CHANGING MINDSETS: ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AS THE PRIMARY BARRIER TO PUBLIC SECTOR PERFORMANCE REFORM

Gcinaphi Dlamini – Simelane

Changing Mindsets: Organisational Culture as the Primary Barrier to Public Sector Performance Reform

Abstract

Despite widespread adoption of performance management frameworks, African public sectors face challenges in achieving optimal governance that balances procedural requirements with citizen needs. Drawing on Cameron and Quinn's Competing Values Framework and institutional theory, this study explores how organisational culture influences governance effectiveness in Eswatini's Ministry of Public Service. The research employs qualitative methodology with triangulated data collection: focus groups with Heads of Departments (n=7), semi-structured interviews with officers (n=11), and document analysis across six African countries (Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Eswatini, Tanzania, and Nigeria). Data were analysed using thematic analysis procedures and NVivo 15 (2024). Findings of the study revealed that hierarchical authority emerged as the foundational constraint enabling risk aversion, reform ritualism, organisational disengagement, and departmental fragmentation as interconnected cultural barriers that constrain public sector performance reform in Eswatini's Ministry of Public Service. This study makes a unique contribution to knowledge by exploring, for the first time, organisational culture as a primary barrier to public sector reform in the Eswatini Ministry of Public Service. The study recommends targeted policy interventions to dismantle hierarchical authority structures, introduce participatory governance mechanisms, and establish innovation-supportive performance management systems that reward experimentation rather than procedural compliance. Without interventions to change mindsets from rule-bound procedures to performance-orientated approaches, reforms will remain ineffective across African contexts.

Keywords: Organisational Culture, Governance Effectiveness, Cultural Transformation, Eswatini, Performance Management, Changing Mindsets

Introduction

Although performance management reforms have been widely adopted globally (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017; Christensen & Lægreid 2007; Osborne & Gaebler 1992; Hood 1991), evidence indicates that organisational culture, as a major barrier to reform implementation, has not received adequate attention. Research also indicates that organisational reforms are not possible when organisational culture remains unchanged (Grindle 2017; Andrews 2013). Cultural change is therefore as critical as structural change (Cameron & Quinn 2011; Schein 2010).

In Africa, the organisational reform constraints are even more visible. African states have introduced Results-Based Management (RBM), service charters, and digital platforms, but entrenched bureaucratic cultures continue to undermine reforms. Khumalo & Marie (2024, p. 8) found that employees in the public service sector in South Africa "do not receive feedback on performance, and they are not given tangible and concrete ideas that can aid in improving their performance." Evidence from Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa shows that hierarchical authority and procedural compliance weaken reform outcomes (Khumalo & Marie 2024; 2022; Eneanya 2018; Pritchett, Woolcock & Andrews 2010; Abdulai & Hulme 2014; Owusu 2012; Hope 2011; Adamolekun 2010).

Reforms such as SERVICOM in Nigeria and performance contracting in Kenya improved outputs but did not change behaviour or strengthen citizen responsiveness (Eneanya 2018; Kobia & Mohammed 2006; Mutahaba & Kiragu 2002). This confirms that reform challenges in Africa are primarily cultural rather than technical. The African Union's Agenda 2063 recognises this reality, stressing that changing attitudes and mindsets is essential for achieving institutional renewal, integration, and people-driven development (African Union 2015).

In the Kingdom of Eswatini, the Ministry of Public Service launched a Performance Management System (PMS) in April 2024. Yet, a year later, no study has explored how organisational culture influences its practical implementation. Although Kaupe & Sulaiman (2018) examined the impact of organisational culture in the Eswatini Ministry of Public Service, organisational culture as the primary constraint to public sector reforms at the Eswatini Ministry of Public Service has not been studied. To this end, this paper explores, for the first time, organisational culture as the primary barrier to public sector performance reform in the Eswatini Ministry of Public Service.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section outlines the literature, followed by the methodology, findings, and discussion. The paper concludes with implications, limitations, and recommendations for further research.

Literature Review

Although the African Union Agenda 2063 (AU, 2015) advocates for a people-centred Africa, African public sectors continue to fall short of achieving governance that balances organisational requirements with citizen-orientated outcomes. Research indicates that performance reforms often fail to achieve their intended objectives when organisational dynamics remain unchanged (Grindle, 2017; Andrews, 2013). Performance management interventions such as balanced scorecards and service contracts may formalise processes, but they rarely succeed when organisational culture is resistant to change (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Schein, 2010).

Gasela (2022) finds that "the existing organisational culture does not support strategy implementation, and this is negatively affecting organisational performance in the public entities" (p. 2). Research further indicates that performance management tools and accountability frameworks have expanded globally, yet organisational culture remains decisive in determining whether reforms are internalised or resisted (Scott, 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Rainey, 2014). There consensus among scholars is that organisational culture plays a pivotal role in determining the extent to which reforms are successfully adopted, adapted, and sustained across different governance contexts (Kotter & Heskett, 2010; Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Schein, 2010).

In African contexts, this cultural dimension is particularly visible. Although public sectors in African countries differ due largely to diverse cultural settings, they nevertheless share a common challenge of hierarchical organisational culture. Evidence from Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa demonstrates that hierarchical authority, procedural compliance, and risk aversion undermine reform effectiveness (Gasela, 2022; Eneanya, 2018; Pritchett, Woolcock & Andrews, 2010; Abdulai & Hulme, 2014; Owusu, 2012; Hope, 2011; Adamolekun, 2010).

Performance management is not a new phenomenon in Africa. In Nigeria, SERVICOM 'Service Compact with all Nigerians' was launched to build a social contract with citizens and "strengthen the accountability and responsiveness of government to the legitimate demands of the citizens" (Eneanya, 2018). Similarly, in Kenya, performance contracting was introduced to enhance service delivery and accountability in the public sector (Kobia & Mohammed, 2006; Mutahaba & Kiragu, 2002). However, contrary to the African Union's aspiration for a people-centred Africa, hierarchical culture has remained a barrier to performance-oriented reform implementation in African public sectors. Hierarchical culture, characterised by top-down control mechanisms, procedural conformity requirements, and predictability prioritisation, creates systematic constraints on the adaptive capacity and innovation potential that performance reforms typically require.

In the Kingdom of Eswatini, the Ministry of Public Service launched a Performance Management System (PMS) in 2024. However, a year later, the practical implementation of this PMS has not been studied. Hence, there is no empirical evidence on how organisational culture constrains reforms. Kaupa and Atiku (2022) examined organisational culture and performance in the Eswatini Ministry of Public Service and found that Eswatini's Ministry of Public Service was "characterised by a hierarchical leadership style which was rigid in terms of innovation and provision of customised services" (p. 4).

As a result, organisational culture as a primary barrier to organisational reforms remains under-researched.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative single case study design to explore organisational culture as a primary barrier to performance reform in Eswatini's Ministry of Public Service. A qualitative case study was selected to enable an in-depth investigation of organisational dynamics within a real-life context (Creswell, 2018; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). The paper is underpinned by Cameron & Quinn's (2011) Competing Values Framework. Cameron & Quinn (2011) conceptualise organisational culture in two dimensions: internal versus external orientation and stability and control versus flexibility and discretion. The CVF provides a theoretical lens on how organisational culture could be a primary barrier in Eswatini's Ministry of Public Service.

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was utilised in the study to select participants who were currently employed at the Eswatini Ministry of Public Service for at least two years. Eight administrators, including Heads of Department (HODs), and ten officers comprised the total of 18 participants. In line with Creswell's (2018) advice to focus on individuals able to provide detailed and pertinent explanations of the phenomenon, this ensured functional and hierarchical diversity across the sample.

Data Collection

The qualitative data for the study was collected in three phases between August - September 2025: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. First, document analysis was conducted on six national reform strategies from Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Tanzania. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 officers and seven HODs in the Eswatini Ministry of Public Service. Lastly, one focus group discussion was held with HODs (n = 7) to triangulate the semi-structured interview data.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from document analysis were analysed thematically using NVivo 15 (2024) and Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2019, 2021) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Similarly, semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussion were analysed using NVivo 15 (2024) and thematic analysis.

Findings and Discussion

This study examined organisational culture as a barrier to public sector reform implementation in Eswatini's Ministry of Public Service through a mixed-methods approach combining document analysis, semi-structured interviews with 11 officers, and focus group discussions with six HODs. The analysis reveals seven cultural mechanisms that systematically undermine reform implementation, establishing organisational culture as the mediating variable through which reform barriers are activated and sustained. Each mechanism reinforces the others through what Scott (2014) terms "mutually reinforcing institutional logics".

Theme 1: Hierarchical Authority as Primary Constraint

Hierarchical authority emerged as the primary constraint that reinforces other barriers to reform implementation. Reforms across African contexts, including Eswatini, remain embedded within centralised authority structures that contradict the decentralised participatory governance models which contemporary reforms seek to establish. For instance, Eswatini's Strategic Roadmap (Government of Eswatini, 2022) anchors reforms in top-down authority patterns despite introducing Results-Based Management and e-Government tools. Similarly, Nigeria's SERVICOM reform operates within ministerial hierarchies where service charters function as compliance instruments rather than accountability mechanisms (BPSR, 2024).

Interview evidence shows hierarchical authority operating as both a structural constraint and a cultural norm. Officers consistently reported extreme centralisation:

Decision-making in the Ministry is overly centralized, with all approvals channeled through the Principal Secretary, leaving staff with little input, limited departmental autonomy, and growing frustration. One officer expressed frustrations in siSwati stating “Umuntfu akafuni kwati lutfo, konkhe kudvonsa etulu. Tsine phansi silalela kuphela”.

This shift exemplifies García and Wei's (2014) concept of "translanguaging as resistance" – participants used cultural-linguistic resources to articulate experiences that bureaucratic English could not accommodate. The use of siSwati critiques imposed authority while asserting cultural agency, showing reform discourse as both cultural and organisational.

Heads of Department also confirmed that decision-making is dominated by the Minister and Principal Secretary, with departments only involved in minor matters. Policy reforms are centrally designed, filtered through top offices, and passed down for implementation, leaving little room for adaptation, negotiation, or meaningful input.

These findings extend Kaupa and Atiku's (2022) identification of hierarchical rigidity in Eswatini's Ministry of Public Service by showing how exclusion, marginalisation and suppression operate systematically. They confirm Cameron and Quinn's (2011) conceptualisation of hierarchy culture, and they show how hierarchical authority functions as a primary constraint that enables risk aversion, ritualism, disengagement and fragmentation.

The evidence supports Grindle's (2017) and Andrews's (2013) arguments that technical reforms fail when organisational dynamics remain unchanged, while it also confirms the World Bank's (2017) recognition of informal institutions and "mental models" in shaping policy outcomes. Hierarchical authority therefore acts as Scott's (2014) "regulative pillar", establishing conditions for other cultural barriers.

Theme 2: Risk Aversion as Innovation Suppression

Risk aversion emerged as a mechanism through which hierarchical authority constrains reform implementation. A contradiction exists between reform rhetoric, emphasising innovation and bureaucratic cultures structured around proceduralism and punishment of deviation. Kenya's Ministry of Public Service (2023) positions performance contracting and innovation as transformation pillars, and South Africa's National Development Plan defines adaptive capacity as a core public service value (NPC, 2012). Yet bureaucratic cultures suppress the experimental behaviours required for reform.

Officers described how centralisation fosters risk aversion:

Decision-making centralisation has fostered a culture of risk aversion within the Ministry, where fear of blame discourages officers from attempting new approaches. Officers reported that supervisors enforce strict adherence to procedures, penalising any deviation even when it produces positive results. Consequently, strict adherence to procedures is enforced, stifling creativity and reinforcing routine compliance over innovation.

Heads of Department confirmed that risk aversion is entrenched, with mistakes not tolerated and experimentation discouraged. Staff perceive new ideas as risky, creating a culture of silence and conformity that inhibits meaningful reform.

These findings extend Hofstede's (1980) framework on high power distance and uncertainty avoidance, demonstrating how these dimensions operate in reform contexts through hierarchical authority. They support Gasela's (2022) findings that South African public entities are characterised by cultures that undermine strategy implementation. The evidence also aligns with comparative studies from Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa (Abdulai and Hulme, 2014; Owusu, 2012; Hope, 2011; Adamolekun, 2010).

Risk aversion appears not as simple resistance to change but as an adaptive response to structures that punish deviation. This supports Cameron and Quinn's (2011) argument that hierarchy cultures obstruct adhocracy traits required for reform, while confirming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's recognition that cultural transformation is essential.

Theme 3: Reform Ritualism as Legitimacy Management

Reform ritualism arises where hierarchical authority and risk aversion combine to create symbolic compliance systems that satisfy external legitimacy requirements while preserving internal stability. Reforms often function as symbolic exercises, confirming Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews's (2010) concept of isomorphic mimicry. For example, Nigeria's SERVICOM service charters operate as compliance mechanisms designed to satisfy accountability rhetoric while producing minimal behavioural change (BPSR, 2024). Similarly, Eswatini's Public Sector Modernisation Programme employs the language of modernisation while maintaining entrenched reporting routines (Government of Eswatini, 2022).

Officer testimonies illustrated ritualism. Centralised decision-making within the Ministry has cultivated a culture of risk aversion, where strict adherence to procedures and reinforces adherence to established routines over innovation.

Heads of Department corroborated these observations, noting that mistakes are not tolerated and experimentation is discouraged, fostering staff silence and conformity that inhibit meaningful reform.

These findings support Scott's (2014) analysis of institutional decoupling and extend Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock's (2017) argument by showing ritualism as an organisational adaptation. Ritualistic compliance emerges as a consistent regional phenomenon rather than a country-specific failure (Eneanya, 2018; Kobia and Mohammed, 2006; Mutahaba and Kiragu, 2002).

Theme 4: Organisational Disengagement as Participation Exclusion

Organisational disengagement emerged as a mechanism produced by hierarchical authority structures that exclude implementers from reform design. Across African contexts, reforms operate as elite-driven initiatives that marginalise frontline actors. For example, while Ghana's reforms foster accountability and ownership cultures (Owusu, 2012), reforms in Eswatini and Nigeria remain centrally driven.

A key theme emerging from the discussion was the consistent exclusion of implementers from the reform process. Officers noted that reforms are typically introduced as top-down directives, often finalized without input from those responsible for carrying them out. This approach was seen to limit meaningful engagement, reduce responsiveness to local realities, and erode a sense of ownership among frontline staff.

Throughout the **feedback session**, Heads of Department echoed these concerns, highlighting the lack of formal mechanisms for consultation or follow-up. Respondents described a reform environment driven by compliance rather than collaboration, where staff are expected to implement policies with little space for reflection or adaptation. As a result, reforms were often perceived as routine administrative obligations rather than opportunities for meaningful change.

These findings support Owusu's (2012) argument that cultural alignment and stakeholder ownership are crucial for reform. They extend Ashcraft's (2025) concept of organisational dissonance, demonstrating contradictions between rhetorical participation and exclusionary practice. They contradict technocratic assumptions that tools alone can drive transformation (Rainey, 2014; Denhardt and Denhardt, 2015).

Theme 5: Reform Ritualism as Legitimacy Management

Reform ritualism emerged as a third mechanism through which hierarchical authority and risk aversion combine to create symbolic compliance systems that satisfy external legitimacy requirements while preserving internal stability. The analysis reveals that reforms across African contexts function primarily as symbolic exercises rather than transformative interventions, confirming Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews's (2010) concept of isomorphic mimicry. Document analysis demonstrates that Nigeria's SERVICOM service charters operate as compliance mechanisms designed to satisfy accountability rhetoric while producing minimal behavioural change (BPSR, 2024). Similarly, Eswatini's Public Sector Modernisation Programme employs the language of modernisation and results-based management while maintaining entrenched reporting routines that contradict its stated objectives (Government of Eswatini, 2022).

Officer accounts reveal how hierarchical authority and risk aversion create conditions where ritualistic compliance becomes the optimal organisational strategy.

The **feedback session** highlighted a shared view among officers that reform processes are largely symbolic and disconnected from daily practice. Reforms were described as procedural exercises – memos, reports, and workshops – that offer little space for dialogue or real change. The respoindents noted a recurring cycle of compliance, where strategic plans are created and filed without altering how work is actually done.

Heads of Department reinforced these observations, describing how ritualism functions as an adaptive response to institutional pressures. Tools like performance appraisals and customer service charters were seen as fulfilling symbolic roles, driven more by the need to demonstrate compliance than to improve outcomes. Without effective monitoring, reforms were perceived as mechanisms to preserve legitimacy while maintaining existing power structures.

These findings support Scott's (2014) analysis of institutional decoupling, where formal structures and actual practices operate independently. The evidence extends Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock's (2017) argument by demonstrating that ritualistic compliance serves specific organisational functions: it satisfies external legitimacy requirements while preserving internal stability. The findings confirm patterns observed across African contexts where "reforms such as SERVICOM in Nigeria and performance contracting in Kenya initially improved outputs but failed to change behaviours or strengthen citizen responsiveness" (Eneanya, 2018; Kobia & Mohammed, 2006; Mutahaba & Kiragu, 2002), establishing that reform ritualism represents a consistent regional phenomenon rather than country-specific implementation failure.

The theoretical contribution lies in establishing ritualism as a systematic cultural response to the tension between external reform pressure and internal hierarchical stability, rather than simple implementation failure. This aligns with Meyer and Rowan's (1977) analysis of ceremonial conformity, where organisations adopt formal structures to gain legitimacy while maintaining operational routines that may contradict formal requirements. The evidence supports the African Union's Agenda 2063 recognition that "shifting attitudes and mindsets is essential for institutional renewal and people-driven development," while demonstrating that current reform approaches fail to address the hierarchical foundations that enable ritualistic adaptation.

Theme 6: Organisational Disengagement as Participation Exclusion

Organisational disengagement emerged as a fourth mechanism directly produced by hierarchical authority structures that systematically exclude implementers from reform design and adaptation processes. The data demonstrate that reforms across African contexts are elite-driven initiatives that marginalise frontline actors, resulting in organisational disengagement that undermines implementation effectiveness. Document analysis reveals that while Ghana's reform experience demonstrates the importance of fostering accountability and ownership cultures (Owusu, 2012), reforms in Eswatini and Nigeria are presented as centrally driven projects with minimal space for staff engagement or bottom-up participation.

Officer testimonies revealed that hierarchical exclusion fosters disengagement, functioning both as a rational response to top-down control and as a subtle form of resistance. Reforms were described as centrally imposed, with little opportunity for consultation or contextual input. This exclusion was seen to erode a sense of ownership, leaving officers with the role of passive implementers rather than active contributors.

Heads of Department confirmed that exclusion is systemic, not incidental, and embedded within hierarchical structures that limit participation. With no formal feedback mechanisms, staff are expected to comply without questioning the relevance or feasibility of reforms. Over time, this dynamic normalizes disengagement, turning reform implementation into a routine obligation devoid of meaningful commitment or impact.

These findings support Owusu's (2012) argument that successful reform depends less on technical design than on cultural alignment and stakeholder ownership. The data extend Ashcraft's (2025) concept of organisational dissonance by demonstrating how rhetorical commitments to participation are systematically contradicted by exclusionary practices rooted in hierarchical authority. The evidence contradicts technocratic approaches that assume "performance measurement tools and accountability frameworks" alone can drive transformation (Rainey, 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015), instead confirming that meaningful reform requires genuine stakeholder participation that challenges hierarchical exclusion.

The theoretical implications establish participation not as a procedural requirement but as a fundamental challenge to hierarchical authority structures. This supports broader scholarship demonstrating that "cultural transformation is as critical as structural reform in explaining reform outcomes" (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Schein, 2010), while confirming international recognition that transforming institutions requires more than policy changes (World Bank, 2017; 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). The causal mechanism is clear: hierarchical authority creates exclusionary structures that generate disengagement, which then manifests as compliance without commitment, ultimately undermining reform sustainability.

Theme 7: Departmental Fragmentation as a Coordination Constraint

The findings indicated that departmental fragmentation is the fifth mechanism through which hierarchical authority reproduces itself by obstructing the lateral coordination required for integrated reform. Reforms are systematically undermined by departmental silos and weak inter-agency collaboration, despite rhetorical commitments to integration. Document analysis shows that South Africa’s National Development Plan promotes collaborative governance while acknowledging that siloed departments limit progress (NPC, 2012). Nigeria’s reform landscape features overlapping agencies, including BPSR, SERVICOM and PEBEC, which operate in isolation despite commitments to integrated reform (BPSR, 2024). Eswatini’s PSMP introduced strategic planning mechanisms whilst leaving intact departmental divisions that obstruct coordination.

Officer and Head of Department testimonies highlighted a persistent culture of fragmentation within the Ministry, where departments operate in isolation and reforms fail to move across institutional boundaries. Officers described a lack of collaboration, with each unit developing plans and attending meetings independently, making cross-cutting reforms difficult to implement. Heads of Department reinforced this view, noting that hierarchical structures prioritize vertical communication within departments, while cross-departmental engagement remains rare. Despite reform documents frequently emphasizing integration, territoriality persists, and a genuine culture of joint problem-solving has yet to take root.

These findings confirm Cameron and Quinn's (2011) analysis that hierarchy cultures prioritise vertical control at the expense of lateral collaboration. They also support Scott's (2014) observation that institutional routines reinforce fragmentation as a path-dependent practice and extend comparative studies from Kenya and Nigeria showing that siloed reform implementation represents a regional pattern (Eneanya, 2018; BPSR, 2024).

The findings further revealed that fragmentation functions as being an adaptation to hierarchy rather than a coordination failure. Silos persist owing to their alignment with emphasis of the hierarchy culture on vertical control and territorial clarity, even when they contradict reform objectives requiring integration. This supports the broader literature recognising that organisational culture determines the extent to which reforms are adopted, adapted and sustained (Kotter & Heskett, 2010; Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Schein, 2010).

The data reveal that cultural mechanisms neutralise reform impact by embedding norms, authority structures and behavioural routines that shape whether reforms are accepted or resisted (Scott, 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Rainey, 2014). These mechanisms reflect what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) term "isomorphic pressures," which promote conformity to existing institutional templates rather than innovation. The findings support comparative analyses that identify reform challenges in Africa as predominantly cultural rather than technical, and they align with the African Union's Agenda 2063 recognition that institutional renewal requires fundamental attitudinal and mindset shifts (African Union, 2015).

An additional dimension of fragmentation is reflected in participants' use of translanguaging to express frustrations with coordination failures and hierarchical authority, as exemplified by one of the respondents' statement in siSwati: *Umuntfu akafuni kwati lutfo, konkhe kudvonsa etulu. Tsine phansi silalela kuphela.* This interpretation is supported by Dlamini and

Kamwendo's (2028) findings that code-switching functions as a strategy of decolonisation in Eswatini higher education.

Although fragmentation reflects entrenched patterns, the findings also suggest that they are not immutable. Cultural reproduction requires reinforcement rather than occurring automatically, and critical junctures such as leadership transitions or external pressures may briefly open opportunities for cultural change. Such opportunities, however, demand intentional cultural interventions rather than technical reforms alone.

These findings demonstrate that departmental fragmentation is not an accidental dysfunction but a functional expression of hierarchy culture. By privileging vertical control and protecting territorial clarity, fragmentation systematically undermines reform integration. Sustainable transformation therefore requires cultural strategies that directly address hierarchical authority and its reinforcing mechanisms.

Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

The findings demonstrate that organisational culture is the primary constraint to reform initiatives. This highlights the urgent need for a mindset shift that positions culture at the centre of innovation. For the Eswatini Ministry of Public Service, this specifically requires the development of a people-centred performance management policy that aligns cultural transformation with performance management reforms.

Implications for Theory

These findings establish organisational culture not as a background condition but as a mediating variable that actively shapes how reforms are interpreted, adapted, or resisted. The latter advances institutional theory by demonstrating what may be termed "institutional reproduction cycles," where cultural mechanisms operate as interconnected processes. Hierarchical authority functions as the primary constraint that enables and reinforces risk aversion, ritualism, disengagement, and fragmentation. Sustainable institutional change therefore requires addressing foundational cultural barriers rather than relying solely on structural or technical adjustments.

This current research also extends translanguaging theory into organisational contexts. Participants' strategic shifts between English and siSwati functioned as acts of cultural agency, enabling resistance and identity assertion within hierarchical bureaucracies. This demonstrates that language practices are not merely communicative but central to how power relations are expressed and contested in institutional settings.

Implications for Policy

Reform policy in Eswatini should recognise culture as the decisive determinant of reform success. Additionally, policy frameworks should mandate systematic cultural diagnostics prior to introducing new systems. These diagnostics must examine norms, authority patterns, and communicative practices to ensure that reforms align with institutional realities.

Policy should also require cultural transformation programmes that directly target exclusion, risk aversion, ritualism, disengagement, and fragmentation. Such programmes are expected to embed participatory design processes, ensuring that staff at all levels are involved in shaping reforms.

Accountability mechanisms for cultural transformation are equally essential. It is essential for leadership evaluations to be explicitly linked to cultural change metrics, including participatory decision-making frequency, innovation support, cross-departmental collaboration, and staff engagement indicators. Without cultural accountability, technical reforms will continue to produce limited results.

First, the findings of the study reveal practical implications for officers in Eswatini's Ministry of Public Service. The evidence indicates that current practices are marked by limited collaboration and fragmented communication, which undermine reform implementation. Officers frequently reported working in isolation, describing departments as "islands" and emphasising the absence of lateral coordination.

Second, these findings suggest that strengthening collaboration among officers is essential to overcoming the constraints of hierarchical authority. Routine practices such as cross-departmental meetings, joint task teams, and open feedback forums may assist to break silos and create a culture of shared responsibility for reform outcomes.

Third, the findings point to the need for leadership practices that empower officers rather than restrict them to compliance roles. Officers identified exclusion from decision-making as a source of disengagement. In response, it is imperative for managers to adopt people-centred approaches that encourage participation in planning and allow officers to adapt reforms to departmental realities.

Finally, the study indicates that meaningful reform requires embedding cultural change into daily practices. Training programmes, mentoring systems, and recognition of innovative problem-solving can reinforce a participatory ethos. By linking performance incentives to collaboration and initiative, officers should experience reform not as a top-down imposition but as a collective process in which their contributions matter..

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that organisational culture is the primary barrier to performance reform in Eswatini's Ministry of Public Service. The evidence shows that five interconnected mechanisms – hierarchical authority, risk aversion, ritualistic compliance, organisational disengagement, and departmental fragmentation – systematically undermine reform initiatives. As a result, the 2024 Performance Management System has been reduced to symbolic compliance exercises rather than generating meaningful organisational transformation.

The findings of the study are a distinctive contribution to new knowledge in several ways. First, they provide unprecedented empirical evidence that organisational culture is a primary barrier to organisational reforms at the Eswatini Ministry of Public Service. The findings reveal that culture shapes how reforms are received, interpreted, and acted upon, and therefore determines whether reforms succeed or fail. The research also contributes to sociolinguistics. It demonstrates that officers and HODs at the Eswatini Ministry of Public Service use translanguaging as a meaning-making strategy within bureaucratic contexts, allowing them to negotiate power and assert identity by demonstrating that translanguaging operates as cultural agency. Participants strategically shift between English and siSwati to resist hierarchical authority and assert identity, showing that language is central to how institutional power is negotiated. Fourth, the study fills a critical gap in organisational culture literature in Eswatini, situating the Ministry of Public Service within wider debates on African public administration reform.

In light of the findings of the study, further research needs to examine how cross-departmental collaboration and participatory decision-making can challenge hierarchical exclusion and foster performance-oriented cultures. Additional research should investigate cultural indicators such as risk tolerance and leadership accountability as levers for building innovation and staff engagement in risk-averse bureaucracies. Further inquiry is also required to analyse translanguaging and multilingual communication as meaning-making strategies and as resources for strengthening reform acceptance. Finally, studies should develop and validate cultural diagnostic frameworks across African ministries to create transferable tools for identifying and addressing cultural barriers in public sector reform.

Overall, the study shows that sustainable reform in Eswatini and across Africa requires deep cultural transformation. Technical reforms alone are incapable of producing symbolic compliance unless coupled with strategies that dismantle hierarchical constraints, strengthen collaboration, and position organisational culture at the centre of innovation.

References

Abdulai, A. and Hulme, D. (2014) *The politics of public sector reform in Africa*. London: Routledge.

Adamolekun, L. (2010) ‘Public sector reform: An overview’, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 76(2), pp. 279–286.

Andrews, M. (2013) *The limits of institutional reform in development: Changing rules for realistic solutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Andrews, M., Pritchett, L. and Woolcock, M. (2017) *Building state capability: Evidence, analysis, action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ashcraft, C. (2025) ‘Organisational dissonance and reform fatigue’, *Journal of Public Administration*, 41(1), pp. 33–52.

Bester, C. (2019) *Performance management in public organisations*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

Bester, J. 2019. How does performance management actually improve employee performance? The Botswana experiences. Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives, 4 (1): 18-40.

Bouckaert, G. and Pollitt, C. (2017) *Public management reform: A comparative analysis – Into the age of austerity*. 4th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bureau of Public Service Reforms (BPSR) (2024) *National Strategy for Public Service Reforms*. Abuja: BPSR.

Cameron, K. and Quinn, R. (2011) *Diagnosing and changing organisational culture: Based on the competing values framework*. 3rd edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Christensen, T. and Lægreid, P. (2007) *Transcending new public management: The transformation of public sector reforms*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Denhardt, J. and Denhardt, R. (2015) *The new public service: Serving, not steering*. 4th edn. New York: Routledge.

DiMaggio, P. and Powell, W. (1983) 'The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields', *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), pp. 147–160.

Dlamini, N. P., & Kamwendo, G. H. (2018). Code-switching as a Strategy for the Decolonisation of Learning: A Case of One University in Swaziland. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies-Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity*, *13*(1), 39-55.https://doi.org/10.1080/18186874.2018.1479873

Eneanya, A. (2018) *Performance management in the Nigerian public service*. Lagos: University of Lagos Press.

Eswatini Government (2019) *Strategic Roadmap 2018-2023 (SRM)*. Mbabane: Government of Eswatini.

Fryer, K; Antony, J. and Ogden, S. 2009. Performance management in the public sector. International Journal of Public Sector Management. 22(6):478-498

Gasela, M. (2022) 'Culture as a barrier to public service reform: Evidence from South Africa', *Journal of African Public Administration and Management*, 34(3), pp. 221–242.

Giddens, A. (1984) *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Grindle, M. (2017) *Good governance, riddles of reform: Institutions and public sector performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hofstede, G. (1980) *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Hope, K.R., Sr. 2001. The new public management: Context and practice in Africa. International Public Management Journal, 4(2): 119-134.

Hope, K. (2011) 'Managing the public sector in developing societies', *Public Management Review*, 13(3), pp. 415–430.

Hope, K. (2013) *Performance management and accountability in developing country public services*. London: Routledge.

Kaupa, M. and Datiku, Y. (2022) 'Organisational culture and performance management in Eswatini', *African Journal of Public Administration*, 12(4), pp. 55–70.

Kelly, J. (1998) 'Measuring public sector performance', *Public Administration*, 76(3), pp. 409–428.

Kelsall, T. (2011) 'Rethinking the relationship between bureaucracy and governance in Africa', *Governance*, 24(2), pp. 169–191.

Kobia, M. and Mohammed, N. (2006) 'Kenya's performance contracting: An evaluation', *African Journal of Public Administration and Management*, 17(1), pp. 23–46.

Mbau, E. (2018) ‘Cultural barriers to performance management in Africa’, *African Review of Public Administration*, 30(2), pp. 177–192.

Meyer, J. and Rowan, B. (1977) ‘Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), pp. 340–363.

Mutahaba, G. and Kiragu, K. (2002) *Lessons of public sector reform in Africa*. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota.

Njagi, L. (2021) ‘Performance contracting in Kenya: Culture as a barrier’, *Journal of African Governance*, 6(2), pp. 141–160.

Osborne, D. and Gaebler, T. (1992) *Reinventing government: How the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Owusu, F. (2012) ‘Organisational culture and reform outcomes in Ghana’, *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 25(4), pp. 278–292.

Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M. and Andrews, M. (2010) ‘Capability traps? The mechanisms of persistent implementation failure’, *Center for Global Development Working Paper*, no. 234.

Quinn, R. (1988) *Beyond rational management: Mastering the paradoxes and competing demands of high performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rainey, H. (2014) *Understanding and managing public organizations*. 5th edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schein, E. H 2004): Organizational culture and leadership (John Willey & Sons Inc, San Francisco 2004).

Scott, W. (2014) *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities*. 4th edn. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Smith, P. (1996) 'Measuring outcomes in the public sector', *Public Money & Management*, 16(4), pp. 13–18.

United Republic of Tanzania (URT) (2013) *Public Service Reform Programme: Phase II*. Dar es Salaam: Government Printer.

World Bank (2017–2022) *Implementation Status Reports: Improving Public Sector Performance Project (P152528)*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

World Bank (2019) *Africa's pulse: An analysis of issues shaping Africa's economic future*. Washington, DC: World Bank.