis generated other enforcement means used by local government councils. They included, but were not limited to, political or deceptive means. The interviews revealed that citizens preferred to complain at public gatherings, especially when political leaders such as presidents, ministers, members of parliament, and councillors were present. One respondent explained:

“The complaint management system is under the umbrella of good governance, which is a political system more than a professional one. Even if we design a new complaint management system, it will fail. Although we have set up a professional system, our actions are primarily political. (Interview with CASE24, 16th August 2022).

Interview sessions revealed the use of deception to justify effective complaint management during compliance inspections in Bahi. The inspection officer from the President’s Office of Public Service Management and Excellence in Governance reported an audit of an official printed complaint register. During data collection, the complaint desk had an inactive complaint register, while active complaints were registered at the land and natural resources offices and the TASAF offices. A confirmation question was asked to the officer who provided complaints management data to compliance inspection officers: “Do you have only the register I have seen, or do you have other registers? On 18 August 2022, CASE7 from Bahi replied: “Yes, that is the only one we have.”

The case was further probed, and the person was asked about the use of the printed TASAF complaint register. The question was: *"Is the TASAF complaints register used by other departments to register complaints?"* CASE7 replied: *"Other departments also use the TASAF complaints register." You can record any complaints from other departments.*" (interview with CASE7, 18th August 2022).

A confirmation/disconfirmation interviewee at the TASAF office was asked a question about the usage of the TASAF complaints register:

"Are these complaints registered used by other departments to register complaints?"
... The officer was guided: *"...can it be used (let us say) by secondary or primary education departments, land, or community development...?"* CASE18 from the Bahi TASAF Office stated the following:

"Any person or citizen can register complaints in this register; however, the complaints must only be related to the TASAF programme. This complaint register is specific to TASAF issues only. Other departments have their own complaint management systems. (Interview with CASE18, 18th August 2022).

The officer asked a leading question. The question was, *"Do you mean other complaints, such as salary areas and transfer allowances, or education complaints and land compensation, could not be registered in the TASAF register?"* CASE18 replied:

"... It can only be registered if they relate to the TASAF programmes. For example, the TASAF constructs infrastructure such as dams and classrooms. If we may have constructed a dam and people complained about their land, that land complaint is related to the TASAF programme; the TASAF project caused it... it must be recorded in this register. For teachers, if we used a teacher to facilitate TASAF training, a head teacher or pupils complained that the teacher did not teach. This issue was a TASAF-related symptom. These complaints were documented in the complaint register. This complaint register is only used in this office and cannot be moved to other offices. (Interview with CASE18, 18th August 2022).

Based on the responses, it is concluded that deception was used to provide complaint data on April 5, 2022. Complaint data from a compliance inspection book may be unreliable, as there were only 7 complaints from Bahi and 2 from Mpwapwa in the 2021/2022 financial year. During data collection, 45 complaints were documented at the land office for the 2021/2022 financial year (from 8 July 2021 to 28 June 2022), while at the TASAF office, 8 complaints were documented (up to 1st April 2022). Since the complaint register at Bahi was first used on 15th November 2011, and that of Mpwapwa on 5th September 2017, it is concluded that complaint statistics were taken from the TASAF complaints register.

5.0 Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal an important gap in formal appointment practices between the Bahi and Mpwapwa District Councils. While 85% of respondents in Bahi confirmed official appointments, only 48% in Mpwapwa did so. This suggests more substantial institutional commitment in Bahi, potentially influenced by external support such as USAID's capacity-

building initiatives. The old institutional theory was helpful in this interpretation. The Bahi's higher appointment and training rates reflect a greater organisational effort to comply with formal rules and regulations (Maduhu, 2023).

Empowerment through training emerged as the dominant strategy in both councils, yet other forms of empowerment, such as provision of stationery, budget allocation, and mentorship, were low. This partial empowerment may limit officers' motivation and sustained performance, aligning with Kitemi's (2025) findings, which emphasised that technical training alone is insufficient without administrative support and resource allocation.

The budgeting dilemma underscores systemic ambiguity. Leaving complaint management unresolved could lead to differing perspectives among officers on budget allocation. CASE8 from Bahi said, "*Complaints could be budgeted on either good governance or corruption,*" while CASE21 from Mpwapwa put complaints on "*good governance.*" The office of the Director of PO-PSMGG said, "*Complaints could be budgeted under corruption.*" These dilemmas and loopholes could have left the budgeting officer confused and fearful of being held accountable for misallocating public money. In both Bahi and Mpwapwa, complaint management was included in the client service charters. The remaining question is why budgeting is problematic. This disconnection between policy intent and resource allocation echoes concerns raised by Maduhu (2023), who found similar gaps at the Arusha City Council.

Compared with Bahi's, Mpwapwa's exposure to donor-led programmes appears to have fostered clearer structures and stronger empowerment, while Mpwapwa's limited external engagement may explain its weaker compliance. These findings suggest that external interventions catalyse institutional change, but sustainable improvement requires internal ownership and clarity in implementation systems (Mnzava, 2024).

The findings reveal inconsistency in complaints reporting practices across departments and councils. This discrepancy points to a potential reporting illusion in which formal claims mask informal realities. In Bahi, the absence of departmental reporting aligns more closely with interview evidence, suggesting greater transparency gaps. Undertaking accountability measures requires complaints management reporting (Mogotloane & Lonw, 2023; Hossain et al., 2024; Manaf et al., 2023). The URT (2014) requires complaints management reports to serve as a benchmark for improving service delivery, as they can help identify solutions.

The lack of active complaint registers underscores a breakdown in institutional memory and accountability. Without documentation, complaints cannot inform planning, budgeting, or performance evaluation. This undermines institutional and compliance theories, which emphasise the role of structured information in guiding organisational action (Etzion, 1969; Lunenburg, 2012). While informal complaint resolution makes sense, it could mean that citizens' voices are lost in formal governance processes.

The integration of complaints into development plans was rated average by most respondents, further highlighting the disconnect between policy and practice. Although complaint management is embedded in client service charters, its exclusion from planning

and budgeting processes suggests symbolic compliance rather than substantive integration. This aligns with Maduhu's (2023) findings, which noted that many LGAs treat complaints as peripheral rather than strategic inputs.

Informal discussions and verbal warnings dominated accountability measures, in line with the Public Service subsidiary legislation of 2007. Nonetheless, the infrequent use of formal sanctions may indicate a culture of avoidance, in which conflicts were managed discreetly rather than addressed through structural means (Pottier, 2023). This could impede policy implementation, hinder organisational learning, and perpetuate low compliance (Mogotloane & Lonw, 2023).

Thematic analysis revealed deeper structural challenges, including politicisation and deception. Citizens' preference for airing complaints during political visits suggests that formal systems lack legitimacy or accessibility. The use of deception during compliance inspections, such as presenting TASAF registers as council-wide records, raises ethical concerns and casts doubt on the reliability of official data. Deception has been reported to enhance customer dissatisfaction (Gshayyish, 2023). Moreover, this behaviour reflects compliance theatre, where surface-level actions were performed to satisfy oversight bodies without genuine institutional reform.

The TASAF register case illustrates how programme-specific systems could be misrepresented as universal tools, distorting data and accountability. The contradiction between CASE7 and CASE18's accounts revealed internal inconsistencies and possible pressure to conform during audits. These findings suggest that without clear guidelines, training, and ethical oversight, complaint management risks could become a performative exercise rather than a meaningful governance tool.

6.0 Conclusion

The study examined five means of influencing compliance: appointing and empowering individuals, presenting complaint management in CMT and departmental meetings, integrating complaint reports into development plans, and establishing accountability. Both councils appointed and empowered complaint management officers. Training outperforms other empowerment methods; providing stationery and clarifying complaints, management duties, and responsibilities were less frequently used, while budgeting for complaints was a dilemma in both Bahi and Mpwapwa. Complaint management was less integrated into development plans, whereas informal and verbal warnings were used to account for officers who failed to comply. Politics and deception were other means of enforcing compliance in both Bahi and Mpwapwa. In the policy arena, the findings suggest integrating complaints management into the council's planning and budgeting to ensure resource allocation and minimise budgetary dilemmas. On the practical side, the councils should enhance monthly departmental meetings to foster complaint management. To gain more insight into both physical and online complaints management, cross-departmental learning is a best practice. For example, TASAF should serve as a benchmark for effective complaint management.

7.0 Recommendations

The administration and human resources office should maintain coordination over complaint management. The internal oversight function should be politicised, with the DED, counsellors, and council chairperson serving as its members. If these officers assume the oversight role, they may decide to employ alternative methods of empowerment. A dilemma can arise regarding budgeting for complaint management. An arrangement could be made to attend each political meeting to record complaints reported and resolved by politicians. Research could be conducted in other district councils to examine the extent of improvements in complaint management practices. Other district councils can use the results as a benchmark to influence compliance with complaint management standards within their districts.

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Notes

1. The Public Service institutions referred to in this paper are those covered in Subsections 3 (a) to (f) of Section 9 of the Public Service (Revised Edition) Act of 2019. The Act does not cover the following: Tanzania Intelligence and Security, Fire and Rescue, the Judiciary, Tanzania People's Defence Forces, the Police force, Immigration, and Prisons.