

Teachers' Perspectives on e-Mrejesho Expenses in Tanzania: Evidence from Public Primary Schools in Dar es Salaam City Council

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Abstract

This study examined public primary school teachers' perceptions of the costs associated with Tanzania's e-Mrejesho complaints-reporting platform. Although the Government of Tanzania introduced e-Mrejesho to strengthen accountability in service delivery, its utilisation remains low among public service users. Limited evidence exists on whether teachers understand the platform's cost structure or whether misconceptions about internet, smartphone, and airtime requirements discourage use. Prior studies on digital governance have focused mainly on institutional adoption, offering little insight into how teachers interpret the costs of digital reporting tools. Guided by Sensemaking Theory, this study examined how plausibility, identity, environmental cues, and social influences shape teachers' perceptions of the costs of e-Mrejesho. A cross-sectional survey of 355 teachers was conducted using structured questionnaires. Results show that although 64.2% of respondents experienced service failures, only 11.1% used e-Mrejesho to report them. Misconceptions were widespread, with 50.9% believing the platform required internet access, 18.4% thinking a smartphone was necessary, 16.1% assuming vouchers were needed, and only 14.7% perceiving no cost. These findings indicate limited awareness of the platform's cost-free USSD and SMS channels. The study concludes that inaccurate cost perceptions contribute to low uptake and recommends targeted awareness campaigns and stakeholder training to improve understanding of accessible and affordable reporting options associated with e-Mrejesho.

Keywords: e-Mrejesho, public primary school, Teachers' perceptions, Dar es Salaam City Council.

1.0 Introduction

Digital governance has emerged as a key component of public sector reform in both middle- and low-income countries (OECD, 2023). Globally, digital governance aims to open new avenues for transparency, public accountability, and participation (OECD, 2023). Although

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countries have adopted digital services at different levels and with varying degrees of sophistication (Digital and Easy Complaints Platform, 2020; Aprilina et al., 2025; Uwah & Etim, 2024; Lisa, 2019), digital complaint management platforms are increasingly being used across high-income, upper-middle-income, lower-middle-income, and low-income contexts to facilitate responsive service delivery and enable citizens to report complaints (Pio et al., 2024; Bayır & Bozyiğit, 2024; Einwiller & Weitzl, 2023; United Nations Public Service Innovation Hub, 2024; Zhang et al., 2022; Agnihotri et al., 2022; Elisa, 2020; Sarda et al., 2019).

In Tanzania, the e-Mrejesho Complaints Management Program is a national initiative to institutionalise digital complaint redress mechanisms (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2023). The e-Mrejesho platform can be accessed through multiple channels, including USSD codes, SMS, web portals, email services, mobile applications, and institutional e-Mrejesho links (Tanzania's e-Government Authority [e-GA], 2025; URT, 2023). While some digital channels may incur connectivity or device-related costs, others, such as SMS and USSD codes, are designed to be low-cost or free (URT, 2023). Acceptance among lower-level public servants, particularly public primary school teachers, remains uneven. Teachers are often uncertain about the cost implications of using e-Mrejesho (Rajabu & George, 2025; Mwakalinga, 2021), which may contribute to low utilisation even where affordable access channels are available.

To address this uncertainty, the study adopts Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995) to explore how public primary school teachers make sense of the costs of e-Mrejesho within their work environment. Sensemaking Theory explains how individuals interpret ambiguous situations by drawing on prior experiences, social interactions, and contextual cues, and how these interpretations shape attitudes and behaviour towards new practices, such as e-Mrejesho. In this study, the theory helps explain how teachers make sense of whether e-Mrejesho is affordable, accessible, or burdensome, regardless of whether these interpretations accurately reflect the platform's actual cost structure. To explore teachers' perceptions of e-Mrejesho costs, the study was guided by four objectives: (1) to assess experiences of service failures that led to complaints, (2) to assess complaint reporting behaviour, (3) to examine use of e-Mrejesho, and (4) to examine perceptions of the expenses associated with e-Mrejesho.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

Developed by Karl Weick (1995), Sensemaking Theory explains how people interpret and construct meaning in complex, ambiguous, or uncertain situations. The theory emphasises that meanings are not formed in isolation; rather, they emerge through prior experiences, social interaction, and contextual cues that people use to understand new or unclear circumstances (Turner et al., 2023; Christianson & Barton, 2021; Aromaa et al., 2019). When change occurs, people create plausible explanations that help them act, even when those explanations are incomplete or not fully supported by evidence. According to Sharma (2005), Sensemaking Theory includes seven interrelated constructs: plausibility, extraction,

identity, retrospective, environment, social activity, and ongoing process. Based on Sharma (2005) and Turner et al. (2023), this study focuses on four constructs, including plausibility, identity, environmental cues, and social influences, because they are directly relevant to how teachers interpret the costs of e-Mrejesho. Plausibility explains how teachers may accept cost-related assumptions that seem reasonable to them, even if those assumptions are inaccurate (Turner et al., 2023). Identity concerns how teachers' professional roles and self-understanding as public servants shape their perceptions of whether digital complaint reporting is appropriate, accessible, or worthwhile (Turner et al., 2023). Environmental cues refer to the contextual conditions surrounding teachers, such as internet availability, device ownership, institutional communication, and workplace infrastructure, which may shape their perceptions of affordability (Turner et al., 2023). Social influences capture how conversations with colleagues, shared experiences, and informal information exchange contribute to collective understandings of whether e-Mrejesho is costly or easy to use (Turner et al., 2023). Together, these constructs provide a theoretical lens for explaining teachers' perceptions of e-Mrejesho costs, whether or not those perceptions accurately reflect the platform's actual cost structure.

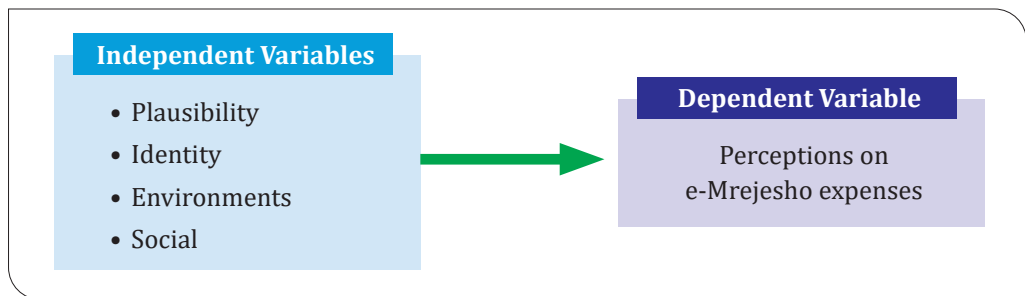


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Source: Modified from Nardon and Hari (2022)

Figure 1 illustrates the study's conceptual framework. The framework proposes that teachers' perceptions of e-Mrejesho costs are shaped by four dimensions of sensemaking: plausibility, identity, environmental cues, and social influences. These dimensions guide how users (Nardon & Hari, 2022), such as teachers, interpret information about the platform's accessibility, affordability, and usability, and therefore help explain why perceptions of cost may persist even when some access channels are free or low-cost.

2.2 Empirical Review

Countries have adopted e-complaint management systems in diverse ways and at varying levels of maturity. Existing studies show that adoption is shaped by technological infrastructure, institutional capacity, governance arrangements, digital literacy, and public trust (Rajabu & George, 2025; Elisa, 2020; Mothobi & Moshi, 2017). Across contexts, the literature indicates that citizens are more likely to use digital complaint systems when platforms are perceived as accessible, useful, affordable, and responsive (Rajabu & George, 2025; Elisa, 2020). However, low awareness of access channels, uncertainty about costs, and concerns about the effort required to use the systems often discourage acceptance (Mothobi & Moshi, 2017). These patterns are relevant to Sensemaking Theory because users

interpret digital systems through environmental cues and socially shared understandings that may or may not reflect the platform's actual design.

2.2.1 Global Trends in E-Complaints Management

Global studies show that digital complaint systems are often introduced to improve transparency, responsiveness, and administrative efficiency, yet their success hinges on users' real-world experiences. In India, the E-Daakhil portal enabled citizens to file complaints, pay fees, and monitor case progress online, demonstrating how digital systems can expand access to grievance redress mechanisms (Press Information Bureau, 2022). In Peru, a standardised digital complaints platform was developed with user input to make the complaint process easier to understand and track, suggesting that perceived usability and clarity are important for citizen engagement (OECD, 2023). In Pakistan, web-based complaint platforms were introduced to improve complaint handling and reduce bureaucratic delays, but their effectiveness still depended on whether users trusted and understood the systems (Phatak, 2017). Across these contexts, studies commonly identify facilitators such as user-friendly processes, accessibility, and responsiveness, as well as challenges including digital divides, internet dependency, and uncertainty about costs or effort. From a sensemaking perspective, these findings suggest that adoption is shaped not only by technical availability but also by how users interpret the platform through plausible beliefs, contextual experience, and shared narratives.

2.2 e-Government and Citizen Feedback Mechanisms in Tanzania

In Tanzania, public service delivery is increasingly automated, including complaint management (URT, 2023; e-GA, 2025). The e-Mrejesho system is one such initiative, designed to centralise citizen feedback and strengthen government responsiveness. It supports anonymous reporting across Ministries, Departments, and Agencies and is intended to facilitate the timely handling of complaints, compliments, and feedback (United Nations Public Service Innovation Hub, 2024; URT, 2023). While the platform reflects progress in digital governance, the available literature has focused more on transparency, participation, and service delivery than on users' perceptions of the system's affordability or cost implications. Yet issues such as internet access, device ownership, digital literacy, and awareness of low-cost or free access channels are central to whether users view the platform as practically accessible. This establishes an important link to the current study, which focuses specifically on teachers' perceptions of e-Mrejesho costs rather than on digital governance outcomes more broadly. Tanzania's e-Mrejesho platform won the prestigious United Nations Public Service Innovation Award. This success is not only technological but also institutional, reflecting improvements in governance, transparency, and citizen engagement within Tanzania's public service framework. Winning with e-Mrejesho placed Tanzania among global leaders in public administration (e-GA, 2025). Different experts praised the platform as an example of how integrated, secure digital systems can enhance real-time government action, reinforcing Tanzania's emerging e-government maturity (ibid.). Despite the success of e-Mrejesho, service users in Tanzania still have different perceptions of the system, with some users appreciating its efficiency while others express concerns about accessibility and user-friendliness.

2.3 Perceptions on e-Mrejesho Expenses

Understanding the costs associated with e-Mrejesho in Tanzania is important for assessing perceived accessibility and affordability among potential users. International studies on digital complaint systems show that while such platforms can reduce administrative burdens and improve reporting efficiency, concerns often remain about internet costs, device requirements, maintenance expenses, and the exclusion of users with limited digital access (Elisa, 2020; Phatak, 2017; Press Information Bureau, 2022; Al-Waeli & Hassan, 2022; Bhadouria et al., 2021). In many settings, users respond not only to a platform's technical design but also to what they believe the platform requires in terms of money, devices, time, and effort. This makes cost perceptions especially important, as they may discourage use even when low-cost or free channels are available.

In the African context, experiences with digital platforms are shaped by uneven ICT infrastructure, the affordability of internet and mobile data, and persistent digital divides (Diphhoorn, 2024; Chetty, 2023). Regional studies indicate that although governments increasingly promote digital transformation, users often face challenges with implementation costs, maintenance, connectivity, and the exclusion of groups with limited access to devices or data services (Kouladoun, 2023; Osei, 2024; Gigaba et al., 2025; Chetty, 2023; Afolabi, 2023; Modjadji, 2025; Mothobi & Moshi, 2017; Mhlanga & Ndhlovu, 2023). These studies suggest that perceptions of affordability are shaped by everyday encounters with expensive or unreliable digital services. In terms of Sensemaking Theory, such environmental cues and socially shared experiences can lead users to interpret a new platform as costly even before they try it.

In Tanzania, ICT has been integrated into a wide range of public services, including education, health, libraries, public administration, and complaints management (Mrosso & Ndibalema, 2024; Ngowi et al., 2026; Malembela et al., 2024; Mushi & Sabi, 2023; Kiwango, 2023; Kaishe-Mulungu et al., 2025; Kashaija, 2023; Charles & Mmassy, 2022; Sweya, 2023; URT, 2023; e-GA, 2025). However, the literature has paid limited attention to end users' perceptions of the cost of engaging with these systems. With respect to e-Mrejesho, existing studies largely emphasise institutional adoption, transparency, and governance benefits, while giving less attention to whether users understand that some access channels, such as the USSD code and SMS, are free or low-cost. This gap is important because perceived cost may differ from actual cost. In sensemaking terms, teachers may rely on plausible assumptions, their professional identity, environmental constraints, and information from colleagues when deciding whether e-Mrejesho is affordable. The current study addresses this gap by focusing specifically on teachers' perceptions of e-Mrejesho costs in public primary schools.

3.0 Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design (Bougie & Sekaran, 2025; Leavy, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to explore public primary school teachers' perceptions of the costs of e-Mrejesho in DCC. The target population comprised 3,982 teachers from 139 public primary schools (DCC, 2025). A two-stage sampling procedure was used: 43 schools

were systematically selected, and teachers were then selected by simple random sampling. Using Cochran's sample size formula with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, a sample of 355 teachers was determined (Cochran, 1977). Following Kothari (2004), Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), and Bougie and Sekaran (2025), proportional allocation was applied across schools and administrative divisions to minimise sampling bias and ensure representativeness.

From June to July 2025, data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising closed- and open-ended items. The questionnaire was designed to align with the four study objectives and included items on service-failure experiences, complaint-reporting behaviour, e-Mrejesho usage, and perceptions of e-Mrejesho expenses. The main study variable, perception of expenses, was operationalised through a multiple-response item asking respondents to indicate what they believed was required to use e-Mrejesho, such as internet access, a smartphone, vouchers/airtime, or no expense at all. The questionnaire also contained twelve closed-ended items with dichotomous and multiple-choice responses, and one open-ended item intended to capture additional reasons for non-use of e-Mrejesho. For example, one item asked whether respondents had ever reported a complaint, another asked whether they had used e-Mrejesho, and another invited them to indicate their views on the expenses associated with e-Mrejesho. Data were coded and entered into SPSS, where descriptive statistics for nominal and categorical variables were generated. To ensure validity and clarity, the instrument was reviewed by experts from primary schools, colleges, and universities and pilot-tested in primary schools (Cohen et al., 2018). Reliability was enhanced through standardised administration procedures across all participating schools (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). Based on Israel and Hay (2006), ethical approval was obtained from DCC and the Tanzania Public Service College.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The study examined experiences and perceptions of e-Mrejesho expenses among 355 public primary school teachers in the Dar es Salaam City Council in Tanzania. To maintain consistency with the study design, the results are presented according to the four study objectives: (1) experiences of service failures that led to complaints, (2) complaint reporting behaviour, (3) use of e-Mrejesho, and (4) perceptions of the expenses associated with e-Mrejesho. The results indicate that 228 teachers (64.2%) encountered a service failure, while 127 (35.8%) did not. Of those who experienced a failure, 109 (47.7%) reported the issue, whereas 119 (52.3%) did not. Only 39 teachers (11.1%) used e-Mrejesho, while 70 teachers (88.9%) did not. When questioned about expenses related to e-Mrejesho, including having smartphones, vouchers, internet access, or no expense at all, all 355 teachers responded, regardless of whether they had used it. More than half (177, or 50.9%) believed that only individuals with internet connections could access e-Mrejesho, while 63 teachers (18.4%) thought a smartphone was necessary. Additionally, 56 teachers (16.1%) felt vouchers were required, and 51 (14.7%) believed there would be no costs.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Experiences of Service Failure

In Tanzania, public services have been reformed to improve service delivery, including complaint reporting (URT, 2012; 2023). Since July 2022, the President's Office-Public Service Management and Good Governance (PO-PSMGG) has started using the e-Mrejesho system to receive complaints management reports from all public institutions (MDAs) (URT, 2023). The system is also open to anybody, as anyone who wants to complain through the e-Mrejesho system can do so directly to the PO-PSMGG via "emrejesho.gov.go.tz" or specific institutional e-Mrejesho links. Based on the findings, 64.2% of public primary school teachers within the DCC faced service failures that led to complaints. The findings therefore suggest that teachers in public primary schools experience challenges in service delivery. According to Sensemaking Theory, individuals interpret events by drawing on environmental cues and prior experiences. Teachers facing service failures are therefore likely to make sense of such situations by considering their seriousness, their impact on daily responsibilities, and whether reporting is likely to prompt a response. These findings align with Tanzanian research highlighting ongoing challenges in service delivery across the education, health, and local government sectors (Mnyanyi & Mbwapbo, 2020; PORALG, 2021). A study by Komba & Ngulube (2022) indicates that bureaucratic delays, inconsistent service standards, and limited responsiveness frequently result in complaints. The substantial proportion of teachers reporting service failures underscores the importance of raising awareness of accessible complaint channels, such as eMrejesho.

4.2.2 Complaints Reporting Behaviour

Although the findings indicate service failures, only 47.7% of public primary school teachers in the DCC reported the problem, leaving 52.3% who did not. This difference highlights how people assess whether reporting is worth the possible costs, required effort, and chances of resolution. If teachers doubt that their complaints will prompt any action, they may choose to remain silent rather than speak out. This trend aligns with earlier research by Lwoga and Sangeda (2019) and Masele and Magova (2021), which shows that citizens are often hesitant to file complaints due to limited trust in government responses, concerns about negative consequences, and low awareness of how to report issues. Studies of local government complaint platforms also reveal that underreporting occurs when users perceive these systems as ineffective and time-consuming (e-GA, 2025). The evidence points to the need to build trust and demonstrate genuine responsiveness to encourage more people to report problems.

4.2.3 The Usage of e-Mrejesho and Perceptions of e-Mrejesho Expenses

Findings indicate that only 11.1% of teachers used e-Mrejesho. This signals very low adoption, despite its intended role in promoting transparency and accountability. From a sensemaking perspective, teachers may view e-Mrejesho as unfamiliar, inaccessible, and unlikely to yield meaningful outcomes. These interpretations shape their willingness to engage with the system. This finding mirrors national trends in e-government adoption. Studies by the e-Government Authority and Tanzanian scholars consistently highlight barriers, including limited digital literacy, low awareness of digital platforms, inconsistent internet access, and mistrust in digital reporting systems (Mnyandu & Mtebe, 2022; e-GA,

2021). Even among educated public servants, Mnyandu and Mtebe (ibid.) argue that users often underutilise digital tools because they perceive them as complex and expensive. The low level of e-Mrejesho usage suggests that technological availability alone is insufficient; users must also perceive the system as valuable, trustworthy, and easy to use. Teachers in selected public primary schools responded to the item on expenses and indicated that cost considerations are central to how users make sense of e-Mrejesho. In relation to the selected Sensemaking Theory constructs, the findings suggest that teachers relied on plausibility, identity, environmental cues, and social influences when interpreting the platform's cost requirements. Plausibility is reflected in the way some teachers accepted the assumption that e-Mrejesho must require internet access, smartphones, or vouchers, because such assumptions seemed reasonable in the context of digital services. Identity is reflected in how teachers, as public servants with specific professional routines and constraints, may evaluate whether engaging with the platform fits their role and available resources. Environmental cues are evident in the significance attached to internet access, devices, and airtime, while social influences may be reflected in shared beliefs and informal discussions about the platform. These perceptions appear to be associated with lower adoption levels. The study aligns with Mtebe and Raisamo (2014), who report that perceived expenses, especially mobile data costs, can reduce the adoption of digital public services. Studies by Komba (2021) also show that users often overestimate the costs of digital platforms when cost structures are unclear. Only a small proportion of teachers believed that e-Mrejesho has no associated cost, suggesting a communication gap that may be hindering adoption. The perception that the platform requires internet connections (50.9%), smartphones (18.4%), and vouchers (16.1%) points to misunderstandings about e-Mrejesho expenses, particularly limited awareness of the free USSD and SMS access channels. Only 14.7% of teachers perceived that such resources were unnecessary for using e-Mrejesho.

Tanzania has also established regulatory frameworks that guide the use of e-Mrejesho. The guideline requires each public institution to provide an e-Mrejesho link, and most have done so by including one either in Kiswahili, as on the Dar es Salaam City Council website under "malalamiko," or in English, as on the Tanzania Public Service College website under "emrejesho." Moreover, the guideline obliges public institutions to raise public awareness of e-Mrejesho and to encourage people to use either the USSD code (*152*00#) or Short Message Service (SMS), both of which are free. Thereafter, the guideline requires officers responsible for handling public complaints to collect complaints from various sources, including suggestion boxes, emails, face-to-face communication, letters, noticeboards, newspapers, and social media, and to register them in the e-Mrejesho system so that the Permanent Secretary (Establishment) can view all complaints, feedback, and compliments (ibid.). The guideline (URT, 2023) clearly identifies public institution leaders and employees as e-Mrejesho stakeholders. Being a stakeholder implies understanding the e-Mrejesho system and acting as an advocate for it. These findings suggest that public primary school teachers may not yet be in a strong position to advocate for automated services, including e-Mrejesho, as only a small number perceived that using the platform would incur no cost.

5.0 Conclusion

This study examined teachers' perceptions of the costs associated with the e-Mrejesho system, set within the broader context of service failures, reporting behaviour, and digital platform adoption. Guided by Sensemaking Theory, the findings indicate that teachers make sense of e-Mrejesho through plausible assumptions, workplace context, professional identity, and socially shared understandings. Although most teachers experienced service failures, fewer than half reported them, and only a small proportion used e-Mrejesho. Perceived costs, particularly the belief that using the platform requires internet access, smartphones, and vouchers, emerged as important interpretive cues that may be linked to the low utilisation of e-Mrejesho. Overall, the study highlights that technological availability alone is insufficient; effective adoption also requires addressing the informational and contextual factors that shape how users interpret the affordability and accessibility of digital reporting systems.

6.0 Recommendations

Referring to Sensemaking Theory, users' interpretations of a digital platform are shaped by prior experience, contextual cues, and social interaction. This study found that many public primary school teachers perceive e-Mrejesho as not readily accessible because they associate it with internet dependence, smartphones, and vouchers.

Misconceptions about expenses, such as the belief that e-Mrejesho requires a smartphone, vouchers, or internet data, may deter potential users from engaging with the platform. To address this, communication should provide clear, repeated cues that basic e-Mrejesho functions can be accessed on feature phones and via free or low-cost channels such as USSD and SMS. Awareness efforts through radio, SMS broadcasts, posters, and workplace communication can help reshape shared understandings of the platform and improve teachers' confidence in its accessibility. These findings suggest that the PO-PSMGG should strengthen user awareness and practical guidance on how e-Mrejesho can be used at minimal or no cost.

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