

Trade Unions' Services & Member Satisfaction in Public Sector: A South African Scenario

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The right to belong to a trade union is contained in ILO Core Convention 87 on Freedom of Association. Employees join trade unions for different reasons and motivations and they in return expect certain services and support from the trade unions. Unions are service organizations and they must satisfy their members by providing good services. The quality of services and benefits offered by trade unions to their members must lead to member satisfaction, as satisfied and committed members are more likely to participate in union activities. This research revealed that even though there seems to be reasonably high level of commitment from union members, about 40% of union members are not satisfied or neutral.

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Background

Trade unions are service providers. They, must, therefore, give employees enough reason to become and remain members. Trade unions as the embodiment of workers' aspirations owe a duty of care to their members and thus should at all times act in their best interests. The kind and quality of services being offered by the trade unions should be perceived by the members as sufficient and satisfactory. Trade unions, like any other organization that provides services are faced with imminent challenges of membership decline due to perceived poor services or the lack thereof. This paper aims to examine if there is a relationship between the quality of services and benefits being offered by unions to their members and member satisfaction.

Primary empirical data within the quantitative paradigm was collated from a random sample ($N = 242$) of members of the three major public service unions in South Africa using a survey questionnaire. Data was analyzed using the SPSS Statistics 23. The questionnaire was statistically significant with the overall scale reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .975$). The find-

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ings revealed significantly high levels of union satisfaction (56%) compared with a meager dissatisfaction levels (16%); and significantly high union participation rate (61%) and union effectiveness (80%). The findings affirm union instrumentality, union effectiveness and member participation as antecedents of union commitment.

Why Employees Join Trade Unions?

Trade union objectives are proffered by Pons and Deale (1998), who list, amongst others, the following:

- To organize and unite all workers in all industries covered by its constitution into one, strong national union.
- To protect, advance, and promote the interests and welfare of its members.
- To strive for economic and social justice for all members by regulating relations and negotiating and settling disputes between members and employers.
- To resist retrenchment(s) and to fight for permanent employment.
- To set up effective collective bargaining mechanisms and fora.
- To democratize work processes.

- To oppose any policy, practice, or measure that will cause division or disunity amongst members or workers, and to fight to eradicate all forms of discrimination (e.g., racism and sexism).
- To promote, support, or oppose, as may be deemed expedient, any proposed legislation or other measure affecting the interests of their members.
- To provide legal assistance to members in matters of employment or in furtherance of any of the objectives set out in its constitution provided it is not inconsistent with any stipulation in its constitution.
- To do such things as appear to be in the interests of members generally or of the union, and which are not inconsistent with the objects or any other matter specifically provided for in its constitution (Pons & Deale, 1998: 6-7).

Haberfeld (1995: 656) says, "one of the key questions in the study of labor unions is why workers join them." According to him, the variety of theoretical considerations can be grouped into six categories:

- i. The first, and one of the most prevalent explanations, is the relationship between job dissatisfaction and the decision to join a union. According to this explanation, unions provide workers with a collective voice in communicating with employers to address sources of dissatisfaction.

- ii. The second is a work-related utility consideration. For example, it is suggested that workers join unions in order to obtain job security and better employment conditions. This consideration, whether based on an economic utility model (mainly the expectation of higher wages), or a more general psychological model of instrumentalities, explains the decision to join a union — workers expect that joining a union will bring them greater utility.
- iii. The third consideration can be viewed as a special case within the utility framework. Workers expect union membership to increase their non-work utility. Many unions provide their members with benefits that are not work-related, such as health- and life insurance, credit cards, and legal aid, all at below-market rates. Workers may decide to join such unions because they find these commodities and services attractive.
- iv. The fourth consideration focuses on workers' political ideology. Workers join unions as a result of their political beliefs. In many countries, labor unions are affiliated with political parties.
- v. The fifth consideration concerns the value workers place on collective action, an outlook that is assumed to be shaped by the socialization process. Those who believe in workers' solidarity join unions because they perceive trade unions as an effective instrument for collective action.
- vi. The sixth consideration highlights the role of work-related and individual

variables in the decision to join a union. Among the variables are gender, race, education, age, and certain work-related characteristics, such as unit size and industry. It is clear that some of these factors could be integrated with explanations described above.

In their endeavor to understand workers' motivation for joining unions, Schuler and Youngblood (1986) developed a model that contains three separate conditions that strongly influence an employee's decision to join a union, namely dissatisfaction, lack of power, and union instrumentality. These are discussed below.

Dissatisfaction

Schuler and Youngblood (1986) state that management's behavior plays an important role in the employees' satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Employees' work dissatisfaction is a result of management's unrealistic expectations that cannot be fulfilled by designing jobs that fail to utilize the skills and knowledge of the employees, and fail to satisfy their interests and preferences; discriminative and unfair management practices; and management failing to tell employees that it would prefer to operate without unions, and that it is committed to treating employees fairly and with respect.

Lack of Power

In the event of an employee being unhappy or dissatisfied, attempts to resolve and improve the work situation will be made by the individual employee act-

ing alone. "The degree of success of this individual attempt depends on two features of a job, that is, essentiality — how important or critical the job is to the overall success of the organization — and exclusivity — how difficult it is to replace the person" (Schuler & Youngblood, 1986: 550). A greater degree of essentiality and exclusivity is tantamount to greater bargaining leverage, which can be used to coerce the employer to change or improve the situation. Low job essentiality and exclusivity will cause the individual attempt to fail. In most instances, the majority of workers are left with no choice but to join trade unions, given their low job essentiality and exclusivity.

Union Instrumentality

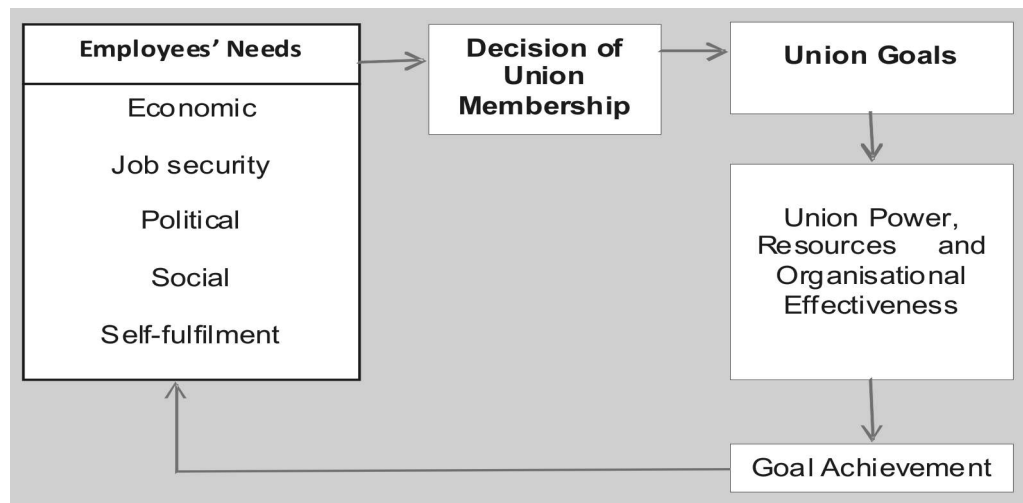
Schuler and Youngblood (1986) explain union instrumentality as follows:

Just as employees can be dissatisfied with many aspects of a work envi-

ronment, such as pay, promotion opportunity, treatment by supervisor, the job itself, and work rules, employees can also perceive a union as an instrument in removing these causes of dissatisfaction. The more the employees believe that a union can obtain positive work aspects, the more instrumental the union will be for the employees. The employees then weigh the value of the benefits to be obtained through unionization against its costs, for example, the lengthy organizing campaign and the bad feelings. Among supervisors, managers, and other employees who may not want a union when the benefits exceed the costs and union instrumentality is high, employees will be more willing to support a union.

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Fig. 1 Employees' Needs, Union Membership, and Union Goals and Achievement



Source: Finnemore (2013: 93)

In an attempt to attract and retain members, trade unions have increased the range of services they offer to their members. These include, inter alia:

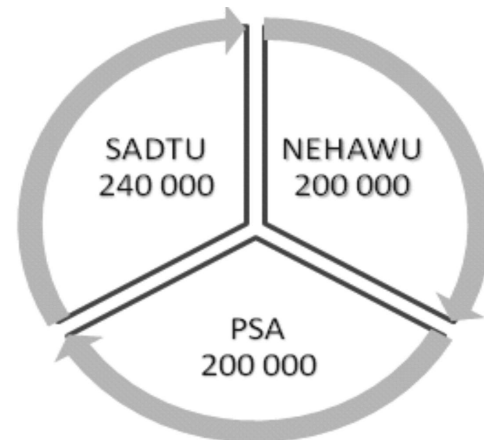
- Financial assistance and discounts — provision and administration of financial assistance or relief for members in distress in the form of funeral benefits, short-term insurance, and loans (members can get discounts on mortgages, car rentals, insurance, and hotel bookings).
- Legal assistance — advice on employment issues (some unions offer assistance with personal matters like housing, wills, and debt).
- Education and training — most unions offer training courses for their members on employment rights, health and safety, and other issues (some unions also assist members and their immediate family members with grants and bursaries to further their studies).
- Welfare benefits — one of the earliest functions of trade unions is to look after members who in financial dire straits (some of the older unions offer financial help to their members during protracted strikes or when they are unemployed) (Olney, 1996: 80-81).

Public Sector Unions in South Africa

A survey was done amongst the biggest trade unions in the public sector in South Africa, namely the South African Democratic Trade Unions (SADTU),

National Educational Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) and the Public Service Association in order to answer the research questions. These three unions have about 640 000 members as depicted in fig. 2.

Fig. 2 Public Sector Unions in South Africa



Jones (2010) noted that public sector employees should not be characterized as a homogeneous entity, stating:

Public workers differed dramatically in what they did, the skills and education that their duties required, and even the class status they held. The contrast between school teachers and librarians on the one hand and garbage workers and plumbers on the other brings into sharp relief the social gulf that sometimes separates public sector workers. At the same time, public employees have several related characteristics in common. They provide essential public services where neither a profit motive nor competition exists and they derive their income from the tax base of the governmental jurisdictions for which they work (Jones, 2010: 6).

Research Methodology

In order to answer the research questions a specific research methodology was used to assist the authors to determine the following:

- The method deemed most suitable for data generation and collection, in order to provide sufficient numerical data to correctly analyze and interpret the data.
- The sampling method followed with the aim of ensuring a sufficiently representative sample.
- A description of the data collection method and measurement instrument(s), as well as their appropriateness.
- The respondents — the population and sample selection.
- An overview of the statistical techniques used in interpreting and analyzing the data. The Statistical Package for the Social Science 23 (SPSS) was used to analyze and describe the data, using frequency distributions, charts (bar and pie), and histograms. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, was used to describe the data, and inferential statistics, such as independent t-tests, ANOVAs, and the Kruskal-Wallis H tests, was employed to investigate if there is a significant difference between perceptions of union members about the services that unions offer. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine reliability.

The research was undertaken in the South African public service, and considered unions operating within the ambit of the public sector bargaining councils. The designated sectors are education, police service, health and welfare, and general public service.

The purpose of sampling is to select, from the population a set of elements that accurately depict the total population from which the elements were selected (Babbie, 2001: 185). The population in the present study consisted of all public-sector employees on Salary Levels (SL) 1-12 or Post Level (PL) 1 who were also members of a trade union. The unit of analysis was permanent employees employed in the public service. The research scope was limited to employees covered by the bargaining councils, which were on SL 1-12 and teachers who fell within the General Classroom Teacher (PL 1) category. For practical reasons, the research was limited to members of large unions.

The research sites selected for primary data collection were national departments situated within the vicinity of Pretoria and schools in and around Mamelodi that fell within the Gauteng North District, per the demarcation of the Gauteng Provincial Department of Education. The selection of the sites was largely based on the following factors: the presence of dominant and influential public sector unions, the proximity and convenience of the research site, non-contrived settings, and the familiarity of the researchers with the site.

Sampling

Sampling is used when it is impractical for researchers to survey an entire population, or when budget or time constraints prevent researchers from surveying an entire population (Saunders et al., 2009: 212). A representative sample implies, firstly, a well-defined population, secondly, an adequately chosen sample, and, thirdly, an estimate of how representative of the whole population the sample is; that is, how well, in terms of probability, the sample statistics conform to the unknown population parameters (Bless & Higson-Smith, 1995: 87). Probability sampling is most commonly associated with survey-based research strategies where the researcher needs to draw conclusions from a sample about a population to meet certain research objectives.

In the case of the present study, the population in the public service was approximately 1.3 million individuals spread across 32 national departments, nine provincial administrations, and 91 provincial departments. As a result, it was essential to select a sample size that was manageable. A practical and manageable sample size of 500 was deemed appropriate.

Survey Questionnaires

A total of 500 self-administered questionnaires requesting voluntary participation and containing the rationale for the study, as well as confidentiality undertakings, were distributed. Of these, 100 were distributed amongst teachers. A total of 247 completed questionnaires were collected from the respondents.

Five of these questionnaires were discarded, as they were either completed by respondents who were not union members of the three designated unions or missing too much data. Therefore, 242 questionnaires were found to be usable for the purpose of the study ($N = 242$) — a response rate of 48.9%.

Content Validity

Content validity was addressed by ensuring that there were adequate questions to comprehensively cover all the relevant aspects identified from the literature review. Construct validity was addressed by means of piloting the questionnaire. This was to ensure that the constructs were clear and unambiguous, and did not result in bias due to phrasing. Due consideration was given to developing and selecting each construct, to add value to the survey and ensure convergence with the literature review. The initial questionnaire was administered in a pilot study to a small sample of knowledgeable experts and practitioners within the employee relations domain, consisting of four employee relations managers and four shop stewards.

The questionnaire items were divided into three sections. Each section contained information and/or directions on how to complete that section.

Section A consisted of dichotomous and nominal questions relating to biographical information or socio demographic background (ten items) including, inter alia, gender, age, race, educational qualification, family responsibility,

marital status, tenure of service, and community background. The questions were close-ended, and respondents were required to choose a single option. In the main, this section was made up of independent variables.

Section B sought to elicit information regarding the respondents' background as union members (15 items). Amongst others, the questions pertained to the reasons for joining a union and participation in union activities. Other information collected included union effectiveness in resolving workplace-related issues and whether unions should concentrate more on workplace issues and less on politics.

Section C contained a list of statements regarding the main services that unions provide to their members (34 items), measured on a five-point Likert scale. These were the dependant variables. The 34 items were adapted from or styled along those of Parasuraman et al (1988) SERVQUAL Model/Scale, and sought to measure various facet of perceived union instrumentality and union satisfaction.

The present study used a hybrid scale with very satisfied (5) and very dissatisfied (1) as anchor points. A high score indicated high satisfaction with the service being offered. Respondents had to choose the answer most applicable to them.

The 34 items were clustered into seven broad constructs or themes for logical classification and tabulation of data later. The seven categories/constructs were: condi-

tions of employment, health, and safety (three items); workplace economic issues (five items); job-related issues (five items); representation in individual matters (four items); legal assistance (two items); education and training (four items); and member service (11 items).

Reliability & Validity

An exploratory analysis aimed at assessing validity and reliability was carried out by means of Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach's α) - a measure of internal consistency reliability, that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group, which is considered a measure of scale reliability. Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham (2006: 137) describe Cronbach's α as a measure of the internal consistency reliability of the items in a multiple rating scale (sometimes referred to as a *scale reliability coefficient*) that measures the degree to which responses across a set of multiple measures of a construct are consistent (highly correlated) with the generally acceptable level of 0.70. However, it is not a measure of homogeneity or uni-dimensionality. Cronbach's α ranges from 0.00 to 1.00, with $\alpha = 0.00$ indicating no consistency in measurement and $\alpha = 1.00$ indicating perfect consistency.

Union Meeting Attendance

This question sought to establish the rate of attendance of formal union meetings by the respondents. They were asked to indicate how often they had attended union meetings during the previous 12 months. 37.2% of the respondents

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for the Constructs & Items measured in the Questionnaire

Constructs and items measured in the study	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Conditions of employment, health and safety (ESH)</i>	242	3.86	0.819
Makes sure the workplace is safe and healthy to work in	242	3.81	1.029
Negotiates for better conditions of service	242	3.87	0.933
Ensures that the employer complies fully with labor legislation	242	3.90	0.970
<i>Workplace economic issues (EI1/Extrinsic)</i>	242	3.80	0.886
Plays an important role in negotiating better wages/salaries	242	3.92	0.978
Strives for longer leave (e.g., annual/sick/maternity)	242	3.88	0.990
Strives for a reduction in working hours	242	3.57	1.017
<i>Workplace economic issues (EI2/Intrinsic)</i>	242	3.80	1.057
Has a funeral benefit scheme for its members	242	3.84	1.074
Negotiates discounts with service providers for its members	242	3.75	1.248
<i>Job-related issues (JI)</i>	242	3.68	0.886
Assists in opposing redundancies/retrenchments	242	3.77	1.079
Protects employees against abuse by management	242	3.95	0.925
Provides workers with a say in management decisions	242	3.61	1.058
Has a say in the implementation of new technologies in the workplace	242	3.30	1.139
Ensures that the recruitment process (appointments/promotions) is fair	242	3.78	1.184
<i>Representation in individual matters (RIM)</i>	242	3.98	0.871
Represents its members during grievance and disciplinary hearings	242	4.14	1.002
Represents its members during dispute resolution at the CCMA/Labor Court	242	4.22	0.896
Provides union-related information on a frequent basis	242	4.05	0.993
Offers personal, family and financial-related advices to its members	242	3.51	1.199
<i>Legal assistance (LA)</i>	242	3.08	1.151
Assists members in drafting a will	242	3.07	1.203
Provides its members with general legal advice	242	3.09	1.176
<i>Education and training (ET)</i>	240	2.93	1.142
Organizes in-service training activities (e.g., workshops) for its members	240	3.03	1.222
Offers study bursaries/grants for its members and immediate family members	240	2.88	1.222
Provides personal training and developmental programs	240	2.74	1.237
Promotes health awareness programmes (e.g., HIV/AIDS)	240	3.08	1.345
<i>Member services (MS)</i>	237	3.62	0.905
Has operating hours and locations convenient to all its members	237	3.58	1.200
Delivers its services promptly	237	3.67	1.158
Keeps its members informed with regard to union activities/meetings/decisions	237	3.82	1.110
Consults its members and gets a mandate with regard to negotiations	237	3.95	1.066
Has members' best interests at heart	237	3.91	1.062
Leaders/Officials are honest, transparent, and accountable to members	237	3.61	1.150
Leaders/Officials have competence and skills to deal with members' issues	237	3.55	1.187
Leaders/Officials are more preoccupied with political issues than workplace issues	237	3.16	1.212
Leaders/Officials perform the service right the first time	237	3.34	1.122
Leaders/Officials are courteous to members	237	3.57	1.078
Leaders/Officials satisfy my expectations	237	3.71	1.140

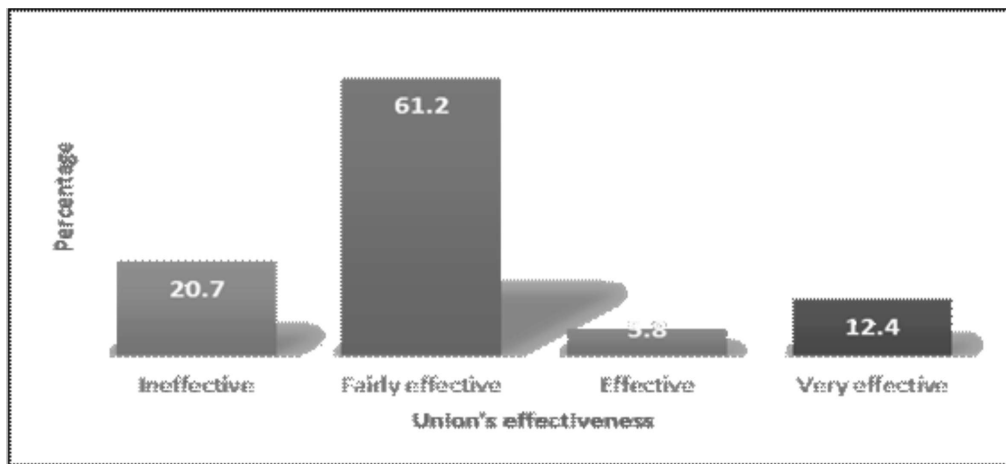
indicated that they had not attended meetings at all, 28.9% indicated that they had sometimes attended meetings, 22.3% indicated that they had regularly attended meetings, and 11.6% indicated that they had never missed a meeting.

Union Effectiveness in the Workplace

“Union effectiveness has several dimensions, including administrative effi-

ciency, bargaining capability and the capacity to organize new members. One direct measure of union effectiveness is member satisfaction with union representation” (Frenkel & Kuruvilla, 1999: 539). The concept of union effectiveness is defined by Kochan (as cited in Fullagar, 1986: 38) as “substantive achievements in bargaining, and the correspondence of these achievements with the personal goals and priorities of members.”

Fig.3 Union Effectiveness in the Workplace



Job-related Issues

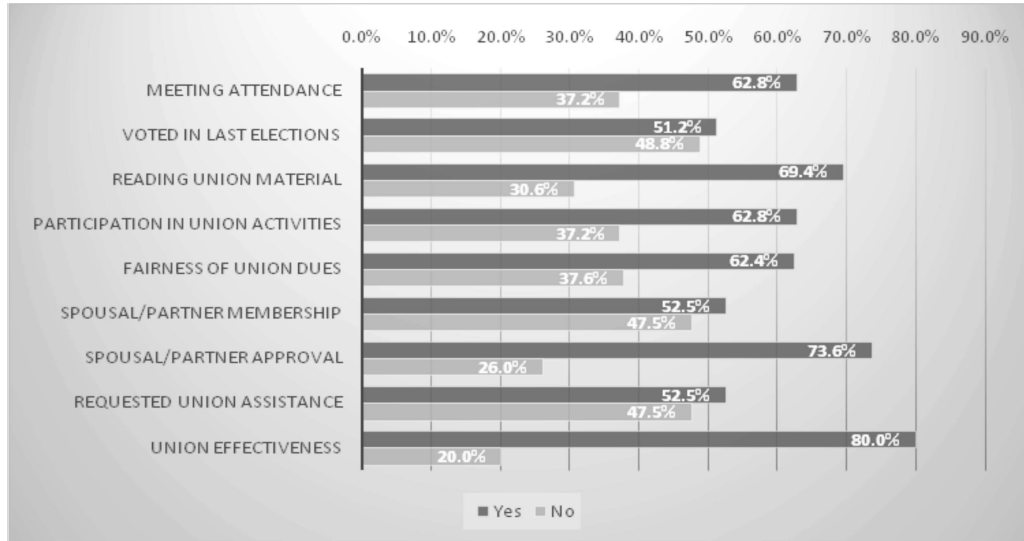
Five items measured satisfaction in this regard, and 60% of the 242 respondents indicated that they were solidly satisfied with the services being rendered by their unions. Those who indicated dissatisfaction amounted to 13.72% and 26.1% were neutral.

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Legal Assistance

The construct was measured by two items. Of the 242 respondents, 33.7% indicated that they were slightly satisfied, and 26.6% indicated that they were slightly dissatisfied. This finding deserves urgent attention from unions. About 40% of respondents were neutral. The reason for these low levels of satisfaction may be that unions do not deem legal assistance to members a core function or essential service.

Fig. 4 Participation in Union-related Activities



Discussion & Conclusion

The paper examined whether the respondents were satisfied with the performance of the trade unions to which they belonged. It is evident from the above that employees join a union to, inter alia, ameliorate their working conditions (e.g., leave) and compensation (wages/salaries and attendant benefits); safeguard against dismissal (job security and stability); ensure legislative compliance (e.g., affirmative action); and ensure fair and equitable recruitment processes. Employees join trade unions because they believe that unions will, through collective effort and bargaining power, represent them in negotiating with employers regarding wage or salary increases, as well as other benefits (e.g., bonuses, medical aid, and housing allowances). Should unions succeed in negotiating substantial increases and better working conditions, employees will per-

ceive the trade union as strong and powerful, which will, in turn, have a positive impact on the union-member trust relationship and support. In addition, new employees will seek to join such unions. On the other hand, perceived failure will deepen the trust deficit, resulting in membership despondency and/or disengagement, and the unions will be deemed weak and ineffective.

Unions’ obligations are composed of what members perceive they can expect from the unions. The authors contend that unions must at all times endeavor to meet their members’ expectations, as there is a nexus between satisfaction and member participation and commitment. A low level of member satisfaction will result in increased turnover and alienation.

The empirical results of the broader study indicate that the majority of the respondents, regardless of socio-demo-

graphic background, had had instrumental reasons for joining their unions. It is apparent from the findings of this study that unionization is influenced by a range of factors, including personal factors, job factors, and perceptual factors. The first two factors have a significant influence on membership participation in union activities and union commitment. The researchers are of the belief that perceptual factors also have a significant bearing on membership participation. Unions, in their endeavors to retain their current members and attract new ones, should earnestly and frankly assess their performance using the findings of this study, the results of which could provide them with an advantage. Lastly, the level of dissatisfaction among members can be ameliorated and/or mitigated by effective and open channels of communication between unions and their members. This will also be helpful in addressing the trust deficit, thus contributing towards the narrowing of the social distance between union officials and their members.

It is evident from the findings that the three unions under study provide their members with a variety of services and benefits that meet their expectations and, therefore, satisfy them.

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The overall satisfaction levels of the respondents are depicted in Fig. 5. Over-

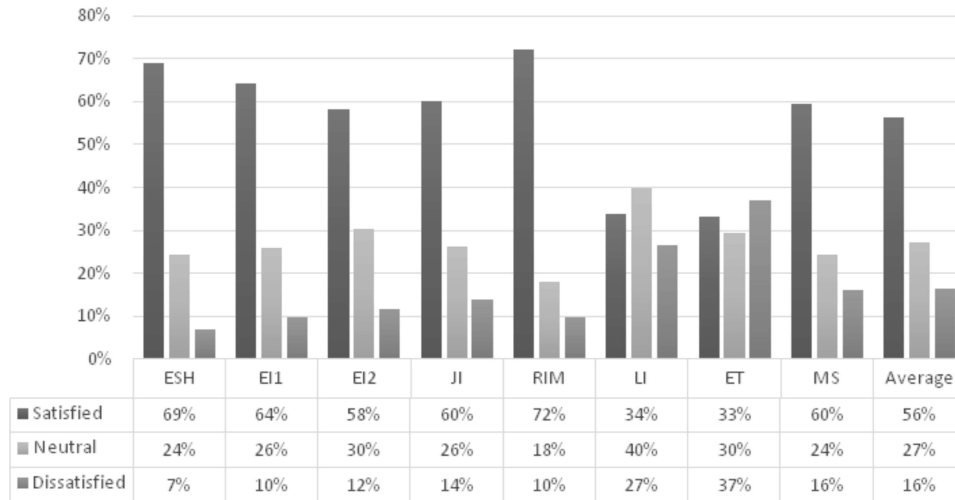
all, 56% of respondents indicated that they were satisfied, and 16% indicated that they were not. In the case of legal assistance only 34% were satisfied and in the case of education and training only 33% were satisfied. A total of 55% of the respondents were satisfied with the services and benefits, while less than 40% were dissatisfied. Unions should heed these results and ensure that they become service-orientated and meet the expectations of their members.

It can be concluded that there exists a correlation between members' satisfaction and perceived union instrumentality, which leads to members' affective commitment, which, in turn, has an effect on their commitment. Behavioral commitment manifests in participation in union activities

The present study's major finding is that the majority of the respondents (56%) are satisfied with the performance and effectiveness of their unions in realizing the above. The performance and effectiveness of trade unions are significant determining factors of members' satisfaction with their unions. Therefore, trade unions should strive to ensure that they not only offer services and benefits of exceptional quality, but also that they attend to members' queries promptly and efficiently. Enhancing the quality of services and benefits will increase members' satisfaction, which, in turn, will have a positive effect on members' loyalty

Satisfaction is the result of one's expectations being met or exceeded, and

Fig.5 Respondents' Satisfaction with Trade Unions' Performance



- ESH – Employment Safety and Health
- EI1 – Workplace Economic Issues (Extrinsic)
- EI2 – Workplace Economic Issues (Intrinsic)
- JI – Job Related Issues
- RIM – Representation in Individual Matters
- LI – Legal Assistance Issues
- ET – Education and Training
- MS – Member Services

enhances retention. Satisfaction has a significant and strong direct relationship with loyalty. Member loyalty manifests in commitment and participation. The relationship between perceived union effectiveness, union commitment, and participation was found to be significant. Satisfaction with union's performance and effectiveness enhances unionization rates; not only will it significantly contribute towards member retention, but also assist in the recruitment of new members.

The respondents were satisfied with the types of services and benefits they derived from their union membership.

They also indicated that the unions improved their working conditions and offered them protection. Thus, unionized employees who perceive their unions to be offering them protection and better working conditions, amongst others, are more likely to retain their membership and remain committed to the union, demonstrated by their continued participation in union-initiated activities.

The findings of this study have implications for both trade union leaders and their members. Trade union leaders must realize that the *sine qua non* for their existence is delivering satisfactory services to their members.

Recommendations to Union Leaders

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to union leaders.

- There is a need to improve unions' ability to promptly deliver superior-quality services and benefits to its members.
- The trust relationship between union leaders and members should be improved by implementing training and capacity-building programs to enhance the professional competencies of union leaders.
- To retain membership and attract new members, unions need to be innovative in terms of its service offerings.
- Unions must, at all times, deal with members in an honest, transparent, and accountable manner. This will go a long way in overcoming the trust deficit.
- Trade unions should exercise good governance by, inter alia, publishing audited financial reports on a regular basis.
- Unions need to implement an effective communication strategy for efficient dissemination of information.
- Trade unions should implement systems to monitor and evaluate the quality of services rendered to members.

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