

***Complaints management in economic institution:
A case study of the Setif Regional Directorate of Sonelgaz***

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Abstract:

This study aimed to shed light on complaint management within an economic institution in order to strengthen its relationship with customers. A field study was conducted on Sonelgaz, a leading national energy company, through its regional directorate in Setif province.

This study employed descriptive and analytical approaches. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with a group of employees working in the commerce department. The interviews aimed to explore the reality of complaint management within the organization, the types of complaints received, and the mechanisms used to address them and communicate with customers.

The results showed that Sonelgaz's complaints management system includes several organized efforts aimed at improving customer satisfaction by quickly resolving complaints, which are typically related to technical solutions, administrative delays, or bureaucratic issues. The recurrence of some complaints is attributed to unclear procedures or poor communication at some branches.

Keywords: Complaints; Complaints Management; Economic Institution; SONEGAS.

Jel classification :M10 ; M31.

1. Introduction:

In the modern era, economic institutions strive to enhance their performance and strengthen their competitiveness by improving the quality of services provided to customers. With the intensification of market competition and the growing awareness of customers' rights, complaints management has become a fundamental component of quality management and customer relationship strategies. Complaints are no longer viewed merely as expressions of dissatisfaction, but rather as a valuable source of feedback and a genuine opportunity to improve performance and develop services.

Complaints management is considered a vital function within economic institutions, especially those that provide direct services to customers. It is not limited to merely receiving complaints but involves a series of processes that begin with effective reception, followed by analysis and evaluation, and ending with timely and appropriate responses that aim to satisfy customers and improve service quality. This process has become increasingly important in a competitive economic environment marked by rising customer expectations. In this context, a complaint becomes a valuable opportunity for the institution to identify weaknesses and enhance its performance. Moreover, having an organized and efficient complaints management system reflects the institution's commitment to transparency and accountability. It contributes to building a sustainable relationship based on trust with customers, thus strengthening its market position.

1.1. Research question

Complaints management plays a pivotal role in improving service quality and customer relations at Sonelgaz. Through standardized procedures at the Setif Regional Directorate, complaints are received, analyzed, and processed by specialized departments. Through this study, we seek to answer the following problematic question:

What is the reality of the complaints management at the regional directorate of SONELGAZ in Sétif?

Two other sub-questions emanate from this main question:

- What is complaints management in an economic institution?
- What are the procedures for handling complaints at the regional directorate of SONELGAZ in Sétif?

1.2. Significance and Objectives of the Study

This study derives its importance from shedding light on the crucial role that complaints management plays in economic institutions. It aims to analyze the current state of complaints management at SONELGAZ, focusing on its organizational structure and adopted mechanisms, to identify the common types of complaints received by the company, and to propose practical recommendations for improving complaints management in a way that aligns with customer satisfaction.

1.3. Methodology

This study adopted both the descriptive and analytical approaches, as they are the most appropriate for analyzing the reality of complaints management within an economic institution. A semi-structured interview was used as the primary data collection tool. Interviews were conducted with a group of employees working in the commercial department at SONELGAZ – Regional Directorate in Sétif.

1.4. Literature Review

- (Kim & Lim, 2021), **Customer complaints monitoring with customer review data analytics: An integrated method of sentiment and statistical process control analyses.** The authors proposed an integrated approach combining sentiment analysis with statistical process control

(SPC) tools to monitor customer complaints extracted from online reviews. This framework is based on the premise that systematically analyzing online reviews can provide organizations with rich and reliable insights into customers' perceptions of service quality. The study highlighted that relying on manual monitoring methods remains slow and prone to inconsistency. The findings conclude that adopting automated, data-driven analytical methods is essential to ensure the early detection of service issues, improve responsiveness, and support evidence-based decision-making in complaint management.

(Bernd Stauss, 2019), Complaint Management in a Customer-Oriented Firm, Complaint management is of great importance for companies in two ways. On the one hand, it takes the dissatisfied customers as a target group and has the central task of

stabilizing customer relationships at risk due to dissatisfaction, thereby avoiding customer losses. In this respect, it holds great strategic potential in customer relationship management. This is particularly true considering the fact that a strategy of minimizing dissatisfaction usually proves to be more profitable than the strategy preferred by most companies of maximizing the satisfaction of already satisfied customers. On the other hand, complaint management provides valuable information input for quality management, because complaints contain relevant information about the quality defects perceived by customers and their unfulfilled expectations. Complaint information can be used for the improvement of products, services and processes. Therefore, complaint management also has high strategic potential in quality management and is an essential element of all important concepts concerning quality management and business excellence, such as DIN ISO 9001, the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) Excellence Model or the Baldrige Excellence Framework.

- (Filip, 2013), Complaint management: A customer satisfaction learning process. This study highlights the essential features of an effective complaint management process, considering it a less costly system for diagnosing and identifying an organization's weaknesses. The research examines customers' complaining behavior and proceeds to discuss the development and implementation of service recovery strategies aimed at enhancing customer satisfaction and addressing service shortcomings.

- (Taleghani & al, 2011), The Role of Customer Complaints Management in Consumers Satisfaction for New Industrial Enterprises of Iran. This paper investigates the role of customer complaints management (CCM) and its associated challenges as fundamental elements for achieving customer retention and loyalty. The authors reviewed several models defining the CCM process and presented a conceptual framework for complaint intensity and outcome satisfaction, classifying cases into four quadrants, each suggesting a distinct strategy for complaint management. The study also introduced the Return on Complaint Management (ROCM) indicator as a measure of the profitability of complaint management. The findings emphasize that effective CCM requires a cultural shift within the organization, a systematic multi-level approach, active team participation in complaint handling processes, and empowerment through appropriate strategies, processes, and analytical tools.

- (Johnston, 2001), Linking complaint management to profit, This study advances the premise that complaint management should not be limited to achieving customer satisfaction but should also serve as a catalyst for process improvement and enhanced financial performance. Despite the inherent operational value of complaints, many organizations treat complaint-handling primarily as a means of appeasing customers rather than as a strategic tool to prevent recurrence of service failures.

Employing data from an empirical benchmarking survey of customer service managers in 40 organizations in the United Kingdom, this research investigates the interrelationships among seven key variables: complaint-handling processes, customer satisfaction, customer retention, process improvement, employee attitudes, employee retention, and financial performance. A relational model was subsequently developed to capture these dynamics

- A review of previous literature shows that complaint management has been examined from different perspectives. Some studies focused on customer behavior in lodging complaints and on service recovery strategies to improve satisfaction and address service failures. Others developed automated, data-driven frameworks to accelerate problem detection and enhance decision-making. Additional research emphasized the strategic role of complaints as valuable inputs for quality improvement, while some proposed conceptual models classifying complaints by intensity and customer satisfaction, with strategies tailored to each case.

What distinguishes the present study is its focus on exploring the reality of complaint management in an economic institution by identifying the types of complaints received, the mechanisms used in handling them, and the methods of communication applied with customers

2.The concept of Complaints management

2.1. Definition of complaints management:

According to ISO 10002:2018 Quality Management – Customer satisfaction– Guidelines for complaints handling in organizations, a complaint is an “expression of dissatisfaction made to an organization, related to its product or service, or the complaints-handling process itself, where a response or resolution is explicitly or

implicitly expected. Complaints can be made in relation to other processes where the organization interacts with the customer. Complaints can be made directly or indirectly to the organization. (Graham, 2018, p. 1)

Complaints management, therefore, is the process of dissemination of information aimed at identifying and correcting various causes of customer dissatisfaction, it defines strategies used by companies to solve and learn from the previous mistakes in order to restore customer confidence in organizational reliability, Therefore, information gathered from customer complaints is of great significance for the quality management process, as it can be used to correct and learn about weaknesses in product quality and delivery system (Filip, Complaint management: A customer satisfaction learning process, 2013, p. 272). It is also defined as the process of dissemination of information aimed at identifying and correcting various causes of customer dissatisfaction (Filip, 2013, p. 272).

Therefore, complaints management goes beyond simply satisfying individual customers; it reveals deeper organizational problems that need to be addressed. Research indicates that only about 20% of customer dissatisfaction is caused by employee errors; most problems stem from flawed processes (John & al, 2009, p. 208). This makes complaints valuable tools for identifying.

2.2. Complaint Channels

Complaint channels are a fundamental part of quality management and improving customer experience. There are several ways through which a customer can submit a complaint, including (Marcel Lips & al, 2022):

- email: A formal and convenient way to document the complaint clearly and in writing.
- phone: A fast and direct communication channel that allows the customer to express their issue verbally—often the first choice when immediate feedback is needed.
- writing: Whether through traditional letters or formal complaint forms, this method is typically used in institutional or governmental contexts.

- personal

contact: Whether it's with front-desk staff, in service offices, or during on-site visits.

However, in some regions or cultures, informal communication is more common. Customers may prefer to express their concerns casually or indirectly to individuals like the caretaker, plumber, or site manager, rather than going through formal channels. This type of interaction is valuable as it reflects the trust between residents and frontline workers, but it may lead to complaints being lost or untracked if not properly documented.

2.3. causes of customer complaints

Past empirical studies stated that customer dissatisfaction is associated with CCB, it means that a greater level of dissatisfaction tends to drive greater customer complaints (Ellyawati, 2021, p. 20). It also indicates that customer complaint intentions are shaped by a set of interrelated factors (Vela'zquez & al, 2009, p. 534), which are outlined as follows:

- **Complaining Attitudes:** Complaining attitudes refer to the consumer's mental disposition toward lodging a complaint as a means of addressing dissatisfaction. These attitudes are shaped by personal values and beliefs regarding the effectiveness of complaints in solving problems or securing compensation. The stronger the consumer's belief in the usefulness of complaining, the higher the likelihood of engaging in such behavior.

- **Level of Information**

The level of information represents the amount and quality of knowledge the consumer possesses about the product or service, their rights as a customer, and the formal procedures available for filing a complaint. A well-informed consumer is better equipped to make an informed decision about whether or not to complain.

- **Previous Complaining Experience:** Previous complaining experience encompasses the consumer's past encounters with lodging complaints, whether those experiences were successful or unsuccessful. This factor directly shapes the consumer's expectations and willingness to complain again—positive past experiences may encourage further action, while negative ones may discourage it.

- **Level of Dissatisfaction:** The level of dissatisfaction reflects the intensity of frustration or displeasure experienced by the consumer due to a negative encounter. The greater the dissatisfaction, the higher the likelihood that the consumer will decide to lodge a complaint, particularly if the experience has had a significant impact on them.

- **Importance of the Situation:** The importance of the situation refers to the degree to which the incident affects the consumer personally, financially, or emotionally. When the matter touches upon essential consumer interests or core values, the probability of complaining tends to increase.

- **Likelihood of Complaint Success:** The likelihood of complaint success reflects the consumer's perception of the chances of resolving the issue or obtaining compensation. A higher perceived probability of achieving a positive outcome act as a strong motivator for lodging a complaint.

- **Previous Experience:** This experience may arise from prior interactions with the company, exposure to advertising campaigns, word-of-mouth opinions (both positive and negative), or direct consumption of the organization's products and services. Depending on its nature, previous experience may reinforce trust in the complaint-handling process—thereby motivating customers to express their concerns—or weaken confidence, leading to hesitation or avoidance of lodging complaints.

2.4. complaints management process:

The complaint management process includes several interrelated steps aimed at ensuring the systematic handling, documentation, and effective resolution of customer complaints. These steps include (Ombudsman, 2024, p. 38):

- **Receiving Defining a Complaint**

A complaint can be defined as an expression of dissatisfaction, typically directed at an organization's services or the behavior of its personnel, in situations where the individual either expects, or is entitled to expect, a response or remedial action. Recognizing what constitutes a complaint -whether explicitly stated or implied-is fundamental to effective service recovery and organizational learning.

- Receiving and Acknowledging the Complaint

Upon receiving a complaint, organizations must promptly engage with the complainant to:

- Clarify the nature and scope of dissatisfaction.
- Understand the desired outcome or remedy sought by the complainant.
- Formally acknowledge receipt of the complaint, providing essential details such as:
 - Confirmation of receipt.
 - An initial assessment.
 - Expected timeframes for resolution.
 - Methods and frequency of communication for follow-up.

Timely acknowledgment not only validates the customer's experience but also sets the stage for transparent and respectful interaction.

- Recording the Complaint

All complaints should be recorded systematically using a unique identifier to ensure traceability. Documentation must include:

- A detailed account of the issue, ideally reflecting the complainant's own words to preserve authenticity.
- Key dates, involved personnel, and any preliminary responses or actions taken.

A robust recording system is vital for data analysis, trend monitoring, and performance auditing.

- Assessing the Complaint

A formal assessment involves determining:

- The subject matter of the complaint.
- Its complexity, severity, urgency, and any associated risks (including legal or regulatory implications).

This step may require direct engagement with the complainant to gather additional information and ensure accurate classification. Maintaining communication during this stage helps manage expectations and reinforces procedural fairness.

- Deciding on Action

Depending on the assessment, organizations should decide whether to:

- Resolve the complaint at the first point of contact.
- Gather more information from relevant stakeholders.
- Initiate a full investigation into the matter.

The complainant should be informed about the selected course of action and the rationale behind it. Transparency here helps mitigate frustration and fosters trust in the organization's commitment to accountability.

- Finalizing the Complaint

Once a resolution is achieved, organizations must:

- Notify the complainant of the outcome, including:
 - Actions taken.
 - Reasons behind the decision.
 - Options available for appeal or escalation, if applicable.
- Record the outcome and all remedial measures implemented.
- Acknowledge organizational fault, where applicable, and issue an apology.

- Consider

and offer appropriate redress, which may include compensation, replacement, service correction, or procedural reform.

Finally, the process can be summarized in the figure below:

Figure (01): complaints management process



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on (Ombudsman, 2024, p. 38)

3. Complaints Management at the Sétif Regional Directorate of Sonelgaz

3.1. the Setif Regional Directorate of Sonelgaz: Historical Operator in Energy Supply in Algeria

Established in 1969, Sonelgaz has, for over five decades, served the Algerian population by providing electricity and gas—two essential sources of energy for daily life. Following the enactment of the Electricity and Gas Distribution by Pipeline Law, Sonelgaz evolved from a vertically integrated enterprise into a holding company, overseeing a diversified industrial group comprising multiple subsidiaries and business activities. Throughout its history, Sonelgaz has played a pivotal role in Algeria's economic and social development. Its contribution to the implementation of the national energy policy is evident in the extensive programs carried out in rural electrification and public gas distribution. As a result of these efforts, electricity coverage has reached 99%, serving 12,297,856 customers, while gas penetration stands at 67%, serving 8,132,420 customers.

Today, the Sonelgaz Group consists of 10 subsidiary companies directly managed by the holding company, as well as 4 joint ventures in partnership with third parties. (sonelgaz, 2020)

The study was conducted at the Regional Directorate (East) of the Algerian Electricity and Gas Distribution Company (Sonalgaz) in Setif, located on 1 November 1954 Street in Bouaroua, Setif. It is a joint-stock company with a capital of 24 billion Algerian dinars. Sonalgaz is an Algerian public company whose field of activity is energy transmission and distribution. It employs 1,197 workers.

It is a directorate that was created during the restructuring that took place during the month of July 2005. This directorate includes four districts (agencies): El Eulma, Ain El Kebira, Ain Oulmane, Ain Azal.

It manages all the electrical and gas facilities, low voltage, low pressure, medium voltage, medium pressure in all the regions of the aforementioned districts, and it manages all the customers affiliated with it (billing payment).

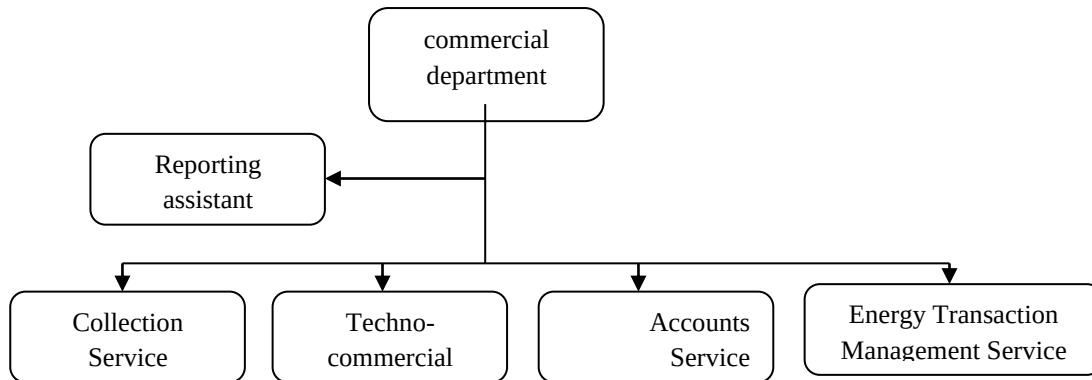
The Directorate includes several communication channels:

- Address: Avenue du 1er November 1954, 19 000, Setif
- Phone: 3303 or via the following numbers:
 - 036-45-20-57
 - 036-45-20-88
 - 036-45-20-62
 - 036-45-20-70
 - 3303
- Company website: www.sonelgaz-distribution.dz
- **Social media:**
 - (Facebook) Sonelgaz.
 - Sonalgaz Official (YouTube).

3.2 . Organizational structure of the commercial division of Sonalgaz

Customer complaints are handled by the Sonalgaz Setif Regional Directorate at the Trade Department, which is divided into the following functional areas:

figure (02):Organizational structure of the commercial department of Sonalgaz



Source: Internal documents of the institution under study.

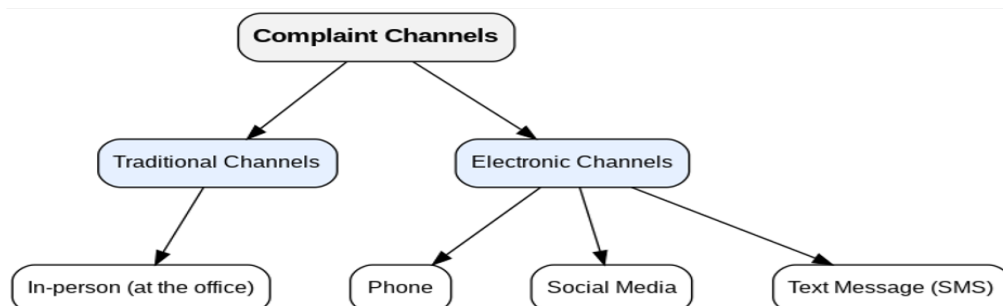
The commercial department is divided into the following functions:

- **Collection Services:** Responsible for following up on the collection of debts owed by customers, working to reduce uncollected debts and improve cash flow.
- **Techno-commercial Services:** Focuses on providing technical support to commercial customers. It also assists in developing technical solutions related to the services or products provided.
- **Accounts Service (HT/HP) and (MT/MP):** Dedicated to managing major corporate clients. It focuses on meeting the needs of high-consumption customers such as companies and factories.
- **Energy Transaction Management Service:** Responsible for managing daily business transactions for clients. Responsible for time, order processing, and ensuring smooth financial operations.

3.3. Complaint channels at Sonalgaz

The following chart illustrates Sonalgaz's complaint channels.

Figure (03): Sonalgaz's complaint channels.



Source: Interview with the Official of the Trade Department at Sonalgaz

As illustrated in the figure below, Sonalgaz provides several complaint channels, including traditional in-person reporting at offices, as well as electronic means such as phone calls, social media, and text messages (SMS), ensuring accessibility and efficiency in handling customer concerns. It has also designated the number 3303, available 24/7 throughout the week, for customers to call and report their complaints in case of any technical fault related to electricity or gas.

In 2024, Sonalgaz (Setif) reported several complaints received through these channels, distributed as follows:

- 25% (291 complaints) via telephone.
- 10% (116 complaints) through email.
- 5% (59 complaints) via social media.
- 60% (698 complaints) directly at the office.

The largest percentage of complaints (60%) were recorded in the branches directly, followed by telephone complaints, which requires strengthening the digital platform to reduce pressure on telephone and direct service centers.

3.4. Types and reasons for complaints:

Customer issues at Sonalgaz are diverse, and are mainly related to delayed bill payments, frequent interruptions in electricity or gas supply, and difficulties in communicating with the company to resolve problems. In addition, customers often report complaints regarding unjustified or excessive bills. There are several reasons for filing complaints against Sonalgaz, the most prominent of which are:

-**Meter malfunctions:** Meters may stop working or display inaccurate readings, causing billing problems and subscriber dissatisfaction.

- **Delays in changing subscriber information:** This is a common problem. Some may encounter difficulty updating their information, such as changing their name or address, which can cause billing errors or delays in receiving important notifications.

- **Interruption of electricity or gas supply due to unpaid bills:** This interrupts essential services and can cause significant problems, especially during periods of cold or hot weather.

- **Delays in the supply of electricity or gas:** Connection procedures may take longer than expected, impacting their daily lives and causing inconvenience.

Bill not being delivered to your door: This poses a problem for some subscribers, especially in remote or hard-to-reach areas, preventing them from paying their bill on time.

- **The company's failure to honor agreed-upon deadlines:** This is a common complaint. A specific date may be set for maintenance or delivery, but it is postponed without prior notice, leading to customer dissatisfaction.

- **Frequent power outages:** This is one of the most prominent problems facing subscribers, as it can negatively impact electrical appliances in homes and disrupt the daily activities of individuals and businesses.

- **Recovering contractors' revenues:** Some face delays or difficulties in recovering the amounts owed to them after the required work is completed.

- **Sonalgaz's refusal to provide customers with a second electricity meter:** This has caused dissatisfaction among many customers, especially those who need an additional meter due to home expansions or the establishment of commercial activities within their properties. The reason for the refusal may be related to the company's regulations or failure to meet specific technical requirements, prompting subscribers to file complaints seeking clarification or alternative solutions.

Complaints are categorized in Sonalgaz according to their type, source, and number over a specific period. The following table shows the number of complaints in 2024:

Table (01): the number of complaints in 2024

Quarter	Total	Electricity Distribution Issue	Gas Distribution Issue	Pending Files
First Quarter	294	228	66	0
Second Quarter	275	239	36	0
Third Quarter	335	286	49	0
Fourth Quarter	260	220	40	0
Total	1164	973	191	0

Source: Internal documents of the institution under study.

The table shows that 1,164 complaints were registered during 2024, with the highest number of complaints occurring in the third quarter of the year.

Complaints include service quality issues, including high or incorrect bills 10% (118 complaints), delayed response and maintenance issues 20% (233 complaints), gas connection issues 40% (468 complaints), and electricity outages issues 30% (345 complaints).

Sonalgaz strives to improve the quality of its services to satisfy its customers, as it always seeks to solve their problems quickly. We note from the table that there are no pending complaint files that have not been resolved. It attaches great importance to handling complaints within the specified deadlines.

3.5. Customer Complaints Management at Sonelgaz

3.5.1. Filing a Complaint

The customer files a complaint through one of the official channels:

- Visiting the reception centers.
- Calling the call center by phone.
- Sending an email.
- Using the digital platform (official website).

3.5.2. Registering the Complaint

The complaint is recorded in an internal information system for the complaints department, as well as in a register located at the company's entrance.

3.5.3. Complaint Classification

Categorized by type:

- Billing complaints
- Technical complaints (electricity/gas)
- Administrative mistreatment or delays
- Connection or subscription problems
- Priority is determined (urgent, medium, normal).

3.5.4. Processing

- The complaint is directed to the relevant department.
- The relevant team investigates or intervenes on the ground, as appropriate.
- The error is corrected, the service is provided, or the situation is clarified to the customer.

3.5.5. Customer Response

- The customer will be informed of the outcome of the complaint via their chosen method (phone, email, or message).
- The customer can express their opinion on the resolution or request a second review if they are not satisfied.

3.5.6. Closure

The complaint file is closed after the final resolution.

Complaints are stored in a database that will be used later for analysis and service improvement, or as a safeguard when reporting the complaint to the Public Prosecutor.

4. Conclusion:

4.1. Results

The study revealed that Sonalgaz has made progress in managing customer complaints by providing multiple communication channels, including in-person visits, phone calls, SMS, and social media. However, a large proportion of complaints remain administrative in nature, such as delayed bill payments and issues related to unclear or excessive billing. While most customers expressed satisfaction with technical solutions (e.g., repairing network failures), dissatisfaction was mainly recorded in cases of administrative delays and bureaucracy. Furthermore, repeated complaints were observed due to unclear procedures and weak communication at certain branches.

Sonalgaz also conducts periodic surveys to assess customer satisfaction in terms of response speed, service quality, and clarity of information, achieving a resolution rate of around 80% within 10 business days.

4.2. Recommendations

- In order to reduce the rate of complaints, it is essential to enhance the electricity and gas distribution network and modernize infrastructure to minimize interruptions in supply.
- Given that gas connection problems represent the largest percentage of complaints (40%), the company should increase the number of technical teams to reduce waiting times and expand infrastructure to underserved areas.
- Since power outages constitute the second largest problem, there is a need for greater investment in electrical grid maintenance and modernization.
- As direct complaints at branches account for the majority (60%), followed by telephone complaints, Sonalgaz should strengthen its digital platforms and online services to alleviate pressure on call centers and physical branches.
- Simplify and modernize billing procedures by providing multiple electronic payment options, and offer facilities at commercial agencies to enable customers to settle accumulated

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