

## Ineffective by design? Systemic failures of performance management in a sub-Saharan African military establishment: The case of Zambia

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Defence Sector of Zambia

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### ABSTRACT

Performance Management Systems [PMS] emerged as a core instrument of New Public Management reform in Sub-Saharan Africa from the 1990s, yet their effectiveness in military establishments remains empirically underexamined. This qualitative case study evaluates the effectiveness of the PMS implemented in military establishments, with particular stress on the Military Training Establishment of Zambia. This is a major institution of the defence sector of Zambia in Kabwe. This evaluation was conducted twenty-two years after its introduction of PMS in 1998. The target population comprised the officer corps at MILTEZ. Purposive sampling was employed to select 23 key informants, comprising 14 wing commanders and 9 senior staff officers, across all six military training establishments of Zambia departments, on the basis of their direct involvement in goal-setting, performance appraisal, or reward administration. The data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2018 and February 2019. The study applies reflexive thematic analysis to generate rich, contextualised insights into PMS effectiveness. The theoretical framework draws on four mainstream public administration theories: New Public Management Theory, Institutional Isomorphism, Principal-Agent Theory, and Accountability Theory. Four interrelated themes emerged: a goal-setting deficit characterised by unilateral formulation and resource inadequacy; a trait-performance Disconnect, in which the appraisal instrument evaluates personal characteristics rather than goal achievement; a Reward Administration Failure driven by opacity and perceived nepotism; and a Systemic Institutional Mismatch generated by the uncritical adoption of civilian performance management systems frameworks in a hierarchical military context. The study concludes that Performance Management Systems' ineffectiveness at the Military Training Establishment of Zambia is systemic, rooted in mimetic isomorphism, and proposes a military-adapted PMS reform framework responsive to the institutional realities of Sub-Saharan African military organisations.

**Keywords.** Defence Sector of Zambia, Institutional Isomorphism, Military Establishments, New Public Management, Performance Management System, Qualitative Case Study

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The institutionalisation of Performance Management Systems (PMS) across Sub-Saharan African public sectors has been one of the defining features of New Public Management (NPM) reform since the 1990s (Hood, 1991; Fatile, 2014). The NPM, with its emphasis on performance measurement, results-based accountability, and the application of private sector management tools to public institutions, was adopted by governments from Botswana to Zimbabwe as the dominant paradigm for improving public sector efficiency (Hinson et al., 2022; Funck & Karlsson, 2020). The Republic of Zambia adopted its own NPM-inspired Performance Management Package (PMP) under the 1993 Public Service Reform Programme (PSRP). It extended to 19 ministries and 17 government institutions that included the Ministry of Defence (Makambwe, 2001; Mate, 2006).

Despite over two decades of implementation, evidence on PMS effectiveness across Sub-Saharan African public institutions remains troubling. Qualitative and evaluative studies from Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa and Zambia consistently document PMS underperformance (Chidwala, 2013; Zvavahera, 2014; Molefhi, 2015; Matlala, 2011; Moodley et al., 2022; Kanchebele, 2012; Kamfwa, 2016). These studies present a pattern that institutional theory has increasingly attributed to the gap between the NPM frameworks imported from Western, civilian, managerial contexts and the institutional realities of African public organisations (Ahyaruddin et al., 2023; Hambissa et al., 2023). This pattern is particularly pronounced in military establishments, where the command-and-control architecture creates fundamental tensions with NPM's participative, transparent, and market-modelled assumptions about how performance should be managed (Hangula, 2010; Haque, 2012).

The Military Training Establishment of Zambia (MILTEZ), which is the primary officer training institution of the DSZ in Kabwe, presents a critical case. At MILTEZ, the PMS was introduced in 1998 under a management by

objectives (MBO) model. By 2020, despite 22 years of nominal operation, no evaluation of its effectiveness had ever been conducted (Government of Republic of Zambia – Ministry of Defence [GRZ-MOD], 2016). This qualitative case study fills that gap. It reports findings from the empirical evaluation of PMS effectiveness at MILTEZ and advances the argument that PMS ineffectiveness reflects a systemic institutional mismatch. This mismatch is perceptibly created through mimetic isomorphism and exists between the design assumptions of civilian-derived PMS frameworks and the structural realities of hierarchical military organisations. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the Performance Management System (PMS) implemented at the Military Training Establishment of Zambia (MILTEZ) and to explain the institutional mechanisms underlying its ineffectiveness, with a view to proposing a reform framework adapted to the structural realities of hierarchical military organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite over two decades of PMS implementation across Zambian public institutions, the performance management architecture of the Defence Sector of Zambia (DSZ) has remained empirically unevaluated. The Performance Management Package (PMP), introduced under the 1993 Public Service Reform Programme, was extended to the Ministry of Defence and operationalised at MILTEZ in 1998 through a Management by Objectives (MBO) model. By 2020, twenty-two years after its introduction, no formal evaluation of the system's effectiveness had been conducted (GRZ-MOD, 2016). This absence of evaluation presents an institutional problem because it has allowed a system of unknown effectiveness to govern the goal-setting, performance appraisal, and reward administration of the officer corps at Zambia's primary military training establishment without scrutiny or reform.

The problem is compounded by the design origins of the PMS. The civilian PMP framework was adopted by the DSZ through coercive isomorphism, institutional compliance with a government-wide reform mandate, without adaptation to the structural conditions of a hierarchical military organisation. The military establishments operate under command authority architectures, single-rater appraisal cultures, and sealed accountability hierarchies that are structurally incompatible with the participative, transparent, and output-orientated assumptions embedded in NPM-derived PMS frameworks (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hood, 1991). Where this mismatch is not identified and addressed, it produces ceremonial compliance. This is the formal apparatus of performance management that operates without delivering genuine performance accountability.

Qualitative evidence from comparable Sub-Saharan African public sector contexts, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, and Zambia, consistently documents PMS underperformance, yet no study has applied an integrated public administration theoretical framework to evaluate PMS effectiveness specifically within Sub-Saharan African military establishments (Chidwala, 2013; Zvavahera, 2014; Molefhi, 2015; Matlala, 2011; Moodley et al., 2022; Kanchebele, 2012; Kamfwa, 2016). This study addresses that gap by conducting an empirical qualitative evaluation of PMS effectiveness at MILTEZ, explaining the institutional mechanisms underlying its failure, and proposing a military-adapted PMS reform framework grounded in the institutional realities of the DSZ.

### 1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To examine the existence and effectiveness of goal-setting practices at MILTEZ as perceived by key informants.
- ii. To investigate the process and outcomes of performance appraisal at MILTEZ as perceived by key informants.
- iii. To assess the administration and perceived fairness of performance rewards at MILTEZ as perceived by key informants.
- iv. To identify the institutional mechanisms that explain the pattern of PMS ineffectiveness identified across the three PMS components.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

#### 2.1.1 New Public Management Theory

The NPM theory is the macro-level theoretical foundation for understanding why PMS was adopted in the DSZ. Hood's (1991) canonical formulation identified NPM as comprising explicit standards and measures of performance, emphasis on output controls, and the application of private sector management styles to public institutions. NPM was promoted across Sub-Saharan Africa as the paradigm for administrative reform and the PMS. The MBO variant became NPM's principal operational instrument for realising performance accountability (Hinson et al., 2022; Lapsley & Miller, 2024; Funck & Karlsson, 2020).

Critically, NPM theory was developed in the context of civilian public administration in Western industrialised countries. Its foundational assumptions, that employees can participate in performance contracting, that appraisal can be objective and transparent, and that rewards can be distributed in strict proportion to measurable outputs, are predicated on institutional conditions that military establishments in resource-constrained Sub-Saharan African settings cannot approximate. Hambissa et al. (2023) document the growing recognition that annual performance review systems, which

were the instruments used at MILTEZ, are fundamentally unsuited to complex, dynamic public organisations. NPM theory therefore provides not only the explanatory context for PMS adoption but also the basis for understanding its structural limitations.

### 2.1.2 Institutional Isomorphism

Institutional isomorphism provides the meso-level mechanism explaining how military establishments come to adopt civilian PMS frameworks despite the institutional mismatch (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). DiMaggio and Powell identified three isomorphic mechanisms: coercive (adoption driven by regulatory mandate); mimetic (adoption through imitation of organisations perceived as legitimate); and normative (adoption through professionalisation). The DSZ's adoption of the civilian PMP through the 1993 PSRP reflects coercive isomorphism; the uncritical import of the MBO instrument's civilian design, without adaptation to military institutional conditions, reflects mimetic isomorphism. Ahyaruddin et al. (2023) demonstrate that isomorphism in public sector organisations frequently produces ceremonial adoption: the formal apparatus of performance management is installed without the substantive outcomes it is designed to produce. This is because the institutional conditions required for genuine implementation are absent.

### 2.1.3 Principal-Agent Theory

The principal-agent theory (PAT) provides the micro-level lens for understanding the hierarchical dynamics of goal-setting, appraisal, and reward at MILTEZ. PAT posits that principals, represented by command authority, delegate tasks to agents (officers) under conditions of information asymmetry – the agent knows more about feasibility and execution than the principal (Waterman & Meier, 1998; Eisenhardt, 1989). In the DSZ context, this maps onto the relationship between wing commander and rated officer: command authority assigns mandates, wing commanders translate them into goals, and rated officers execute. This execution is based on information asymmetry at each level that creates accountability deficits. Bjurström (2020) demonstrates that the impact of performance management in hierarchical principal-agent relationships is contingent on trust and information flow. These are precisely the dimensions that military command culture suppresses. Recent conceptual work further shows that PAT's rigid contractual assumptions diverge from the complexity of real accountability relationships in public organisations, generating the opaque reward and appraisal dynamics documented in this study (Rajala, 2025).

### 2.1.4 Accountability Theory

Accountability theory in public administration identifies four accountability types in public organisations: hierarchical (to superiors through command authority); legal (to rules and regulations); professional (to occupational norms); and political (to external stakeholders) (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Bovens, 2007). Effective PMS requires coherent operation across all four types. At MILTEZ, hierarchical accountability dominates. The rating officers are accountable upward in the command chain but not downward to rated officers, not outward to professional performance standards, and not laterally to any independent review mechanism. Romzek and Dubnick (1987) identify this dominance of hierarchical accountability at the expense of other types as a structural precondition for appraisal and reward dysfunctions. Accountability theory, therefore, provides both the diagnostic lens for understanding what is institutionally absent at MILTEZ and the normative framework for what effective PMS reform must deliver.

## 2.2 Empirical Review

### 2.2.1 Goal-Setting Effectiveness in Sub-Saharan African Public Organisations

Empirical studies directly relevant to Objective 1, which examines goal-setting effectiveness, document persistent failures in performance goal formulation across Sub-Saharan African public institutions. Hambissa et al. (2023) recognise that annual performance review systems, the primary mechanism through which NPM operationalises goal accountability, are structurally misaligned with the operational rhythms of complex African public organisations, with more regular, developmental feedback mechanisms required in their place. Pandey and Rainey (2006) establish goal ambiguity as a structural barrier to performance management. They assert that when goals are formulated without mechanisms for participative clarification, they fail to provide the operational clarity required to guide behaviour or enable meaningful accountability. Heinrich (2002) demonstrates that when performance standards are mandated without concurrent resource allocation, the result is not improved accountability but systemic frustration and ceremonial compliance. This finding has a direct application to goal-setting processes in resource-constrained military establishments. The findings collectively establish the empirical baseline against which goal-setting effectiveness at MILTEZ is assessed under Objective 1.

### 2.2.2 Performance Appraisal Dynamics in African Public Sector Contexts

Empirical studies relevant to Objective 2, investigating performance appraisal processes and outcomes, reveal consistent appraisal dysfunction in hierarchical African public organisations. Hangula's (2010) investigation of the Namibia Defence Force found that performance appraisal failed to meet its objectives because supervisors were

insufficiently engaged, ratings had little impact on promotions, and the system demotivated personnel. This pattern is consistent with the PAT accountability gaps identified theoretically in Section 2.1. 3. Haque's (2012) qualitative analysis of public sector appraisal in Bangladesh identified the divergence between legalistic appraisal parameters and managerial discretion as a fundamental structural problem for appraisal validity. This is directly analogous to the trait-based appraisal design under investigation at MILTEZ, where wing commanders exercise discretion through trait scoring without accountability to objective performance criteria. Moodley et al. (2022) identify performance goal ambiguity, supervisory bias, and lack of transparency as primary inhibitors of effective PMS in South African public sector organisations. Roberts (1998) identifies the disconnect between appraisal criteria and actual job performance as an enduring flaw in public sector systems, confirming that when appraisal scores are not credibly linked to measurable outputs, the system loses both its diagnostic validity and its motivational function.

### 2.2.3 Reward Administration and Perceived Fairness

Empirical studies relevant to Objective 3, which assesses performance reward administration and perceived fairness, document reward dysfunction as a systemic consequence of appraisal design failures. Roberts (1998) establishes that when appraisal scores are not credibly linked to reward decisions, the system loses both motivational potency and perceived fairness. This finding has direct application to PMS contexts characterised by trait-based rather than goal-attainment appraisal. Moodley et al. (2022) document patterns of supervisory bias and transparency failure in South African public sector PMS, confirming that reward opacity is a structural feature of hierarchical public institutions rather than an organisation-specific anomaly. Within the Zambian context, Kanchebele (2012) and Kamfwa (2016) document comparable reward administration deficiencies in civil service PMS, establishing that opacity and perceived unfairness in reward allocation are systemic rather than incidental features of NPM-derived performance systems in Zambia. These three bodies of evidence provide the empirical comparators against which reward administration at MILTEZ is evaluated under Objective 3.

### 2.2.4 Institutional Mechanisms Explaining PMS Failure

Empirical studies relevant to Objective 4, identifying the institutional mechanisms underlying PMS ineffectiveness, converge on institutional isomorphism as the primary explanatory construct. Ahyaruddin et al. (2023) demonstrate that isomorphism in public sector organisations produces accountability deficits: organisations adopt the formal apparatus of performance management to achieve institutional legitimacy but do not achieve genuine accountability improvements because the underlying institutional conditions for effective performance management are absent. This ceremonial adoption dynamic is replicated across Sub-Saharan African contexts. Fatile (2014) and Hinson et al. (2022) document the broader NPM implementation failure pattern across African public organisations, identifying the institutional gap between imported Western frameworks and African administrative realities as the primary mechanism of non-delivery. Zvavahera (2014) and Moodley et al. (2022) provide comparative regional evidence from Zimbabwe and South Africa, respectively, confirming that PMS ceremonial compliance is a regional pattern rather than a country-specific anomaly. The empirical consensus supports the theoretical proposition that the isomorphism-mismatch pathway articulated in Section 2.1 is empirically operative across comparable military and public sector contexts in the SADC region.

## 2.3 Research Gap

Three critical gaps persist in the literature. First, no qualitative case study has applied an integrated mainstream public administration theoretical framework, combining NPM theory, institutional isomorphism, PAT, and accountability theory, to evaluate PMS effectiveness in a Zambian military establishment. Second, the specific pathway through which mimetic isomorphism produces component-level PMS failures simultaneously across goal-setting, appraisal, and reward systems has not been empirically mapped through qualitative inquiry in a sub-Saharan African military context. Third, no reform framework has been proposed that addresses the isomorphism mismatch by designing PMS instruments natively appropriate for military command structures rather than adapted from civilian templates. This study addresses all three gaps.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design, the most appropriate methodology for investigating a contemporary phenomenon, PMS effectiveness, within its bounded, real-life institutional context (Yin, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Specifically, the study employs an instrumental case study approach (Stake, 1995), in which MILTEZ serves as the case not as an end in itself but as a vehicle for illuminating broader insights about how NPM-derived PMS frameworks fail in hierarchical Sub-Saharan African military organisations. The instrumental case study design was

particularly suited to this study because it allows the researcher to move beyond description to theoretical explanation. This accounts for the mechanisms that produce PMS failure, not merely documenting that failure occurs.

The study was guided by a constructivist philosophical orientation, acknowledging that key informants' accounts of PMS effectiveness are shaped by their institutional positions, experiences, and the command culture of MILTEZ (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2013). Consistent with Mason's (2002) guidance on qualitative research, the researcher's institutional familiarity with the DSZ was treated not as a source of bias but as a contextual asset that enabled deeper access, more nuanced questioning, and richer interpretation of informants' accounts within the military command culture.

### 3.2 Participants and Sampling

Twenty-three key informants were purposively selected from the officer population at MILTEZ, Kabwe. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that all participants possessed direct, expert knowledge of PMS administration, specifically of goal-setting, performance appraisal, or reward processes, in their respective roles (Bernard, 2002; Creswell, 2013). The 23 key informants comprised two categories: Wing Commander Level Key Informants (n=14): The Wing Commander Level Key Informants, or commanding officers, of each of the six MILTEZ departments: Zambia Military College (ZMC), Officers' Staff College (OSC), Technical Training College (TTC), Infantry Training College (ITC), Administration Wing (ADW), and Recruit Training College (RTC). These colleges were all selected, together with additional wing-level commanders responsible for subdepartmental training programmes. Wing Commanders were selected because they are the principal actors in the PAT framework at MILTEZ: they receive performance mandates from higher command and translate them into individual goal assignments, conduct appraisals, and initiate reward recommendations for their subordinate officers.

Senior Staff Officer Level Key Informants (n=9): Nine senior staff officers were purposively selected from MILTEZ headquarters and departmental staff functions on the basis of their direct involvement in PMS design, coordination, or administration. These included the chief of staff (responsible for strategic planning and performance alignment), the G1 (Personnel) officer (responsible for appraisal form administration and records), senior instructors with extensive appraisal experience, and performance management coordinators responsible for the operational implementation of the PMP across departments. The inclusion of this second category enriched the data by providing perspectives on PMS from both the command level and the administrative and coordination levels. This offered a more comprehensive picture of how PMS operates across MILTEZ as an institution.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with all 23 key informants. Interviews were conducted between October 2018 and February 2019 at MILTEZ, Kabwe. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a secure, private setting to protect confidentiality and encourage candid participation, given the security-sensitive nature of the military establishment. The interview guide was developed around the three PMS components (goal-setting, performance appraisal, and the performance reward system) with open-ended questions exploring how each component was experienced, administered, and perceived by informants in their respective roles.

The interview questions were informed by the four theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 2.1 and covered how performance goals are set, communicated, and resourced (NPM and PAT lens); the process and criteria of performance appraisal (accountability theory and isomorphism lens); the administration and fairness of reward decisions (PAT and equity lens); and informants' perceptions of the overall PMS design and its fitness for the military institutional context (isomorphism lens). The interview guide was piloted with two officers at Chindwin Barracks, Kabwe (not included in the final sample), to assess clarity and contextual appropriateness. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, and verbatim transcripts were produced within 48 hours of each interview. Field notes were maintained throughout to capture contextual observations.

Key informants are identified in this article using institutional role codes: wing commander level officers by department (wing commander level key informant (WCLKI): 1-14) and senior staff officers by functional role (senior staff officer key informant (SSO-KI): 1-9).

### 3.4 Data Saturation

The data saturation was monitored throughout the interview process using concurrent analysis after each interview to track emerging themes and assess information redundancy. Saturation was determined through three indicators: code saturation (no new codes emerging from additional interviews), meaning saturation (no new thematic meanings being identified), and theoretical saturation (sufficient data to develop a comprehensive understanding of PMS effectiveness across all four theoretical dimensions). Saturation indicators were confirmed after the 19th interview; the remaining four interviews (20 to 23) were conducted to confirm saturation and ensure comprehensive coverage across all departmental levels and functional roles. The final four interviews yielded no substantively new insights, confirming that the 23-informant sample provided a thorough and saturated qualitative account of PMS effectiveness at MILTEZ.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), following a six-phase process: familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; generation of initial codes capturing semantically and latently meaningful features of the data; searching for themes by clustering related codes into candidate themes; reviewing themes against the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness; defining and naming themes by articulating what each captures about PMS effectiveness; and reporting through the rich, analytic narratives presented in Section 4. Consistent with a reflexive approach, the researcher's theoretical positionality, informed by the NPM, Isomorphism, PAT, and Accountability frameworks, was explicitly acknowledged and documented throughout the analytical process, rather than treated as a bias to be eliminated (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Coding was conducted in two cycles: a first cycle generating descriptive codes closely tied to informants' language and a second cycle generating more abstract, theoretically informed interpretive codes. Member checking was conducted with three key informants (one Wing Commander and two senior staff officers) to verify the resonance of preliminary themes with participants' intended meanings.

To further ensure methodological rigour, this study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiry: credibility was enhanced through member checking and prolonged engagement with the MILTEZ context; transferability was supported through thick description of institutional structures and participant roles; dependability was maintained through an audit trail of coding decisions and reflexive journaling; and confirmability was addressed through explicit documentation of the researcher's theoretical positionality and the use of verbatim participant quotations to ground interpretive claims.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines throughout design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zambia Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC: 2018JULY-029) and institutional approval from Zambia Army Headquarters prior to data collection. All 23 key informants provided written informed consent before engagement, were fully briefed on the study's purpose, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Given the security-sensitive nature of MILTEZ, particular attention was paid to ensuring that no classified operational information was elicited or disclosed. All participants were anonymised through the role-based coding system described in Section 3.3, and all audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and destroyed after analysis.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Findings

Reflexive thematic analysis of the 23 interviews generated four primary themes that collectively explain PMS ineffectiveness at MILTEZ: a goal-setting deficit, a trait-performance disconnect in appraisal, a reward administration failure, and an overarching systemic institutional mismatch. These themes are presented below with rich verbatim evidence from key informants.

#### 4.1.1 Theme 1: Goal-Setting Deficit

All Wing Commander-level key informants confirmed that performance goals are formally set for officers at MILTEZ, cascaded downward through the command hierarchy from the establishment's strategic mandate to train DSZ officers from basic to advanced levels. The wing commanders consistently described goals as operationally specific, resource-linked, and time-bound – meeting the formal requirements of SMART goal-setting:

*“We have soldier recruit training for 24 weeks beginning January to July 2019. I want you, as Course Officer, to ensure that these troops can shoot and kill an enemy at the battle range of 800 metres without being seen and also be able to effectively and efficiently conduct pacification operations in low-intensity conflicts anywhere in the world.”* (WCLKI 03, Interview, 27 October 2018).

However, the goal-setting process was characterised by the complete exclusion of rated officers from formulation. All Wing Commander informants confirmed that goals were assigned unilaterally by command authority and communicated to rated officers by directive — not negotiated. Senior staff officer informants offered a structural explanation for this exclusion:

*“The goals are set for the officers in MILTEZ by the commanders following the military hierarchy. The setting of goals in the establishment is essentially designed for purposes of meeting the strategic objectives set by the command and is also in tandem with the ones set for everyone below my command.”* (SSOKI 07, Interview, 30 October 2018).

Three sub-themes emerged within the goal-setting deficit. First, resource inadequacy: the majority of Wing Commander informants reported that performance goals were frequently set without confirmation that the required financial, material, and human resources would be available.

*“After setting the performance goals, I make sure that the required resources in terms of funds; correct and adequate training ground and equipment like weapons; and access to required information are made available. If they are inadequate, I inform our headquarters.”* (WCLKI 04, Interview, 07 November 2018).

Second, inequitable goal allocation: senior staff informants reported persistent disparities in the volume and difficulty of performance goals assigned across departments and individual officers, with some officers receiving disproportionately demanding loads without corresponding resource support. Third, goal ambiguity: several informants noted instances where goals were communicated in terms insufficiently precise to guide performance — a consequence of the absence of any participative clarification mechanism in the unilateral formulation process. This finding resonates with Pandey and Rainey's (2006) identification of goal ambiguity as a structural barrier to performance management: when goals are formulated without mechanisms for participative clarification, they fail to provide the operational clarity required to guide behaviour or enable meaningful accountability.

This theme aligns with the NPM accountability deficit identified by Hambissa et al. (2023) in comparable African public sector contexts: performance accountability standards are set through NPM instruments, but the resource environment cannot sustain them. The PAT dimension is equally evident: the information asymmetry between commanders and wing commanders about resource availability and operational feasibility produces goals that are formally valid but structurally unachievable. Heinrich (2002) found that when performance standards are mandated without concurrent resource allocation, the result is not improved accountability by systemic frustration and ceremonial compliance. This is precisely the dynamic reported by MILTEZ wing commanders.

#### **4.1.2 Theme 2: Trait-Performance Disconnect in Appraisal**

All informants confirmed that performance appraisal is conducted annually, in October of each year, as a formal institutional exercise led by wing commanders. The appraisal process is consistently described as involving form completion, a medical examination, and a Wing Commander-led evaluation meeting:

*“I call the subordinate officers usually in September of every year and inform them about the performance appraisal. I give them appraisal forms to fill out and get medically examined. After that, I evaluate their performance following the ratings and provisions regarding the personal traits indicated on the performance appraisal form. I then bring out identified weaknesses and areas of strength and ask the subordinate officer to endorse the form as a matter of procedure.”* (WCLKI 02, Interview, 13 November 2018).

The most significant finding across all 23 informants was the Trait-Performance Disconnect (TPD): the appraisal instrument evaluates personal character traits — loyalty, military bearing, physical fitness, professional ethics, discipline, and instructor ability — rather than the degree to which the SMART goals set at the beginning of the year were achieved. This disconnect was articulated with particular clarity by senior staff officer informants who had reflected on the design implications:

*“The form used is devoid of the actual performance tasks and goals given at the beginning of the year. The officer is required to endorse the evaluation regardless of whether they are happy or not.”* (SSOKI 01, Interview, 19 November 2018).

Senior instructor informants elaborated on the structural consequence of this disconnect — that rating officers are left to score traits using subjective judgement with no obligation to reference the officer's goal-attainment record:

*“When I assess my officers, I look at how they carry themselves, their loyalty, their physical fitness, their discipline. These are the things on the form. But did Sergeant Banda actually achieve his snipers course targets? That is not on the form. So how do I connect what I measured in October with what I assigned in January?”* (SSOKI 05, Interview, 19 November 2018).

This theme constitutes a fundamental accountability theory failure (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987): the absence of professional accountability norms, which would require appraisal to be anchored to demonstrable performance outcomes, means that hierarchical accountability dominates unchallenged, and rating officers exercise unchecked discretion over trait scores. Roberts (1998) identified the disconnect between appraisal criteria and actual job performance as an enduring flaw in public sector systems; at MILTEZ, this manifests as the evaluation of personal traits rather than documented goal attainment, leaving rating officers to exercise subjective judgement without accountability to objective performance evidence. The NPM requirement for explicit, measurable output controls (Hood, 1991) is formally satisfied by the existence of SMART goals but substantively violated by an appraisal instrument that does not measure those outputs.

#### **4.1.3 Theme 3: Reward Administration Failure**

All Wing Commander informants confirmed that a formal performance reward system (PRS) exists at MILTEZ, comprising promotions, superior command appointments, medals and national honours, further training (including overseas courses), and presidential honours and awards. The motivational potency of this portfolio was acknowledged

across all informant categories. One Wing Commander described an instance where the system had functioned as designed:

*“I was sent to the USA in 2017 for further training because I was rated the best officer in the 2016 performance evaluation. I had supervised a snipers' course where 72 per cent of the course participants managed to hit man-sized targets at distances of 300 metres. Performing beyond the set performance goal and getting further training in the USA was so gratifying to me. I feel valued and appreciated by the system.”* (WCLKI 09, Interview, 11 December 2018).

However, three sub-themes of reward failure emerged from the informant accounts. First, perceived nepotism: several informants across both wing commander and senior staff categories reported observations of reward allocation favouring officers with family or social connections to senior commanders:

*“I have observed, over time, that some officers whose families hold high ranks in the army are favoured and receive far better performance ratings that predispose them to rewards for excellent performance. Some officers with family connections in the system receive excellent performance ratings despite their average performance. This is made worse by the performance criteria, which are based on loyalty and cannot be questioned.”* (SSOKI 09, Interview, 19 December 2018).

Second, the appraisal-reward disconnect: multiple informants noted that reward decisions bore little discernible relationship to appraisal scores — a structural consequence of the TPD identified in Theme 2. Since the appraisal instrument does not measure goal attainment, rewards cannot be credibly grounded in performance achievement:

*“Evaluations leading to rewards at the establishment are dependent on the scores obtained from the performance appraisal form. These scores are based on personal traits that are susceptible to the personal tastes of the rating officer. I think the rating ought to be based on the achieved performance goals.”* (SSOKI 07, Interview, 27 December 2018).

Third, PRS opacity: informants across all categories reported that reward allocation criteria were not published or communicated; that comparative appraisal scores were not accessible to rated officers; and that no formal mechanism existed through which reward decisions could be questioned or appealed. One Wing Commander reflected on the systemic implications of this opacity:

*“The PRS at MILTEZ is challenging to follow, especially as regards the criteria used to determine who gets what reward. Officers who do not understand it lose confidence in the system.”* (WCLKI 10, Interview, 05 January 2019).

Moodley et al. (2022) document identical patterns of supervisory bias and transparency failure in South African public sector PMS, confirming that these are structural features of hierarchical public institutions rather than organisation-specific anomalies. Roberts (1998) further observed that when appraisal scores are not credibly linked to reward decisions, the system loses both motivational potency and perceived fairness. This is the dynamic reported by MILTEZ informants regarding the appraisal-reward disconnect.

#### 4.1.4 Theme 4: Systemic Institutional Mismatch

An overarching fourth theme emerged from the cross-cutting analysis of the three component-level themes: that the failures of goal-setting, appraisal, and reward administration at MILTEZ are not independent malfunctions but expressions of a single, systemic institutional mismatch between the civilian NPM framework within which PMS was designed and the hierarchical military institutional context in which it must operate. This theme was most directly expressed by senior staff officer informants who had compared MILTEZ's PMS with performance management approaches in other institutional contexts:

*“The PMS we have was designed for the civil service. It was brought to us as part of the reform. But the civil service officer can question their supervisor, can go to HR, and can raise a grievance. Here, questioning your Wing Commander is insubordination. The whole system assumes you can participate. But in the army, you comply. So the system runs, but it does not work the way it was meant to work.”* (SSOKI 09, Interview, 06 November 2018).

Senior instructor informants reinforced this theme from the appraisal perspective:

*“Performance management in a training establishment like ours is about whether the soldiers we graduate can fight. That is the output. But the appraisal form asks me about loyalty and bearing. These are important values, yes — but they are not the same as whether Major Banda ran a successful snipers course. The system cannot tell the difference”* (SSOKI 01, Interview, 05 February 2019).

This theme confirms the institutional isomorphism diagnosis: the DSZ adopted the civilian PMS framework through coercive isomorphism (PSRP mandate) without adapting the civilian instrument to military institutional conditions — producing the ceremonial adoption dynamic in which formal compliance with NPM requirements exists alongside substantive non-delivery of NPM outcomes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Ahyaruddin et al., 2023).

## 4.2 Discussion

### 4.2.1 The Isomorphism-Mismatch Pathway

The four themes generated through reflexive thematic analysis converge on a coherent institutional explanation: PMS ineffectiveness at MILTEZ is the product of a causal pathway, the Isomorphism-Mismatch Pathway, in which mimetic adoption of civilian NPM instruments produces an architectural mismatch that generates component-level failures across goal-setting, appraisal, and reward. NPM's PMS framework assumes participative goal formulation, objective performance measurement through results-based appraisal, and merit-based, transparent reward distribution (Hood, 1991). These assumptions cannot be realised at MILTEZ, not because of poor management, but because the command authority architecture, single-rater appraisal design, and sealed reward administration processes that characterise military establishments structurally preclude their realisation.

The four theoretical lenses illuminate distinct but interlocking dimensions of this pathway. The NPM theory explains the macro-level origin — the institutional imperative to adopt PMS as a legitimising instrument of public sector reform (Lapsley & Miller, 2024). Institutional isomorphism explains the meso-level adoption mechanism — the uncritical import of a civilian template without adaptation (Ahyaruddin et al., 2023). PAT explains the micro-level accountability dynamics — the information asymmetries at each command level that generate goal-setting inadequacy, appraisal bias, and reward opacity (Bjurström, 2020; Rajala, 2025). Accountability theory explains the normative deficit — the dominance of hierarchical accountability at the expense of professional, legal, and political accountability types that effective PMS requires (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987).

### 4.2.2 The Military-Adapted PMS Reform Framework

What is required is a Military-Adapted PMS (MA-PMS) that addresses the isomorphism mismatch directly. Four reforms constitute the MA-PMS. First, resource-secured goal-setting: mandatory resource adequacy audits before goals are formally assigned, ensuring that only resourced goals are gazetted as performance commitments — addressing the NPM accountability gap in which standards are set without resource confirmation (Hambissa et al., 2023). Second, a hybrid appraisal instrument: allocating at least 60% of the appraisal score to documented SMART goal attainment and no more than 40% to military conduct traits — closing the TPD while preserving the legitimate professional accountability function of character evaluation. Third, transparent reward criteria: published reward standards tied to goal attainment, an independent review panel for reward decisions above defined thresholds, and a formal officer redress channel — introducing the professional and legal accountability types identified by Romzek and Dubnick (1987) as necessary complements to hierarchical accountability. Fourth, digitised PMS: a secure, auditable digital platform for recording and tracking the entire PMS cycle, reducing information asymmetry and enabling evidence-based, transparent reward decisions. These reforms are structurally compatible with military command culture and do not require the importation of civilian participative management models.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

This qualitative case study evaluated the effectiveness of the PMS at MILTEZ through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 23 purposively selected key informants, analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four interrelated themes were identified: a Goal-Setting Deficit characterised by unilateral formulation and resource inadequacy; a Trait-Performance Disconnect in which the appraisal instrument evaluates personal characteristics rather than goal achievement; a Reward Administration Failure driven by nepotism, opacity, and the appraisal-reward disconnect; and an overarching Systemic Institutional Mismatch generated by the mimetic adoption of civilian PMS frameworks in a hierarchical military context. Applying an integrated public administration theoretical framework — NPM Theory, Institutional Isomorphism, Principal-Agent Theory, and Accountability Theory — the study concludes that PMS ineffectiveness at MILTEZ is systemic, rooted in the Isomorphism-Mismatch Pathway, and is likely replicated across military establishments in the Southern African region.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The DSZ should develop and pilot the Military-Adapted PMS (MA-PMS) at MILTEZ as a reform instrument that preserves command authority while addressing the four structural defects identified in this study: resource-secured goal-setting; hybrid goal-attainment appraisal; transparent and auditable reward criteria with independent review; and digitalisation of the PMS cycle. Future qualitative research should extend this case study to other DSZ establishments to determine whether the systemic failure pattern identified at MILTEZ is institution-specific or service-wide. Comparative qualitative inquiry across SADC military establishments would establish the regional generalisability of the ceremonial adoption dynamic. Research is also needed on the gender dimension of PMS experience in DSZ establishments and on the potential of digital tools to reduce information asymmetry and improve accountability in military performance management contexts.

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The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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