

Performance Reporting Practice of Malaysian State Islamic Religious Councils towards Enhancing Accountability

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This study investigates in-depth the performance reporting practices in Malaysian State Islamic Religious Councils (SIRC). Semi-structured interviews are conducted with accountants of SIRC and contributors, representing the public. Such interviews are carried out to discuss the current reporting practices. This study addresses the current performance reporting practices of State Islamic Religious Councils in Malaysia. It begins with the definition of performance reporting in the context of SIRC, its relevance, current practices and also recommendations for a more comprehensive performance reporting. The performance reporting essentially, is as part of an annual report, which expected by a wide range of stakeholders. Indeed, this study views that public accountability is pertinent, which appreciates the public's right to get information about SIRC's performance. A comprehensive corporate annual report should include performance reporting, indicating the importance of performance report not just financial performance but also non-financial performance. Particularly, for those organisations with not for profit oriented organisations like faith-based organisations, SIRC, zakat institutions, NGOs and even government agencies. Performance reporting studies in the context of not-for-profit organisations are at the infancy level. Despite the relevance of such report, similar non-profit organisations also could benefit from this study. Having a best reporting practice, non-financial performance aspects cannot be neglected so as to be seen being accountable to various stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

Many advocates claim that in both developed and developing countries, public sectors have experienced severe criticism for over two decades since 1995 for being inefficient, corrupt, showing poor performance, bureaucracy conflict, failing to satisfy the public, which has resulted in changed attitudes to the government's role and public expectations (Siddiquee 2006). Consequently, the majority of these countries have been undertaking considerable reform in the administration of the public sector to address such problems (Hooks et al., 2012).

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Siddiquee (2006) defines New Public Management (NPM) as a set of contemporary administrative changes to improve efficiency and performance in public service delivery. NPM offers many labels for reforms, which have been inspired by private sector management style and market mechanisms (Samaratunge et al., 2008). Unfortunately, there is no globally cohesive model of NPM (Hood 1991; Wollmann 2003) since Lane (2011) claims that “NPM is the generalization of tendering inherent in public procurement” and there is not a country-specific model.

Although there is an on-going debate about the precise elements of NPM, several doctrines^a have been articulated in the literature from, among others are Lane, 2011; Samaratunge et al., 2008; Hood 1995; Hoque and Moll 2001. Such elements concede the need to empower every civil servant with a specific responsibility (Hood 1995). These measures aim to enhance organisations’ accountability and promote efficiency and effectiveness (Hoque and Moll 2001).

Due to this greater accountability, Hood (1995) further explains that NPM permits the empowerment of public managers having high flexibility and freedom to enhance performance accountability beyond fiscal compliance. However, Romzek (2000) cautions that public managers are accountable to provide satisfactory explanations to the public, within the public’s notion of accountability for their actions, to prevent any sanction. Haque (2000) highlighted the essence of public accountability, which is aimed at improving performance by assuring the efficiency of resource usage and quality in delivering services.

NPM thus became the dominant practice in the 1980s and 1990s in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and some developing countries (Haque 2007). Samaratunge et al. (2008) found that developing countries have been implementing NPM reforms to improve service efficiency in national socio-economic growth, which implies social, economic and fiscal rationality towards various reforms of the public sector in developing regions. In this study, the annual reporting for the discharge of public accountability is investigated, concerning a NPM in one the developing countries, namely the Malaysian public sector.

Performance reporting system is widely used worldwide in public sector. The performance reporting is believed as a good means to enhance accountability of government, promoting efficiency and effectiveness. Indeed, the main purpose of this study is to examine the performance reporting practices of Malaysian State Islamic Religious Councils. SIRC are statutory bodies, which were established under the state enactment. They are sole trustees, which responsible for managing the Muslims wealth derived from *zakat* (alms), *waqaf* (endowment) and *mal* (treasury). The uniqueness of

^a There are seven key elements in NPM as follows: i) business-like entrepreneurial management-preference from non-monetary to monetary incentives ii) standards and measures of performance accountability iii) output controls through reporting, monitoring and accountability; iv) disaggregation and decentralisation of management in public services delivery; v) greater competition in the provision of public services vi) a private sector management style; and vii) discipline efficiency and parsimony in resource allocation.

SIRC as public service organisations within the Islamic setting triggers the present study, supporting public accountability paradigm. Specifically, this study addresses the current performance reporting practices of State Islamic Religious Councils in Malaysia. It begins with the definition of performance reporting in the context of SIRC, its relevance, current practices and also recommendations for best practice of performance reporting.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the previous related studies and Section 3 explains the method used in this study. Next, Section 4 discusses the findings and Section 5 concludes this paper.

2. Literature Review

A review of previous studies on SIRC was carried out to identify the area, where a contribution to the SIRC context can be made. From the reviewed, there have been a limited number of studies on the SIRC accounting practices. The majority were not published in academic journals. These were conducted for post graduate research such as Siraj (2012), Yaacob (2006) and Md. Zain (2005). This is not the case for other fields of research about SIRC like Islamic jurisprudence, law and management studies. Despite this limitation, there are useful findings, some of which are lack of accountability dimensions, no detailed information, absence of qualified accountants and lack of an accounting system, which may implicate the needs for improvement. This study attempts to discover these issues, specific to the performance reporting practice via interviews.

In respect to the studies on SIRC, *waqaf* reporting was mainly focused highlighting the obvious gap in SIRC studies except of Abdul-Rahman and Goddard (2003, 1998). The focus of *waqaf* unit in most studies arises possibly because it is the oldest form of charity institution in Islamic history for socio-economy development of the society. Afifuddin and Siti-Nabiha (2010) claim that Islamic charity bodies today like religion boarding school and *zakat* centres are eventually reinvented from the Islamic history of *waqaf* institutions, which could explain the growing number of studies on *waqaf*.

Hence, the need in this research is for a comprehensive report of SIRC, not only for *waqaf*, which could be limiting. Notwithstanding that *zakat* contributes to more than 70% of the funds in the SIRC, it is practical to focus on the entire operation of the SIRC. Although Abdul Rahman and Goddard (2003, 1998) examined more than *waqaf* in their accounting practice, more than ten years ago they only dealt with two SIRC. Therefore, this research will include a number of SIRC and cover annual report evaluation over the recent six-year period, 2008-2013 inclusive.

Abdul Rahman and Goddard (1998) conducted a case study using grounded theory to examine accounting practices in a cultural setting of two SIRC; namely ASIRC and BSIRC^b. They conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews with the chief

^bASIRC has a power elite culture stemming from the Royal family whereas BSIRC was located in the commercial and modern life city.

executives, senior management, accounting staff and religious officers as well as a document review including annual reports, financial statements, brochures and minutes of meetings. Both sources of data were used for comparison. It was found that accountants in BSIRC have more authority in financial decision-making and accounting activity was appreciated. In contrast, the authority of accountants and roles of accounting in ASIRC were restricted due to the dominant influence of power elite.

Previous research was further explored by Abdul Rahman and Goddard's (2003) who explained accounting as a social practice and to develop an accounting rationale. They inferred that although both organisations did not object to accounting practice, the practice was less developed in the organisations. Accounting practice was not rated highly. Interestingly, although both organisations were set up within the same religious denomination, their accounting practices differed due to discrepancies in power and other cultural influences according to their location. The aforementioned studies insights into the reasons, constraints of disclosure and non-disclosure of SIRC.

The previous studies did not examine annual report of SIRC using a disclosure index, perhaps due to the limited feasible annual report earlier than 2008. Only recently has the publication of annual report been demanding, especially in 2007, which marked the introduction of the Accountability Index. It is timely to examine SIRC annual reports to identify current reporting trends. Consequently, this study is the first to contribute to the disclosure study on the SIRC's comprehensive reporting, which might be of interest to religious-based, charities and public service organisations.

The present study aims to extend the above studies by examining the current practices of corporate annual reports, particularly on non-financial performance rather than only financial statement. In the unique context of public service and religious setting, SIRC is the focus of this study. Specifically, this study concerns information communicated to stakeholders through the comprehensive annual report. Such a notion is set within a public accountability paradigm and performance-oriented information. The former is as prescribed in the NPM, while the latter is in line with Stewart's (1984) accountability dimensions, which posits the importance of accountability in public sector. An 'internal accountability' dimension, which acknowledges the value of belief and religion is considered as the SIRC were established in a religious setting. In this study, several issues are explored in preparing such a comprehensive annual report, including performance reporting and also, the current reporting practices are investigated.

3. The Methodology

Semi-structure interviews were conducted to discuss the current practices of performance reporting of Malaysian State Islamic Religious Councils (SIRC). The interviewees were preparers – five SIRC accountants and two users - contributors cum Accounting Professors. The accountants, including those SIRC in a Central (AC1 and AC2) and three regions in the North (AC3, AC4 and AC5) whereas users consisting of contributors, C1 and C2, representing the public. They were asked about their perspectives on performance reporting, current state of practices and the relevance of performance reporting.

4. The Findings

Performance reporting practice in SIRC was examined by interviewing different point of views from SIRC accountants and contributor/public. A Professor of Accounting, representing the public cum contributors of SIRC viewed a performance reporting practice in Malaysia, as best described as follows:

“Performance reporting is yet to become part of our routine motives. To a certain extent, public sector accounting in Malaysia is still lagging behind in a way that is affecting the zakat authority as well. But, what concerns me is actually, the question of whether we can measure efficiency, effectiveness and outcome? Yes, we can”[C1].

The responses are consistent with the content analysis that reveals SIRC had a lack of performance disclosure (See Masruki et al.,2017). Instead, the content analysis showed that they were more likely to disclose items in the financial statement. As the present study underlies a public accountability theme, fulfilling the public information expectation is a concern. A study conducted by Masruki et al. (2016) suggested information that should be disclosed by SIRC to meet the expectations of various groups of stakeholders.

The performance reporting practices and their measurement are the focus. C1 also expressed the following view:

“The element of public accountability is where we have to identify our potential stakeholders. Now, we have to start with the needs of the stakeholders and then, we have to move backward. What are the needs of the stakeholders? For example, if we identify contributors as the stakeholders, then we need to identify their needs”[C1].

An SIRC accountant in SIRC North3 (AC5) mentioned that the payers were more interested in the distribution of *zakat* than the collected *zakat* funds. This is a similar argument to Bakar and Rashid (2010). C1 stated that if the stakeholders are *zakat* payers, we can measure the efficiency of *zakat* collected. This would help to provide the appropriate measurement of efficiency of a *zakat* authority.

According to C1, it could be measured financially by a calculation of the amount of *zakat* distribution over *zakat* collection. This is consistent with the basis of measuring efficiency in charities and NPO (Sulaiman et al., 2009;Connolly and Hyndman, 2004). The more funds distributed out of the *zakat* that have been collected, would indicate the more efficient the SIRC are. Another example of efficiency measures was given by C1. He stated that in the same way there is a calculation of *zakat* distribution over *zakat* collected, which could be computed as a measure of efficiency in *zakat* distribution.

This indicates that there are possibly other ratios to signify the efficiency measurement as highlighted by C1. However, the difficulty of measuring performance was mentioned by other SIRC accountants; similar to Connolly and Hyndman (2003), who examined charities organisations. Indeed, discussions between SIRC accountants and academic members would be useful to get a clearer idea of what kind of measurement could be adopted, as suggested by a study conducted by Masruki et al. (2018).

When the SIRC accountants were asked about reporting on the efficiency of *zakat* spending and collecting using ratios (similar to the efficiency measurement used in this study), the majority of them were in agreement. Initially, some of them mentioned that users might not understand the ratios but they agreed that interpretations of each ratio could better explain the reported ratios. Furthermore, an accountant in SIRC North3 (AC5) emphasised the performance report to explain reasons for increases and decreases of the amount of *zakat* collection and distribution.

This was supported by another accountant in the SIRC Central1 who added that information beyond the financial report should be disclosed to the public, supporting Ntim et al. (2016). She argued that not all SIRC had annual reports and there were various constraints, especially internal problems (Masruki and Azizan, 2017).

For those SIRC that had one, it did not necessarily mean that the report satisfied the public. One accountant in the SIRC Central2 commented:

“In my opinion, the absence of some information disclosure items was due to the lack of knowledge. Probably, the report preparers do not know about the information disclosure that should be prepared and disclosed in the annual report”[AC2].

Indeed, the dilemma here was identifying the information disclosure that should be disclosed in the SIRC’s annual report. This study aims to respond to this dilemma by looking at the performance reporting practice in SIRC. An interviewee known as one of the public (C2) highlighted that the findings in this study should be shared with SIRC accountants and the Accountant General Department, to suggest the best reporting guidelines for SIRC. This is because after considering feedback from the SIRC accountants, regulators and the public including academia in relation to normative accountability, the needs of a majority of stakeholders could be satisfied. One accountant in the North2 stated:

“First and foremost, the vision, mission and chairman’s statement should be disclosed according to the pre-identified format. To me, a financial report should be disseminated to the public. If we provide only a financial report, the public might not understand. It should include reports on activities and achievements, receivable income and spending and this is more detail than financial statements”[AC4].

The above statement indicates that in addition to a financial statement, non-financial information is also important. A similar view was also shared by another accountant(AC5), in the SIRC North3. She claimed that the public, especially *zakat* payers, would like to know in detail about yearly *zakat* collection and disbursement. She noted that performance measurement could address the expectations of the public, who are more demanding nowadays about the SIRC’s performance, not just input and output. Her response is consistent with the arguments made by Tooley and Guthrie, 2007; Grosso and Van Ryzin, 2012; Dunne, 2013 that the performance reporting should include a wider scope of measurement such as effectiveness, efficiency and productivity.

Nevertheless, from the interviews with SIRC accountants, ineffective enforcement of performance reporting is evident in the decision not to disclose performance reporting among SIRC (Masruki et al., 2018). If stringent enforcement were in place, the SIRC's attitude towards preparing performance disclosure might be improved. For instance, an accountability index rating score^c does not take into account non-financial performance or even annual reporting. It is merely on the financial disclosure requirements (Bakar and Ismail, 2011). An accountant in SIRC Central¹ suggested that one of the criteria in the rating could consider annual reports, to encourage a comprehensive report including performance reporting. Furthermore, another accountant in SIRC North¹ stated that the attitude and background of top management, especially the CEO, have an influence on the report content. In this case, the needs of performance reporting of SIR Care related to the political agenda and economic impact to the public.

In response to the attitude of top management, an accountant in SIRC North³ (AC5) asserted that her CEO had established a financial committee in 2014 to monitor financial management. The committee consisted of corporate leaders from the private sector and others who were civil officers. The first appointed chairman of the committee was a corporate leader. The accountant had to prepare a performance report every two months for the committee. The report covered collection and spending of SIRC funds, which emphasises the reasons for the increase and decrease in the reported figures.

An interviewee (C1) as a researcher stressed that there were many ways to measure and report performance: for example, efficiency, effectiveness and outcomes measured quantitatively using a number of different types of ratio. The insufficiency of performance reporting is an important matter, considering the stakeholders are more than the individual *zakat* payers, the so-called Muslim public, but also corporate payers who are always critical about SIRC, representing either the existing or potential payers. Gaining the trust of those who do not pay *zakat* is a problem. The existing and potential payers, both individual and corporate payer might be attracted for more funding by obtaining their trust (Yasmin et al., 2014).

In Malaysia, previous studies found that an ability to attract corporations to pay *zakat* on business has not yet been fully utilized (Rahman et al., 2012). An interview with C1 elaborated:

"If they (corporate) are our stakeholders, then we have to identify their needs. For example, the amount of zakat on business wealth collected during the year divided by the total number of zakat recipients during the year. Then what you get is actually the utilization of zakat from business wealth for each and every zakat recipient to that particular state" [C1].

This response implies that the information expectations of *zakat* payers among corporate payers, namely companies, should not be neglected in SIRC. They are very

^c Accountability Index consist of nine elements, namely: organizational management control, budgetary control, receipts, expenditure, management of trust funds, assets, investment, loans and financial statement.

demanding payers; as C1 specified, for each cent of *zakat* fund paid into an SIRC they expect to see that it has been distributed. Then, out of the *zakat* recipient who has received *zakat* money, how much per *zakat* recipient of the *zakat*, from business wealth that was collected, has been distributed to the poor.

As such, it is believed that reporting this level of detail would raise the consciousness of companies and encourage them to pay *zakat*. Therefore, SIRC must consider both individual and corporate *zakat* payers in reporting *zakat*. They should not focus just on individual *zakat* payers, otherwise it might discourage *zakat* collection from business, as argued by Rahman et al. (2012) and Bakar and Rashid (2010).

One might say that the basic information from a newsletter would be sufficient if it is for individual *zakat* payers. However, that might not be the case for corporate *zakat* payers such as Islamic banks and *takaful* companies. C1, who represents the public, states that *zakat* from business, was not well collected. He argued:

"...they (corporates) are very critical, I know some Islamic banks who decided not to pay zakat to SIRC. Some Islamic banks in Malaysia decided to distribute on their own to the poor because they don't trust zakat authority. They prefer giving zakat direct to the poor through their own programs to help the poor"[C1].

It shows that although those business institutions have *zakat* obligations, many of such *zakat* funds are not being paid to SIRC due to the lack of trust in them. The reasons were explained by C1:

"...it is mainly because the information provided is not geared towards corporate zakat payers, which has led to lack of trust in SIRC. To the BOD of Islamic Bank, they want to see the full information such as the impact, not just payments. They don't want to see how much money has been paid to zakat authority, but what they are interested in is the impact of money given to the poor, and how many benefit. That's what the trend is now. If the zakat authority is not able to provide information that satisfies them, I think many more Islamic banks and takaful firms will not be paying to a zakat authority". [C1]

Responses from the SIRC's accountants did not mention the *zakat* from business. Although there are several types of *zakat* that might be incurred by corporations, *zakat* on income (salary) represented a higher proportion of collection compared to *zakat* from corporations. That could be the reason for it not being discussed by the SIRC accountants in the interviews.

In particular, from the interviews with SIRC accountants and the public, it can be inferred that the difficulty in measuring performance might result in the lack of performance reporting (Connolly and Hyndman 2003). Although there is a challenge in dealing with expected measurement, actually, there are ways to measure non-financial performance. SIRC might have incentives for performance reporting if they believed it would have a positive impact, particularly on *zakat* collection and *waqaf* endowment in portraying the good name of the SIRC leaders.

However, from the interviews, it was identified that non-financial were the disclosure items most demanded from the SIRC annual reports, but were the least disclosed. One interviewee, representing the public in this study highlighted reporting in the context of zakat: *“There are many types of information required, such as not only the amount of zakat that is paid or distributed by the SIRC, but also how good the effect and impact was of the distribution for the poor. We always measure in terms of input, output, how much money we collect, how much money we disburse, how much we spend on projects we create for the poor, but we have not measured these in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and outcomes of the zakat being contributed by zakat payers. So, I think the focus in Malaysia is very much on input and output measures not efficiency, effectiveness and outcome measures. I think that is actually what we are lagging behind on”* [C1].

Overall, this study found that the current performance reporting practice within SIRC was far from the expectations of various stakeholders, similar to most of the previous studies. This current reporting practice is contradicts with these notions; promoting performance reporting as being essential, so as to minimize information asymmetry between SIRC’s managers and their stakeholders, satisfying the stakeholders' expectations and recognising the public's right to information about SIRC, which calls for government intervention to encourage performance reporting.

However, preparers claimed that despite lacking of such disclosure in the areas of performance reporting, all SIRC accountants were agree on the importance of having the report. They were also aware of public expectations. One accountant in SIRC North3 (AC5) noted that the public were very keen to know more detail rather than just about the collection and distribution of SIRC fund. This implies a need for performance measurement elements for SIRC to respond to the public’s inquiries. As such, this study suggests the elements of not just input and output, but also efficiency - input to output, effectiveness – output to objectives, and impact - outcome.

5. Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, from the interviews with SIRC accountants and the experts, representing the public, it can be inferred that despite of the high demand of reporting on the comprehensive performance reporting, it was low reported. The difficulty in measuring performance mentioned by the accountants might result in the lack of performance reporting (Connolly and Hyndman 2003). Although there is a challenge in dealing with expected measurement, there are ways to measure non-financial performance. SIRC might have incentives for performance reporting if they believed it would have a positive impact, particularly on SIRC fund and in portraying the good name of the SIRC leaders. Performance reporting is seen as being essential so as to minimize information asymmetry between SIRC’s managers and their stakeholders. This also could satisfy the stakeholders' expectations, supporting the public right to information about SIRC, which calls for government intervention to encourage performance reporting. As this study merely examined the current practice of performance reporting of SIRC, future study is suggested to examine the performance indicators, consisting of efficiency, effectiveness and the impact.

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