

EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT REFORM UNDER THE INTEGRATED RESULTS BASED MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK IN ZIMBABWE STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISES

PERSPECTIVAS DOS FUNCIONÁRIOS SOBRE A REFORMA DA GESTÃO DE RECURSOS HUMANOS NO ÂMBITO DO QUADRO DE GESTÃO INTEGRADA BASEADA EM RESULTADOS NAS EMPRESAS ESTATAIS DO ZIMBABUÉ

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Abstract

The study explored the human resource management (HRM) reform implementation under the Integrated Results-Based Management (IRBM) framework in Zimbabwe State Owned Enterprises (SOEs). Employee perspectives were used to theorise organisational dynamics of reform enactment, advancing understanding of how public sector reforms are negotiated in developing economies. A phenomenological approach was used in this interpretivist study. Data were collected through 30 in-depth interviews, three focus group sessions and longitudinal secondary data analysis in SOEs in the areas of transportation, energy, and utilities. Hermeneutic thematic analysis was used with the institutional Ability/Motivation/Opportunity (AMO) and psychological contract theory lens. IRBM was viewed by the employees as more of a performance-control hybrid rather than a developmental tool. Implementation was limited by external pressures low morale and limited opportunities for growth that undermined reform leadership. Meanwhile the HRM function was found to be administrative rather than strategic. A breach of psychological contract impacted employee behaviour leading to a symbolic

Resumo

O estudo explorou a implementação da reforma da gestão de recursos humanos (GRH) no âmbito da estrutura de Gestão Integrada Baseada em Resultados (IRBM) nas empresas estatais (SOEs) do Zimbábue. As perspectivas dos funcionários foram utilizadas para teorizar a dinâmica organizacional da implementação da reforma, aprofundando a compreensão de como as reformas do setor público são negociadas em economias em desenvolvimento. Foi utilizada uma abordagem fenomenológica neste estudo interpretativo. Os dados foram coletados por meio de 30 entrevistas em profundidade, três sessões de grupos focais e análise longitudinal de dados secundários em SOEs nas áreas de transporte, energia e serviços públicos. A análise temática hermenêutica foi utilizada sob a ótica da teoria institucional de Capacidade/Motivação/Oportunidade (AMO) e da teoria do contrato psicológico. O IRBM foi visto pelos funcionários mais como um híbrido de controle de desempenho do que como uma ferramenta de desenvolvimento. A implementação foi limitada por pressões externas, baixa moral e oportunidades limitadas de crescimento que minaram a liderança da reforma. Enquanto isso, constatou-se que a função de gestão de recursos humanos (GRH) era administrativa, e não estratégica. Uma quebra do contrato psicológico impactou o comportamento dos funcionários, levando a



compliance culture, constraining innovation and disengagement. The consequences of these findings were that IRBM failed to stimulate meaningful performance or behavioural change. This study shifts from treating reform in SOEs as a technical system to reframing it as a human and organisational change process through a triumvirate analytical lens, positioning HRM as the central driver of IRBM. This view extends HRM and Change Management theory into the under-researched public sector context in the global south.

Keywords: Employee. Human Resource Management. Integrated Results Based Management. Reform. State-Owned Enterprises JEL Codes: J8; J22, L320.

uma cultura de conformidade simbólica, restringindo a inovação e o desengajamento. As consequências dessas descobertas foram que o IRBM não conseguiu estimular mudanças significativas de desempenho ou de comportamento. Este estudo passa de tratar a reforma nas empresas estatais como um sistema técnico para reestruturá-la como um processo de mudança humana e organizacional por meio de uma lente analítica tripartida, posicionando a gestão de recursos humanos como o motor central da IRBM. Essa visão estende a teoria da gestão de recursos humanos e da gestão da mudança ao contexto do setor público, pouco pesquisado no Sul Global.

Palavras-chave: *Funcionário. Gestão de Recursos Humanos. Gestão Integrada Baseada em Resultados. Reforma. Empresas Estatais Códigos JEL: J8; J22, L320.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Human Resource Management (HRM) reform is often afforded a pivotal role in leading performance improvement in the public sector contexts including State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) (Krausert, 2014; Kickert, 2015; Van der Voet *et al.*, 2016; Alyafei *et al.*, 2025). In 2018 the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) relaunched Results-Based Management (RBM), operationalised as the Integrated Results Based Management (IRBM), which is an HRM reform tool within SOEs to enhance performance in the government's vision 2030 agenda (GoZ, 2018; Chigudu, 2022). Yet, with less than five years to 2030, the government still grapples reputational damage and poor performance within SOEs (Mthombeni *et al.*, 2023).

RBM is a results-oriented performance management tool intended to improve accountability and measurable service delivery outcomes in the public sector context (Mayne, 2007; OECD, 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017; Brock and Shepherd, 2022). It aims to foster public value orientation, while maintaining a structured performance management framework in multi-faceted governance contexts (Rassapan, 2002; Kusek & Rist, 2004; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). SOEs represent a unique context positioned at the intersection of public accountability and profitable ventures, demanding balanced

governance systems including political oversight and the meeting of service delivery objectives (Latham *et al.*, 2008; Fryer *et al.*, 2009; Baum *et al.*, 2024). In this context, employee perceptions refer to how employees interpret the HRM reform effort during the implementation of IRBM.

Scholarship has extensively examined the implementation of performance appraisal reform (Wang and Guo, 2025). Some studies examined employee perceptions on gaps between formal objectives and actual practice in implementing performance management (Mohapi and Louw, 2024). Mainly, studies focused on the broad HRM reform effort (Perry *et al.*, 2010; Kaliannan *et al.*, 2023; Muzanenhamo, and Rankhumise, 2023). However, limited attention has been paid to employee perceptions of HRM reforms in the context of IRBM implementation within SOEs. This lacuna is particularly salient in developing economies, operating within politically constrained contexts such as Zimbabwe (Chigudu, 2020; Mokaloba *et al.*, 2024). Further, literature indicates that relying on a single analytical lens oversimplifies IRBM implementation by overlooking the interaction of complex relationships within the public sector context risking partial explanations of staff perspectives to HRM reform (See Boselie, 2021).

This study bridges the gap by firstly, retheorises IRBM implementation as an HRM-driven organisational change process rather than a mere technical performance reform. Second, it offers an uncommon employee-level practical evidence from Zimbabwean SOEs, extending HRM studies into underexplored Global South public sector contexts. Third, it advances a multi-lens (three) analytical framework to capture multiple dynamics in HRM reform results through the interaction of authority structures, HR systems, and employee perceptions.

2 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND OF IRBM IMPLEMENTATION IN ZIMBABWE

Upon attaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwean SOEs were perceived positively because they represented national sovereignty and economic autonomy. Strategic sectors including transport, utilities and energy were anticipated to improve and enhance equitable development after years of colonial neglect. Nevertheless, the succeeding two decades was marked by a deterioration in the performance standards,

measured in terms of financial losses, inefficiencies and poor governance, hence, eroding the early positive perceptions (Ncube and Maunganidze, 2014; OAGZ, 2016; ZIMCOD, 2019). By the early 2000s, the majority of the SOEs had become dysfunctional causing significant decline in the macroeconomy and deterioration of public service delivery (Chimbari, 2017; Mthombeni *et al.*, 2023).

Despite some literature attributing SOE poor performance to deep-rooted governance failures constraining accountability (Chigudu, 2020). The adoption of IRBM in Zimbabwe should also be understood against a background of severe economic stress, including hyperinflation, diminishing fiscal potential and poor investor confidence, all of which weaken SOE effectiveness (Chimbari, 2017). Worldwide public sector evaluations attribute failures and fiscal risks to weak governance, insufficient financial controls, and lack of strategic human resource management (HRM) (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2010; Siddiquee, 2010; Mokaloba *et al.*, 2024). These challenges are said to have intensified dependence on external financial and technical aid, particularly from international development partners, the majority of whom endorsed RBM as a pre-condition for assistance (De Vries and Nemeč, 2013).

To address the persistent failures within SOEs, the Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) approved the RBM in 2005, later operationalised through IRBM within the public entities (Chigudu, 2020). The apparent success of pioneering economies, such as Australia, Malaysia, South Korea and Uganda, motivated the adoption in Zimbabwe. However, early assessments revealed that the implementation of IRBM did not produce the anticipated behavioural change and performance improvements (Mthombeni *et al.*, 2023; Muzanhamo, 2023). Therefore, theoretically driven research is needed to better understand the reasons for failure.

In 2017, there was a political transition that marked the end of long serving Robert Mugabe's presidency, which ushered in the beginning of the so-called "Second Republic" which relaunched IRBM, yet the structural constraints remained. The "Second Republic" pronounced the Vision 2030 in alignment with the UN sustainable development goals and the National Development Strategy (NDS) (GoZ, 2018; Ncube, 2023). The strategy positioned SOE reform as the foundation of fiscal consolidation, improved service delivery and economic renewal. Within this context, IRBM was endorsed and reinforced

as the performance tool with a transformed emphasis on sustained performance across SOEs.

Primarily, IRBM provides an integrated context for mapping organisational strategy, with national development priorities, while reinforcing transparency and accountability (Rassapan, 2002). Similar comparative evidence indicates that strategically positioned performance enhancing tools can support productivity and accountability (Olufemu, 2014). Accordingly, the Zimbabwe IRBM guidelines stressed the importance of corporate planning, board-endorsed performance indicators and regular reviews to strengthen governance mechanisms (Twala and Chimusoro, 2017; Chigudu, 2020). However, available evidence reveals persistent IRBM implementation challenges, particularly concerning governance and human resources practices (Muzapu *et al.*, 2016; Twala and Chimusoro, 2017; Chiparo *et al.*, 2022; Mthombeni *et al.*, 2023). The prevailing conditions underscore the importance of understanding how IRBM is perceived and experienced by employees.

2.1 Institutional theory, AMO framework and psychological contract perspectives

This paper integrated institutional theory, the AMO framework, and psychological contract theory to explore HRM reform under IRBM in Zimbabwean SOES. It makes a novel contribution to public sector scholarship in the Global South by demonstrating the connection between external concerns with internal organisational HRM systems, advancing understanding of how and why HRM reforms are enacted.

While the proposed framework is applicable elsewhere, this African context faces unique institutional, and resource constraints. Therefore, applying the framework in other SOEs requires contextual adaptation to the relevant environmental realities of the region. This responds to the interests in developing theoretically grounded HRM reform studies in the public sector and understanding the practical implications for the broader HRM discipline and organisational performance in SOEs.

The institutional theory offers a macro (external) lens for analysing the implementation of IRBM. It suggests that the institutional environment including rules, norms and expectations shape organisational practices (Scott, 1995; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). Potentially, the study could unearth performance illusions that separate

success measured against formal indicators from the real reform value (Power, 1997; Bromley and Powell, 2012). Such illusions could include symbolic adoption, whereby institutions officially comply with the set guidelines with no substantive alterations in underlying practices (Naveed *et al.*, 2017). However, institutional theory is dated, criticised for under theorising employee agency and psychological processes as it wrongly treats employees as passive carriers of institutional scripts (Lawrence, *et al.*, 2009; Suddaby, 2010). This is problematic in reform contexts where employees' interpretations significantly shape reform outcomes. The study addresses this limitation by adopting additional perspectives to strengthen the analytical lens.

AMO framework potentially contributes the implementation of IRBM if it can be shown to develop employee skills (ability), motivate them to apply their skills (motivation), and provide opportunities to apply their skill (opportunity) (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000; Aguinis and Kraiger, 2009). Scholarship evidence that HRM interventions can potentially influence employee commitment and performance (Baum *et al.*, 2024). These results strengthen the AMO framework, in particular the '*opportunity*' aspect which is often constrained in bureaucratic contexts (Boxall and Purcell, 2003). However, Pauwe (2009) criticised AMO's assertion for its neglect of power dynamics and institutional contexts within the public sector, underscoring the need to compliment it with institutional theory.

The Psychological Contract (PC) forms the third dimension of the analysis. The PC represents employee expectations of obligations and fairness in the employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995; Korczynski, 2023). Notably, PC shapes employee views during HRM reforms in the public sector context (Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Bellou, 2017). Prior studies reveal that HRM practices influence the fulfilment or breach of the psychological contract (Boselie, 2021; AlMunthiri *et al.*, 2024). The involvement of employees in HRM reforms strengthen psychological contracts, while disengagement contributes to their breach (see, Siddiquee, 2010; De Vries and Nemec, 2013; Van Doren *et al.*, 2015; Aluko *et al.*, 2022; Saraf *et al.*, 2022). This dynamic is supported by the social exchange theory, which suggests that employment is an exchange relationship of fairness and reciprocity (Argyris, 1960; Blau, 1964; Kissi, 2024). Further evidence suggests that employees may apply effort in proportion to their expectations in return (Conway *et al.*, 2014; Brinkerhoff, and Brinkerhoff, 2015; Chiwawa, 2022; Findlay *et al.*, 2025). Failure

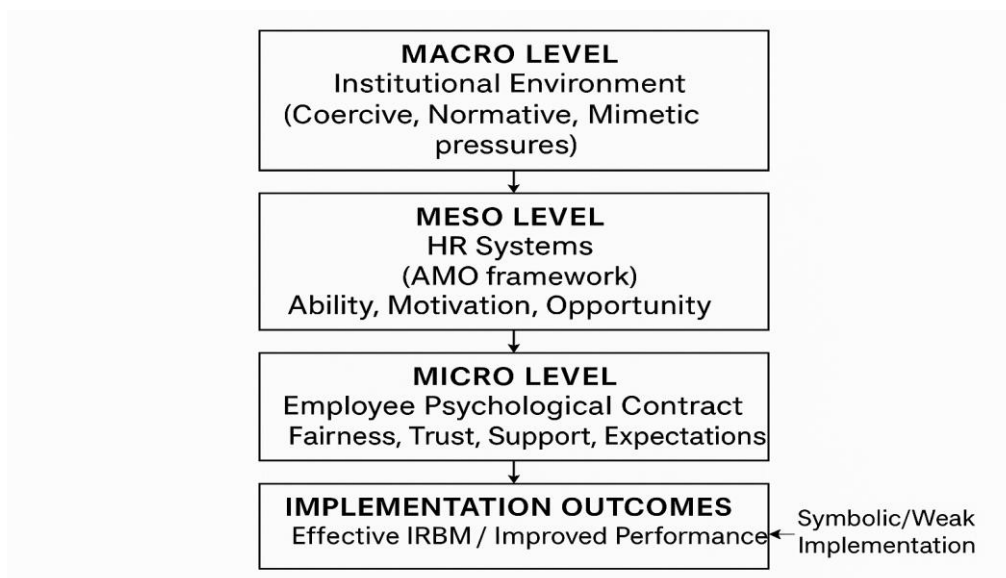
to balance expectations between employee effort and benefits could weaken the PC and undermine HRM reforms such as IRBM.

However, the psychological contract is criticised from a sociological perspective for its individualistic orientation (Guest, 1998; Korczynski, 2023), it ignores power dynamics and institutional contexts (Hofstede, 2001; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2015). Scholarship reveals that methodological limitations, longitudinal designs are rare in spite of the wide recognition of the dynamic nature of psychological contracts (Conway and Briner, 2005). Therefore, the study considered organisational-level dynamics and a longitudinal secondary data set to capture the IRBM reform effort over a lengthy period of time.

The institutional theory is macro focused, outlining how coercive burdens and institutional dualities support the approval of the IRBM concept in Zimbabwean SOEs. Meanwhile, the AMO and psychological frameworks focus on the micro-level and illuminate employee perceptions towards IRBM related practices. Further, the frameworks highlight the role of HRM reform activities at meso-level in connecting IRBM objectives to daily routines.

Figure 1

HRM Reform Dynamics in IRBM Implementation.



Source: Authors' Fieldwork.

Figure 1, represents the schematic summary of HRM reform dynamics in the implementation of IRBM within SOEs in Zimbabwe, integrating three theories (institutional, AMO framework and psychological contract). The IRBM reform effort is portrayed as controlled by the macro environment strengthened by coercive, normative and mimetic pressures existing as top-down by nature that drive formal adoption of IRBM (Gong *et al.*, 2023). The immediate organisational level (Meso) consists of HRM systems underpinned by the AMO framework. The micro or personal level is characterised by the psychological contract shaping employee perceptions of fairness, trust, support and expectations. The downward chain determines whether employees perceive IRBM outcomes as effective in improving performance or as symbolic or a weak performance tool.

Accordingly, the study responded to the following questions: Firstly, how do employees perceive the HRM reforms? Secondly, how do HRM reforms impact institutional constraints, employees' ability, motivation and opportunity, and the psychological contract in the context of IRBM implementation in Zimbabwean SOEs? Current scholarship emphasises macro level analysis at the expense of micro-level processes that interpret and endorse reforms (Virani and Van De Waal, 2023), particularly ignoring the role of psychological contracts and strategic intervention of HRM in politicised SOE settings (Ohemeng, 2009; Mahmoud and Othman, 2023). Therefore, this article contributes to the field by integrating a multi-level analysis, capturing macro and micro-level contexts.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The hermeneutic phenomenology approach was adopted to understand (i) how employees perceive the HRM reform? (ii) how the reform impact institutional pressures, AMO and psychological contract in the implementation of IRBM in Zimbabwean SOEs? The interpretivist paradigm presumes that organisational realities are linked to the meaning ascribed by its members (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is especially apt in organisational reforms in the public sector because employee performance itself becomes impossible to interpret without understanding it through the

perspective of those on its receiving end. IRBM becomes subject to scrutiny not merely from a perspective related to organisational performance, but also from a perspective where it is embedded in social fields.

The study explored how employees make sense of the HRM reform in particular how IRBM is understood and interpreted. Hermeneutic phenomenology was appropriate as it has been previously effective in similar studies where it was found that, it attaches importance to dialogue between participants' interpretations and the related reflections by the researcher (Heidegger, 1962, Van Manen, 1990). Further, the philosophical approach is supportive of the idea that, for instance in Public Sector management studies, sense-making approaches might be more important than outcomes (Ohemeng *et al.*, 2017).

3.1 Research context and participants

The research context falls within selected SOEs within the transport, energy, and utility sectors in Zimbabwe where IRBM has been institutionalized. The selected sectors represent high impact, technically complex and politically constrained context where formal HRM reforms and operational realities are particularly visible, making them ideal for examining IRBM. The study purposively selected participants from different departments, particularly from employees that were with the organisation from IRBM re-launch in 2018 to data collection (2025). A total of 50 participants from the identified organisations had expressed interest, however saturation was reached at 30 participants (Paton, 2015).

3.2 Data collection

Primary data was collected from December 2025 to February 2026 using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Semi-structured interviews permitted probing and eliciting candid but anonymised accounts of employee experiences (Maxwell, 2012). For example, Describe the main drivers that led your SOE to adopt IRBM? What lessons have emerged from IRBM? Interviews took an average of one hour and saturation was reached at 30 participants.

Three focus groups, one for each organisation were convened to capture group dynamics and shared meanings on IRBM. Barbour (2007) supports the use of focus groups within the public sector contexts as experiences regarding changes are socially constructed and interpreted collectively. Attendee selection was restricted to interview participants.

Table 1

Participants description, interview duration and codes

PARTICIPANTS	EXAMPLES	IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS	DURATION IN HOURS	CODES
PROFESSIONAL & TECHNICAL STAFF	Engineers, IT specialists, planners, accountants,	8	8	PT1-8
SKILLED OPERATIONAL FRONTLINE / SERVICE DELIVERY	Technicians, drivers, mechanics	8	8	SO1-8
	Customer service staff, ticketing officers, meter readers	7	7	FS1-7
ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF	Clerks, finance assistants, secretaries	7	7	AS1-7

Source: Authors' Fieldwork.

Table 1 illustrates the categories of interview participants, duration of interviews in hours and codes used for each category of participants. The interview scripts were anonymised using Codes. As reflected in the above table, we use identifiers that were generated during the initial inductive coding process for traceability across the data sources.

Secondary data including statutory instruments, circulars and meeting minutes facilitated triangulation by tracking IRBM implementation events from inception to date (Bowen, 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Table 2

Secondary Data Sources

Data Sources	Quantity	Period
Government IRBM Circulars	5	2018-2025
Internal IRBM circulars	10	2018-2025
Statutory documents	2	2018-2025
Performance Contracts/reports	30	2018-2025
Human Resources Manuals	3	2018-2025

Source: Authors' Fieldwork.

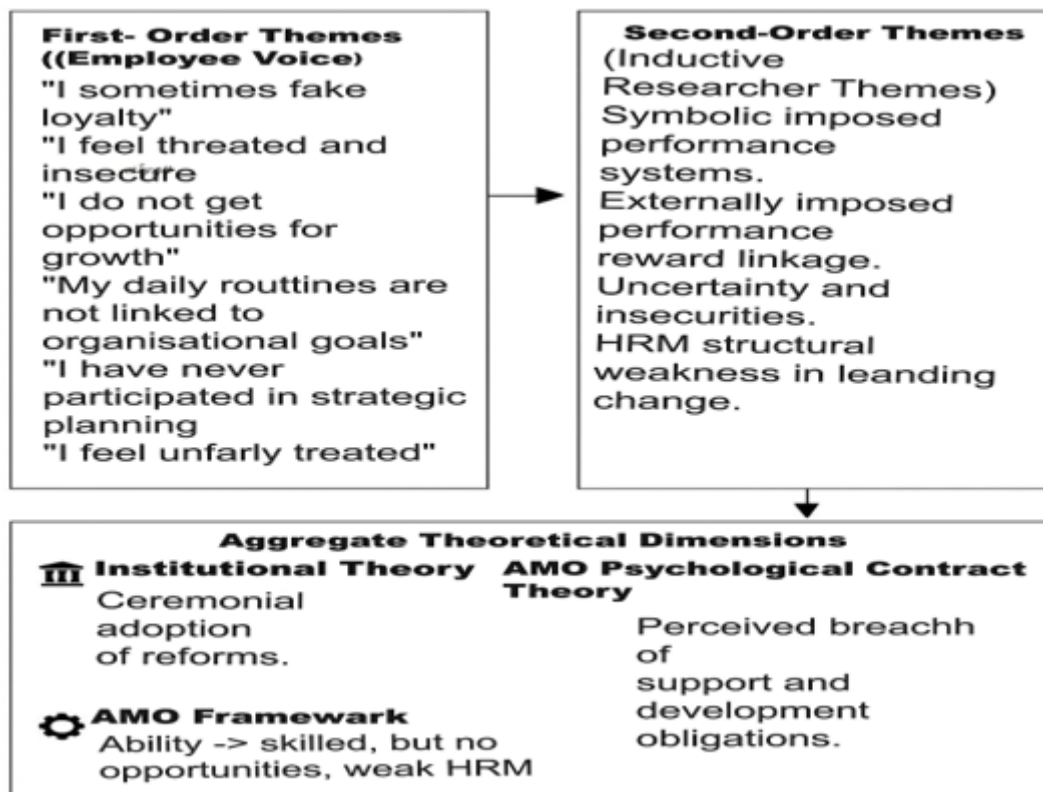
Table 2 shows secondary data sources tracking the HRM reform from its inception (year 2018) to date (year 2025). Data included government and internal IRBM Circulars, statute documents, performance contracts and reporting, HR manuals, and training manuals, dated between 2018 and 2025.

3.3 Data analysis

Phenomenological thematic analysis guided the generation of themes as analytic outputs by interpreting lived experiences while remaining reflexive to researcher's personal biases (Heidegger, 1962; Suddick *et al*, 2021). Data was coded inductively, and themes constructed through sense making of employee experiences (Brown and Clarke, 2021).

Figure 2

Coding Scheme Data Structure linking Employee Experiences to Theoretical Perspectives



Source: Authors' Fieldwork.

Figure 2 shows initial coding included first order concepts (employee voice) interpreted into second order themes (inductive researcher themes) and later aggregated into the three theoretical dimensions.

An interpretive relationship between the data and the theory was maintained, gaining deep understanding through a cycle of comparison and contrast, between the sections and the whole, and the data and theory (Gadamer, 1975). The refinement of understanding ultimately resulted into themes that closely align with the research objectives. An *audit trail* for transparency and authenticity was maintained (van Manen, 1990; Patton, 2015). Researcher's reflexivity, especially in politically contentious contexts of SOE reform, was stressed. The collected data was thickly described to ensure transferability of findings to similar public-sector settings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.4 Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from De Montfort university research ethics under work tribe reference: 2644062/2025. Consideration was made to the politically sensitive context of Zimbabwe SOEs hence measures were undertaken to safeguard participants including confidentiality, use of pseudo names and deletion of organisational identifiers. Participants were informed of the study purpose, their rights to withdraw hence participation was voluntary with no coercion. Data security was prioritised with access restricted to the researchers who remained reflexive to protect ethical integrity (BERA Ethical Guidelines, 2024).

4 FINDINGS

The themes presented emerged from the findings that explain employee perceptions of the HRM reform in implementing the Integrated Results-Based Management in the Zimbabwean State-Owned Enterprises.

4.1 Theme 1: institutional pressures leading to symbolic conformity and decoupling

Evidence reveals institutional contradictions between bureaucratic and employee judgements which decouples formal performance management systems and daily operations. In such cases, IRBM risks being reduced to a reporting tool rather than a sincere facilitator of performance improvement. Such organisational constraints can limit the scope of HRM reforms and confine the effective conversion of IRBM ideologies into employee-level behaviours. Some employees shared common sentiments during focus group discussions:

“I feel that the pressure groups and citizens in general place excessive accountability requirements on us and as employees we are forced to shoulder organisational failures” (PT8)

“I am obligated to comply with the IRBM template even though some of the requirements do not fit the local context” (FS3)

“I just tick the boxes on paper to avoid victimisation but in reality, my daily routines are different from what is on paper” (PT5)

“The budget priorities are pre-determined from above and cascaded down for implementation, yet they do not address the real service delivery challenges that we face on the ground” (SO7)

The performance of IRBM templates in this case represented a phenomenon of adopting international notions without any reflections at the local level, resulting in symbolic rather than substantive efforts at improvement. This was confirmed by the documentation that showed SOEs rewarded for excelling in IRBM, yet service delivery remains poor as evidenced by the high number of customer complaints.

4.2 Theme 2: politicised governance

One notable point in terms of the efficiency of IRBM as a performance management tool is with regard to the politicization of the governance and appointment of managers in SOEs. Despite these frameworks having the role of merit in the recruitment of executives, there was politics in the appointments. A salient finding is with regard to the involvement of the minister in the appointment of managers, which emerged

to be a major structural limitation on IRBM implementation. Participants consistently stated that leadership appointments were shaped by ideological alignment.

Secondary data revealed that, the Public Entities Corporate Governance Act (2018), HR policy manuals, and government circulars confirmed that managerial appointments are approved by the minister after security vetting conducted by the Central Intelligence Office, a key security advisory branch within the office of the President and cabinet. A professional staff summarised:

“I feel that the security vetting for managerial appointment is unfair as the criteria is unclear.... I think it is based on patronage than competence” (PT1).

Another employee shared personal experience and grief after participating in a promotion interview.

“I passed the competence promotion interview but failed the security vetting.....It is painful because I expected my long service to be rewarded through promotion”. (PT 8).

An employee shared an opinion.

“I feel that the system promotes incompetent managers hence implementation of HRM reforms suffers.... I think that the minister should not interfere in the appointment of managers” (PT6)

The frustration about external interference in the promotion process was highly pronounced amongst the professional staff who have career growth prospects through promotion to managerial roles. However, the system is heavily politicised, and the security vetting is used to identify loyal employees overriding competence. The practice was associated with weakness in HRM reform commitment and direction.

4.3 Theme 3: unbalanced activation of AMO dimensions in IRBM

IRBM implementation selectively reinforced the *ability* aspect of performance, while motivation and *opportunity* remained underdeveloped. Frontline staff interviewed stated the following:

“I can confirm that my skill levels increased significantly” (FS3).

Yet, incentives and career progression remained weak:

“There are no rewards for top performers and poor performers” (S06).

“The organisation should develop and promote internal candidates as this helps to boost morale and retain knowledge and skills.... New people take long to understand the internal dynamics that impact on performance” (TP11)

Some employees disclosed during the focus group discussion that, the performance is constrained due to poor knowledge retention.

“I think that important skills and knowledge continue to leave the organisation due to lack of incentives and opportunities for growth.” (AS3)

“I was trained in this organisation but if I get greener pastures elsewhere, I will leave because I do not feel valued” (AS5)

While employees appreciate the training effort, IRBM implementation was constrained because of low morale, lack of opportunities for career growth and motivation to reinforce performance.

4.4 Theme 4: IRBM experienced as a performance-control hybrid rather than a developmental system

In all instances, the experience of IRBM was perceived less as a developmental framework of performance management, and more as a hybrid system combined with intensive bureaucratic control and a results-based discourse. Although narratives of efficiency and enhanced service delivery were central focus points of the polices, it functioned primarily as an enhanced reporting and compliance measuring tool.

As one employee explained:

“I do not understand how my performance targets are set, everything is dictated to me by my line manager....” (AS1)

“I do not understand the link between my daily routine and the organisational goals and nobody” (SO5).

Similarly, one front line employee observed:

“We are not permitted to question logic... We are whipped into line” (FS5).

The setting of performance targets was said to be top-down and rigid, with little room for situational accommodations. Documentary evidence supported this, wherein the minutes from the IRBM meetings contained threatening language:

“Failure to comply will be treated as resistance.... either you ship in or you ship out.” (IRBM review meeting minute)

Thus, the IRBM system reinforced the existing hierarchical controls rather than encouraging learning, problem-solving, and performance improvement activity. The implementation guidelines emphasise facets of process rather than the performance, resulting in the definition of performance to focus only on the documentation process rather than the performance itself.

4.5 Theme 5: administrative focus

The HRM activities in leading the change process were weakly linked to strategy. Major roles centred on administrative coordination of IRBM processes and less of a strategic partner. Some administrative staff shared a common sentiment during the focus group discussion.

“It feels like a mere form filling exercise...” (AS5)

“I have never been consulted on the setting of organisational goals hence I do not understand the connection” (SO3)

The annual reports from the sampled firms revealed that training programs were well budgeted for and routinely conducted without consideration to the rising implementation gaps. The training was largely compliance oriented for instance, to understand indicators, templates, and reporting cycles.

Another employee commented:

“I do not see any connection between the IRBM outputs with organisational strategy” (AS7).

A member of professional staff expressed frustration:

“We do not participate in the strategic review meetings hence our experiences and views are not considered” (PT6)

Communication was perceived to be predominantly one-directional, strengthening the view that IRBM is imposed and driven by external forces that do not consider employee voice, engagement and local adaptation.

4.6 Theme 6: psychological contract lens

The fulfilment and breach of the psychological contract had a pivotal role in determining how employees responded to IRBM in terms of their performance. Employees felt unfairly treated and oppressed leading to a disengagement. However, where HRM practices were supportive engagement improved.

“I feel like I am investing too much effort into this organisation, yet my efforts are not rewarded...so I tend to work in proportion with my paycheck” (PT3).

“If you complain you are threatened, so it’s better to suffer in silence” (FS3).

Recognition proved to be very effective:

“I was happy when I was rewarded for my performance, it enhanced my sense of belonging... I actually withdrew my resignation letter after this event” (SO3).

Notwithstanding, the overwhelming majority reported escalating levels of performance expectations without corresponding resource support. Skilled operatives identified infrastructural deterioration, budget, and political pressure.

“What I expected before joining this organisation is not what I found.”

“I experience high workload, stress of equipment breakdowns....no proportional rewards so I tend to apply minimum effort to preserve my mental health” (SO2).

This mismatch between performance expectations and resource support sparked perceptions of psychological contract violations, resulting in trust degradation and performance contraction towards minimum compliance by the employees. The findings are linked to the theoretical framework in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Theory evidence Matrix: HHRM Reform

Theoretical Lens	Empirical Theme	Core Empirical Pattern	Illustrative Evidence from the Study
Institutional (strongarm and prescriptive approach)	Politicised governance and weak meritocracy	Political oversight, donor conditionalities, calls for accountability	Employees complained about interference from the line ministry, politicisation of promotions, rigid approach, excessive scrutiny, threats leading to symbolic compliance thus weakening IRBM reform effort
Ability– Motivation–	Selective stimulation of	IRBM strengthens technical ability but	Training was provided but incentives, feedback, opportunities were absent

Opportunity (AMO)	the performance scope	overlooks motivation and participation	
Psychological contract	Psychological contract reciprocity	Employee performance responses are mediated by perceptions of trade-off, justice, and support	Where employees complained about unfair treatments, threats, unfulfilled expectations, high workload without proportional support, employees disengaged or merely performed the minimum required.

Source: Authors' Fieldwork.

Table 3, represents the findings' summary of the theory-evidence matrix, including how the institutional theory, AMO and psychological contract impact on employee perceptions. It represents the connection between the theories and the empirical themes and illustrative evidence from the study as later analysed in the discussion section.

5 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings reveal HRM reform challenges in Zimbabwean SOEs. IRBM implementation is constrained less by technical design limitations than by governance arrangements, weak strategic HR enactment, and fractured psychological contracts. These dynamics explain the persistent gap between formal performance compliance and substantive service delivery outcomes, highlighting the centrality of human and institutional factors in public sector performance reform.

The institutional theory reveals institutional pressures and symbolic compliance. It is clear that there are significant pressures in the form of bureaucratic judgements, donor conditionalities, and calls for accountability that encouraged decoupling in the adoption of the IRBM and its practices. This is consistent with the institutional theory that has long argued that the ceremonial adoption of reform structures externally is not beneficial if internal existing practices remain the same (Scott, 1995; Gong *et al.*, 2023). The case of Zimbabwean SOEs is that the IRBM was more of a signalling mechanism to external stakeholders and not a serious tool for performance improvement. This is why service delivery inefficiencies have continued to occur despite compliance with the IRBM.

The politicized governance is a structural constraint of HRM driven reforms. An important finding is the politicization of SOE governance, and more specifically the

process of appointing managers, which emerged in the qualitative analysis as a structural conditioning of the implementation of IRBM. In contrast to merit-based procedures, managers were seen as appointed through a politically mediated process, thus lacking credibility and legitimacy in reforms. This confirms institutional theory, according to which reforms in the public sector are conditioned by ideas of legitimacy rather than reason of performance (Scott, 1995; Naveed *et al.*, 2017).

Such governance practices undermined the degree to which strategic leadership was committed to the IRBM and HRM's functions, placing HRM in the administration as enforcement officers and change opponents. Similar dynamics have been raised within the African and post-transition SOEs context where politics dominates reform effort at the expense of credibility and managerial autonomy (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2015; Muzanenhamo, 2023). This contributes to the public sector HRM literature as evidence that politicized institutional environments decrease HRM's ability to influence performance change in the public sector (Burke *et al.*, 2017; Mthombeni *et al.*, 2023).

While the usefulness of AMO is appreciated, particularly regarding improving employee abilities, the findings indicate that there was a limitation in enhancing strategic enablement. The results indicate that HRM-initiated practices, including training and communication, did not address strategy, thereby reinforcing the views that IRBM was externally driven. This pattern resonates with the view that criticises HRM for persisting in administrative roles even within reform-oriented agendas (Perry *et al.*, 2010). This demonstrates the limitations of HRM's strategic agency within politically controlled conditions, impacting negatively on employee engagement.

The AMO lens presents IRBM as a compliance-oriented paradigm with limited activation on motivation and opportunities to a large degree, which therefore weakened its performance-enhancing function (Boxall and Purcell, 2003). This imbalance echoes findings from other developing countries where performance-based changes raise capability but do little to enhance behavioural and relational factors (De Vries and Nemec, 2013). As has been found in existing critiques on performance reforms in the public sector, the IRBM framework in this case has largely been experienced by staff as a control and compliance-based framework and not a performance-development framework (Fryer *et al.*, 2009; Van Dooren *et al.*, 2015; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). While efficiency and accountability of services were emphasized in the narratives surrounding IRBM (OECD,

2010; Brock and Shepherd, 2022), staff in Zimbabwean SOEs experienced it as a coercive compliance mechanism. These findings only serve to confirm a worrying trend: result-based reforms place a high value on measuring and achieving compliance relative to learning and performance enhancement, especially in more hierarchical public sector environments (Krausert, 2014; Kickert, 2015).

With regard to the psychological contract theory, the study revealed two notable contributions to theory. First, the mediating role of the psychological contract during the implementation of IRBM. Where employees felt fairly treated, commitment increased, conversely, where performance standards were set with no corresponding resources and rewards, perceptions of psychological breach increased. These results support predictions based on psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1995; Morrison and Robinson, 1997) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), and extend existing findings that work intensification during organizational reforms undermines trust and discretion (Conway *et al.*, 2014). Specifically, in this context, employees reacted to imbalances by constraining their effort, leading partly to the lack of performance gains experienced by IRBM. This perspective highlights the importance of both system design and credible HRM practices during reforms.

Secondly, the study follows critique of the PC idea for its strong individualistic orientation that can potentially overshadow broader structural and power dynamics that influence employment experiences (Korczynski, 2023). This study upholds that employee perceptions of PC breach were not formed in isolation but other organisational dynamics such as organisational hierarchies, governance issues were pivotal in limiting the effectiveness of HRM reforms. Ultimately the institutional, political forces and interpersonal practices equally shaped the PC, thus demonstrating that power relations embedded in organisational context are equally important in understanding reform outcomes.

5.1 Contributions of the current study to theory and practice

Firstly, the study offers an extension in the field of IRBM studies, as well as performance management, by introducing employee data on how results-based reforms are implemented and perceived in a politicized setting in SOEs. Secondly, it builds upon

psychological contract theory by empirically examining its role in the process of implementing performance reforms introduced through the HRM function in organizations. Thirdly, it combines institutional theory, AMO and psychological contract perspectives, contributing a multi-level outline for understanding reform decoupling in public sector organisations.

For policy makers and SOE leaders, the findings suggest that performance reform cannot occur by itself in the system. It is important to address governance challenges, reshape the role of HRM, and reinforce the support, recognition, and participation levels in line with performance expectations. Without considering the perceptions of the employees, IRBM will simply become a compliance activity rather than the main driving force behind improvements in the delivery of services.

5.2 Limitations of the study

Although the analytical framework used in the article is broadly applicable, the findings are contextually bound and specific to Zimbabwe SOEs. Application in contexts, such as the Global North, would need contextual modifiers because the institutional and resource pressures are stable, while in other African settings, **context-specific moderators** such as governance fragility, or socio-political influences are needed to fully describe employee experiences. The self-reported accounts are prone to recall bias and social appeal. However, the cross-sectional study fails to capture the evolving landscape of IRBM implementation.

5.3 Scopes for future research

Future research could consider testing the relationships quantitatively and use cross-country comparative studies to elicit broader insights. It could be necessary to further explore how HRM functions may regain strategic power within the politically restricted public sector context. More than that, other studies could consider capturing the views of external factors such as line ministry officials and IRBM development partners for a more inclusive understanding of how formal pressures profile HRM independence and reform implementation in Zimbabwean SOEs. This paper emphasized that the

attempted reform of performance management within SOEs is essentially a human and institutional issue. It is important that both issues be addressed if result-based reforms like IRBM are to become successful in terms of achieving the desired results on performance and service delivery.

6 CONCLUSION

The current study makes a contribution to public sector management literature by offering a multi-theoretical explanation as to why PM reforms such as IRBM often struggle to generate improvements in developing-country SOEs. The processes underlying the interplay between institutional factors, AMO and psychological contracts in influencing the implementation of IRBM are highlighted. The study adopts the tri-analytical approach to establish that the IRBM approach has mainly improved technical capacity but at the cost of performance value hence resulting in the adoption of performance-complying, rather than performance-enhancing, behaviours among employees. The politicisation of governance structures and failure to connect ability, motivation, opportunities with organisational goals limited the strategic role of HRM. The psychological contract impacted on how employees perceived IRBM resulting in unexpected results, including reduced engagement and symbolic compliance.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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