# Employee perspectives on human resource risk management in Zambian quasi-governmental organisations: The gap between perception and practice

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores human resource professionals' accounts of employee perceptions of human resource risk management in Zambian quasi-governmental organizations, addressing a critical gap between formal governance frameworks and organisational practice. While existing research identifies human resource risks and policy implementation challenges, less is known about how organisational actors interpret risk, governance, and responsibility within quasi-governmental organisations, particularly in the Zambian context. The study is theoretically grounded in Social Constructionism and Problematic Integration Theory, supported by Institutional Theory, to explain how organisational actors construct meanings around human resource risks, reconcile uncertainty with valued outcomes, and interpret the relationship between formal governance structures and organisational practice. Drawing on in-depth interviews with thirteen senior human resource professionals from thirteen quasi-governmental organizations, the study is grounded in a relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. It examines how organisational actors construct and interpret human resource risk and the extent to which these interpretations shape perceptions of governance and policy implementation. The findings reveal a persistent policy-practice gap in which formal human resource policies exist but are inconsistently implemented. Participants reported that employees often perceive favouritism and nepotism, rather than merit, as influential in recruitment and promotion decisions, thereby weakening confidence and trust in human resource governance systems. The findings further indicate limited awareness of formal risk management processes, with participants reporting that employees often encounter policy outputs without understanding the underlying risk rationale. The study contributes to human resource governance literature by showing that the policy-practice gap involves not only inconsistent implementation but also competing interpretations of risk, fairness, participation, and organisational responsibility. Effective HR risk governance therefore requires both structural reforms and greater attention to how risk is communicated, interpreted, and experienced within organisations.

**Keywords:** Human Resource Governance, Policy-Practice Gap, Relativist Interpretivism, Risk Perception, Quasi-Governmental Organisations, Zambia

## I. INTRODUCTION

Quasi-governmental organizations occupy a unique institutional space at the intersection of government and the private sector, serving as pivotal mechanisms for executing policies and responding to social demands that neither government bodies nor market participants address effectively (Mead & Warren, 2016). In Zambia, these entities assume a crucial role in job creation, regulatory oversight, and service delivery across strategic sectors, including energy, transport, health, communications, and agriculture. Despite their significance, research on human resource governance within these institutions remains scarce, exhibiting limited attention to employee perceptions and experiences of human resource risk management. This limited attention is important because formal HR governance arrangements do not operate independently of how organisational actors understand, interpret, and respond to them.

The Zambian quasi-governmental sector operates within a broader governance context shaped by public sector reform and successive efforts to strengthen the performance and accountability of public institutions. These processes have created a hybrid institutional environment in which quasi-governmental organisations are expected to balance operational and commercial objectives with public accountability. This hybridity is not merely a background feature; it shapes how human resource decisions are made, how risk is understood, and how employees experience governance. Evidence from other African public-sector settings similarly shows that formal organisational reforms are mediated by employee perceptions, institutional relationships and everyday organisational practices. Research in Ghana, for example, demonstrates that employee perceptions can influence the institutionalisation and implementation of formal performance-management systems and that credibility, fairness, respect and communication are important to the development of organisational trust (Ohemeng et al., 2018; Ohemeng et al., 2020). These experiences reinforce the importance of examining the relationship between formal governance structures and how those structures are interpreted within organisational practice.



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Managing human resource risks is particularly complex within quasi-governmental organizations. These organizations encounter risks distinct from those faced by traditional government entities and private sector firms (Mead & Warren, 2016). Their dynamic operational environment, characterized by public accountability and private sector pressures, necessitates sophisticated human resource risk management approaches (Bombiak, 2020). Central to this approach is human resource governance, encompassing policies, procedures, and structures that govern human resource decisions within an organization. However, the Auditor General's Report (2023) reveals significant human resource risks in Zambian parastatal bodies and statutory institutions. These include governance failures, staffing deficiencies, questionable practices, statutory non-compliance, and employee welfare crises. These documented institutional problems demonstrate that the existence of formal governance arrangements does not necessarily ensure their effective enactment in organisational practice.

From a relativist standpoint, risk is not an objective entity to discover and measure; it is a temporal construct emerging through narrative processes where individuals and organizations selectively construct their reality based on their values and the forces that threaten them (Russell & Babrow, 2011). Therefore, understanding employee perceptions is crucial because risk perception shapes behaviour, compliance, and organizational trust (Damayanti et al., 2023). The policy-practice gap being investigated in this study is not merely an implementation failure but reflects stakeholders' deeper interpretive differences regarding what risk is, whose perspectives count, and how governance should respond.

Existing research has examined human resource risks primarily in terms of identification, mitigation, managerial awareness, and formal risk management processes (Zulu, 2015; Becker & Smidt, 2015; Bombiak, 2020). However, less attention has been given to how organisational actors interpret the meaning of HR risk and how these interpretations influence the credibility and legitimacy of formal governance arrangements. This gap is particularly relevant in quasi-governmental organisations, where formal public-sector accountability coexists with organisational pressures associated with commercial and operational performance. The present study therefore examines how human resource professionals understand employee perceptions of HR risk management, with particular attention to policy implementation, risk awareness, participation, fairness, and trust. The study contributes to this literature by shifting attention from HR risk as a primarily technical management problem to the interpretive processes through which risk, fairness, and governance acquire meaning within organisations.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Enterprise risk management has developed sophisticated frameworks addressing financial, operational, and technological vulnerabilities (Falemi et al., 2024; Meyer et al., 2011). However, human resource risk management remains under theorized and deprioritized in practice (Christensen, 2009; Meyer et al., 2011). This disparity is particularly pronounced in quasi-governmental organizations, where the complex interplay of public mandate, political influence, and commercial operation generates a distinct array of human resource risks.

The Zambian public sector confronts a critical disjunction between formal risk management frameworks and persistent human resource failures. The Auditor General's Reports of 2022 and 2023 document systemic human resource failures which include prolonged absence of boards creating accountability vacuums; critical staff vacancies persisting for years; contractual arrangements exposing government to financial losses; large unpaid statutory obligations threatening employee welfare; and benefits owed to retired and separated officers remaining unsettled for decades. These failures suggest weaknesses in public institutions' human capital governance.

Zulu (2015) identified nine high-priority human resource risks, comprising inadequate recruitment, stress, demotivation, skill shortages, and unplanned retirement and succession. However, while Zulu's study is invaluable, it focused on risk identification and mitigation without explicitly examining the governance structures that influence the perception and management of these risks. Therefore, this study extends Zulu's work by examining how governance structures enable or constrain risk identification, assessment, and mitigation and how these processes are interpreted by organisational actors with particular attention on employee perceptions of human resource risk management.

The central issue pertains to the disparity between formal risk management frameworks and practical human resource risk governance. Despite robust policy design, the framework is deficient in human resource-specific mechanisms for the systematic identification of workforce risks, the assessment of their impact on objectives, and the implementation of targeted mitigation strategies. This governance deficit transcends mere administrative inefficiencies, thereby presenting considerable risks to institutional sustainability and the provision of public services. Understanding how employees and HR professionals interpret human resource risk management is crucial for bridging this gap because these perceptions influence behaviour, compliance, participation, and the perceived legitimacy and credibility of governance systems. Accordingly, the problem addressed by this study is not simply the absence of HR policies or formal risk management structures. Rather, it is the limited understanding of how formal HR risk governance arrangements are interpreted, communicated, and experienced within quasi-governmental organisations.



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### 1.2 Research Objectives

i. To describe how employees perceive human resource risk management within quasi-governmental organisations.
ii. To explore the awareness levels of formal human resource risk management processes among employees.
iii. To describe the factors shaping employee perceptions of human resource governance, including trust, fairness, and policy implementation consistency.
iv. To identify the implications of employee perceptions for human resource risk management effectiveness and organisational performance.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework. Social construction of reality theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1991) offers the overarching framework to explain how shared meanings regarding human resource governance develop and persist within organizations. Problematic integration theory (Russell & Babrow, 2011) offers a framework for understanding how uncertainty and value interact in risk construction. It elucidates how employees create risk narratives, combining outcome uncertainty with the value they place on career progression and fair treatment. Relativist epistemology (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) justifies analyzing various stakeholder perspectives instead of pursuing a singular, correct assessment of human resource risk governance.

These perspectives perform different but complementary analytical functions. Relativism provides the epistemological basis for treating organisational accounts of HR risk as situated constructions rather than as expressions of a single objective reality. Social constructionism provides the broader explanation for how meanings of risk, fairness, governance, and responsibility are produced and reproduced through organisational interaction. Problematic integration theory provides a more specific lens for understanding how employees and managers reconcile uncertainty with valued outcomes such as promotion, employment security and fair treatment. Institutional theory is subsequently used as a supporting organisational lens to interpret the relationship between formal structures and enacted practices.

Russell and Babrow (2011) demonstrate that risk is not merely perceived but rather narratively constructed. Their synthesis of narrative and problematic integration theories reveals that risks permeate our lives, shaped and communicated through storied explanations, expectations, and evaluations of potentially significant yet uncertain experiences over time. Risk is neither a relic of the past nor a forecast of the future; instead, it is a contemporary concept formulated to define the connection between our established past and our anticipated future. This insight is fundamental to understanding the gap between human resource policy and practice. In the present study, this perspective helps explain why the same HR decision can be interpreted differently by different organisational actors. A management decision to recruit externally may be constructed by HR professionals as a mechanism for reducing competency-related risk, while employees may interpret the same decision as a threat to internal progression. The disagreement is therefore not necessarily caused by a lack of information alone; it reflects different values, expectations, experiences and understandings of what constitutes risk.

Berger and Luckmann's (1991) influential work posits that social reality is not objective; instead, it is shaped by social interactions and societal constructs. Knowledge is produced and maintained through social processes, and what counts as knowledge in one context may not hold in another. Damayanti et al. (2023) apply this relativist insight to public sector risk awareness, demonstrating that it is not objective but rather a social reality formed by interactions and constructs. This relativist perspective implies that human resource risk governance cannot be understood solely by examining formal policies and structures as objective facts. It necessitates an investigation into how actors construct shared understandings of what constitutes a risk, who is responsible for its management, and what constitutes adequate mitigation. The theoretical framework therefore directs attention to the relationship between formal governance structures and the meanings attached to those structures by organisational actors. It is this relationship that provides the basis for interpreting the policy-practice gap identified in the study.

#### 2.2.1 Human Resource Governance

Human resource governance refers to the structures, processes, and mechanisms used to make, implement, monitor, and review decisions about managing people within organizations (Kaehler & Grundei, 2018). Kaehler and Grundei provide the most comprehensive definition, explaining that human resource governance forms the internal and external behavioural framework for human resource management and control by various actors within a corporation and its units. This framework consists of formalized norms and arises from the formative influence of multiple stakeholders. This definition includes both formal policies and informal norms, as well as power relations and cultural assumptions that influence how human resource decisions are made and implemented across organizational levels.

In a systematic literature review, Ghani et al. (2019) identifies eight key factors influencing human resource governance: regulation, ethics, risk management, leadership, stakeholder engagement, supervision and control, human


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resource process automation, and technology support. This comprehensive framework transcends the traditional focus on individual human resource practices by examining the governance infrastructure within which these practices are situated. The Zambian context introduces additional complexity, as human resource management practice is regulated by the Zambia Institute of Human Resource Management pursuant to the ZIHRM Act Number 3 of 2022.

### 2.2.2 Employee Perceptions of Human Resource Risk Management

A consistent gap exists in the literature between the objective significance of human resource risks and the importance managers and boards perceive. Berger (2025) observes HR risks attract less attention than financial risks despite their potential impact on organizational performance, partly from a lack of empirical evidence on their commonality. Bombiak (2020) reports managers underestimate HR risk in operations; only 32% consider it a key risk, though global research indicates HR risk is major. Human resource risks are frequently disregarded as intangible concerns, consequently leading to insufficient consideration and execution of risk management protocols (Berger, 2025). This categorization of human resource risks as intangible, as opposed to the tangible risks inherent in finance and operations, both reflects and exacerbates their perceived lack of importance. Failing to use risk management terminology means human resource management misses an opportunity to engage in broader management discussions and make a unique contribution (Becker & Smidt, 2015). When human resource professionals frame issues using terms such as engagement, retention, and competencies rather than risk, likelihood, and impact, they may inadvertently marginalize their concerns in risk governance forums.

Damayanti et al. (2023) offer empirical evidence that risk awareness is not a neutral cognitive state but rather a social construct shaped by organizational hierarchy, managerial experience, and cultural context. Their study of Indonesian local governments revealed that managers at top, middle, and lower levels each construct risk differently based on their organizational position and accumulated experience. From a relativist perspective, risk perception is not simply subjective distortion; it is a legitimate construction that shapes organizational behaviour and outcomes.

These studies indicate that HR risk is not only a question of whether a risk exists, but also of whether organisational actors recognise the issue as a risk, how they interpret its significance, and whose interpretation becomes influential in organisational decision-making. This distinction is important because formal risk frameworks may identify particular risks while employees and managers simultaneously construct different understandings of what constitutes an immediate or consequential risk. The emerging literature therefore points to a gap between formal risk identification and the social processes through which risk becomes meaningful. While recent studies have strengthened understanding of managerial risk awareness (Bombiak, 2020; Damayanti et al., 2023), less attention has been given to the relationship between risk interpretation, employee experience, and the credibility of HR governance within quasi-governmental organisations.

A related body of literature has examined organisational trust and employee perceptions in African public-sector contexts. Ohemeng et al. (2018), examining performance management in Ghana's public service, demonstrate that employee perceptions are important to the institutionalisation and implementation of formal organisational systems, particularly where employees perceive limited involvement in their development or question their organisational value. Ohemeng et al. (2020) similarly identify credibility, fairness, respect and communication as important dimensions through which trust can be developed between organisational leaders and employees in Ghana's public sector. This literature is relevant to the present study because it demonstrates that the effectiveness of formal governance arrangements depends not only on their technical design but also on how organisational actors interpret their fairness, credibility and organisational value. Within quasi-governmental organisations, understanding trust is therefore central to explaining how formal HR governance arrangements acquire or lose legitimacy in practice.

### 2.2.3 Employee Awareness of Formal Human Resource Risk Management Processes

Academic literature consistently delineates a discrepancy between formalized risk policies and employees' comprehension of said policies. Zulu's (2015) research found that although the ministry had theoretically implemented mitigation measures, such as an HIV/AIDS workplace policy, training plans, annual performance appraisal systems, retirement and succession plans, and check-in and check-out log books, the majority of respondents (58.3%) were unaware of their existence. This awareness gap demonstrates a fundamental failure in risk communication and governance, suggesting that formal mechanisms do not guarantee effectiveness if employees are not engaged with or informed about them.

Ghani et al. (2019) observed that employees exhibited a limited comprehension of risk management processes within a Malaysian public university, thereby reinforcing the cross-contextual nature of this communication deficit. The study found a significant positive relationship between employees' understanding of risk management processes and their knowledge of risk management. This suggests that organizations investing in risk management training and communication may achieve better risk outcomes. The Zambian Risk Management Framework (2020) defines risk



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culture as the system of values and behaviours that collectively determines the ability of management and employees to identify, understand, openly discuss, and act on current and future risks.

The baseline study conducted within the Zambian framework revealed that Zambia's Public Sector had not formalized or integrated risk management, thereby indicating the presence of both cultural and structural deficiencies. A positive risk culture involves policy leaders championing government intent, a clearly communicated risk management strategy, transparent communication of its benefits to all stakeholders, integration into routine government business processes and systems, and incentives that advance the common good and government interests. These cultural elements are crucial for how human resources perceive risk. When risk management becomes part of routine processes, is communicated clearly, and leadership supports it, human resource risks are more likely to be recognized and addressed.

Evidence from African public-sector research further suggests that the existence of formal organisational systems does not necessarily ensure their institutionalisation in everyday practice. Ohemeng et al. (2018) demonstrate in Ghana's public service that employee perceptions can significantly affect the implementation and institutionalisation of formal performance-management arrangements. This reinforces the argument that the policy-practice gap cannot be understood entirely through policy design or formal compliance. Organisational actors must also perceive formal systems as meaningful, credible and relevant to their work. Although the institutional context differs from Zambia's quasi-governmental sector, this evidence provides an important African comparison for understanding how employee interpretation can mediate the relationship between formal governance arrangements and organisational practice.

However, the policy-practice gap should not be understood solely as a communication deficit. The evidence suggests that employees may receive information about policies while simultaneously developing interpretations of those policies from their experiences of how rules are actually applied. Thus, awareness of a policy does not necessarily translate into confidence in the policy or the institution implementing it. This distinction is important for understanding the findings of the present study, where participants described employees as encountering formal policy outputs without necessarily observing the underlying risk rationale or consistent implementation. The literature therefore suggests two related but distinct dimensions of the policy-practice gap: an awareness gap, in which employees do not know or understand formal risk processes, and a credibility gap, in which formal processes may be known but are questioned because organisational practice appears inconsistent with policy. The present study examines both dimensions.

### 2.2.4 Factors Shaping Employee Perceptions of Human Resource Governance, Including Trust, Fairness, and Policy Implementation Consistency

A related body of literature has examined organisational trust and employee perceptions in African public-sector contexts. Ohemeng et al. (2018), examining performance management in Ghana's public service, demonstrate that employee perceptions are important to the institutionalisation and implementation of formal organisational systems, particularly where employees perceive limited involvement in their development or question their organisational value. Ohemeng et al. (2020) similarly identify credibility, fairness, respect and communication as important dimensions through which trust can be developed between organisational leaders and employees in Ghana's public sector. This literature is relevant to the present study because it demonstrates that the effectiveness of formal governance arrangements depends not only on their technical design but also on how organisational actors interpret their fairness, credibility and organisational value. Within quasi-governmental organisations, understanding trust is therefore central to explaining how formal HR governance arrangements acquire or lose legitimacy in practice.

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### 2.2.5 Implications of Employee Perceptions for Human Resource Risk Management Effectiveness and Organisational Performance

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## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

The study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in a relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. From a relativist perspective, the social world is knowable, but knowledge of it is inseparable from the meanings and interpretations of social actors. There is therefore no assumption of a single objective organisational truth independent of participants' experiences and interpretations. This philosophical orientation was appropriate because the study sought to understand how organisational actors interpret human resource risk management rather than establish a single objective measure of its effectiveness. Russell and Babrow's (2011) conceptualisation of risk as constructed through communication and interpretation further informed the study.

To answer the research questions, a qualitative case study approach was adopted. This design was adopted because it allows investigation of human resource governance as it operates within quasi-governmental organizations, preserving the contextual conditions that shape policy interpretation and enactment. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. This analysis approach was adopted because of its flexibility and aligns well with the study's philosophical orientation and methodological approach. Throughout the analysis, themes emerge inductively from participants' constructions rather than being imposed by a pre-existing coding frame derived from an existing codebook. The choice of a qualitative case study was also appropriate because the study sought to understand meanings, experiences, and interpretations rather than to estimate the prevalence of particular HR risks across the wider population of quasi-governmental organisations. The findings should therefore be understood as contextually situated accounts rather than statistically representative estimates.

### 3.2 Population, Sampling, and Participant Characteristics

The study's target population included employees in quasi-governmental organizations in Zambia. The study took place in Lusaka, where the majority of quasi-governmental organisations are located. The thirteen participating organizations represent 29% of eligible Lusaka-based quasi-governmental organizations, encompassing thirteen sectors: energy, financial services, transport, health, communications, mining, industry, education, agriculture, water and sanitation, labour and employment, and media and information.

Participants were chosen through non-probability, purposive sampling to find highly informative individuals. The sample included thirteen senior human resource professionals (P1-P13) at the Director, Head, or Senior Manager level. Each possessed at least seven years of human resource management experience and direct involvement in policy formulation or implementation. The group comprised eight male participants and five female participants. All thirteen participants possessed a master's degree as their highest qualification. The duration of participants' employment with their current organizations varied from seven to twenty-three years, thereby furnishing substantial organizational knowledge and experience.

The sample size of thirteen was considered appropriate for the study because participants were purposively selected for their specialised knowledge and direct involvement in human resource policy formulation and implementation. The purpose was not numerical representation but information-rich engagement with actors possessing substantial organisational knowledge. The inclusion of participants from thirteen organisations and multiple sectors also provided variation across organisational contexts. Nevertheless, because the study relied exclusively on senior HR professionals, the findings primarily represent informed professional accounts of employee perceptions rather than direct accounts from the broader employee population.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through comprehensive semi-structured interviews and an examination of relevant documents. Each interview lasted 40 to 60 minutes. We audio-recorded and transcribed each one verbatim with participant consent. The semi-structured format allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and knowledge regarding human resource risks within quasi-governmental organisations, enabling the interviewer to clarify potential misunderstandings by probing further and posing follow-up questions to elicit richer information. Data were collected over a three-month period in 2025. Relevant organisational and policy documents were also reviewed to provide contextual information and support triangulation of interview accounts. Documents were included where they were available to the study and directly relevant to human resource governance, formal organisational policies or risk-management processes discussed by participants. The documents were not treated as independent evidence of employee perceptions; rather, they were used to contextualise participants' accounts and assess the relationship between formal



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governance arrangements and reported organisational practice. Triangulation involved comparing participants' descriptions of formal organisational arrangements with the relevant documentary evidence available to the study. Where the two sources converged, the documents provided contextual support for participants' accounts. Where differences emerged, these were examined as potentially important manifestations of the policy-practice gap rather than assuming that either source provided a complete representation of organisational practice.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, adapted to the relativist epistemological stance. The process was iterative, involving movement between data collection, coding, and theme development. Initial coding generated forty-seven distinct codes. Codes were grouped into twelve candidate themes. Reviewing candidate themes against the full dataset led to consolidating them into four main themes and 16 subthemes. Relevant themes for this article emerged from the broader analysis, especially those addressing human resource risk management perceptions.

The analysis involved both attention to recurring patterns across accounts and attention to differences in how participants interpreted the same organisational processes. This was particularly important given the study's relativist orientation. Rather than treating differences in accounts as simple inconsistencies, the analysis considered how organisational position and professional experience shaped interpretations of HR risk and governance. Documentary evidence was used alongside interview data to contextualise these interpretations.

### 3.5 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed using principles associated with Lincoln and Guba (1985), Schwandt (2001) and Tracy (2010). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement over approximately three months, the use of multiple data sources and peer debriefing with supervisors. Transferability was supported through thick description of the organisational setting and participant characteristics, while dependability was strengthened through maintenance of an audit trail documenting analytical decisions. Interview transcripts, coding decisions and a reflexive journal were retained as part of the analytical process. Authenticity was pursued by representing participants' accounts in sufficient detail and using direct quotations where appropriate.

Given that all participants occupied senior HR positions, particular attention was also paid to the possibility of social desirability bias. Participants may have had professional or institutional incentives to portray HR systems positively or to attribute governance problems to employees or other organisational actors. The use of probing questions, comparison across participants and documentary evidence was therefore important in identifying recurring patterns and tensions within the accounts. Nevertheless, the possibility that professional position shaped the accounts remains a limitation of the study.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Zambia Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Permission was also obtained from participating organisations. Participants received information about the purpose of the research and provided informed consent before participating. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw. To protect confidentiality, participants were assigned codes P1–P13, and organisational identities were not disclosed. All data were stored on encrypted devices accessible only to the researcher and academic supervisors.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Findings

#### 4.1.1 The Pervasive Disconnect Between Policy and Practice

A persistent gap between human resource procedures and employees' experiences was the most significant finding across all organizations studied. Because the participants were senior HR professionals, this finding refers specifically to their accounts of employees' experiences and perceptions. This disconnect suggests that formal human resource policies alone do not guarantee effective governance, especially when they are not consistently implemented or embedded in daily practices. Participant 3 acknowledged this institutional challenge, stating: "the organisation is good at writing documents but does not do enough to follow them." This highlights a major systemic weakness: human resource frameworks exist on paper but are not integrated into daily practice.

Employees often view new policies as management being difficult. Participant 10 explained that employees perceive management as simply difficult for implementing new policies. However, these policies, in actuality, mitigate risks. This suggests that employees frequently attribute ulterior or punitive motives to management actions when policies



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are inconsistently enforced or inadequately communicated. Participant 6 explained that an average employee struggles to differentiate between executing stipulated standards and human resource's essential roles.

> *"Employees perceive that management is simply being difficult by implementing new policies." However, those policies are actually in place to help us mitigate risks."* Participant 10 (Female, KII, 5th May, 2025).

Across all institutions, staff widely believe human resource decisions are influenced by personal relationships and favoritism, not impartiality. Participants often used terms such as nepotism is rampant and favouritism is pronounced (P2) to describe their organisations. These perceptions influence organizational narratives regarding human resource governance. Participant 13 acknowledged that human resource practitioners receive employee complaints concerning the hiring of relatives. Participant 12 explained the perception from employees:

> "*The perception from employees is that every position working for the institution should be filled internally." Whether that person has the skills and competencies or not, as long as they have the qualification, they should take up any position that falls vacant. And when management looks to use a different angle to mitigate the risk by employing people from outside the organisation, the employees perceive that management is favouring people from outside the organisation."* Participant 12 (Male, KII, 5th May, 2025).

This finding reveals a critical tension regarding the differential construction of risk by employees and management. Employees perceive risk as losing internal promotion opportunities, whereas management views it as the threat of appointing underqualified candidates. Interpreted through different perspectives, the same policy decision generates conflicting expectations and behaviours. Interviews with human resource practitioners reveal a contrasting perspective characterised by frustration, defensiveness, and professional undervaluation. Participant 13 candidly described the human resource function as thankless. This reflects persistent criticism of HR practitioners, often from employees who try to influence recruitment by submitting applications for relatives or acquaintances (P13). HR practitioners perceive themselves operating in a challenging organizational environment where employees often misunderstand procedural requirements for fairness, transparency, and compliance.

This finding aligns theoretically with Argyris and Schön's (1978) distinction between espoused theory and theory in use. While organizations may espouse fairness, transparency, and meritocracy through formal policies, their actual practices may reflect different values when decisions are made under pressure. This finding aligns with Berger and Luckmann's (1991) social construction of reality: human resource policy meaning is not fixed but constructed through daily interactions among professionals, managers, and employees. Each group approaches policies with unique interests, varied experiences, and distinct interpretive frameworks, shaping their understanding of what policies signify and how they ought to be implemented.

### 4.1.2 General Awareness of Formal Risk Management

Staff generally lack awareness of the formal processes for human resource risk management, specifically those designed for identifying, assessing, and mitigating risks. Instead, their understanding of human resource risk management primarily stems from sporadic, visible outputs. Participant 11 highlighted this lack of visibility, observing that employees perceive no direct evidence and consequently feel uninformed about organizational efforts to identify and mitigate human resource risks. Participant 1 reinforced this position:

> "*An average employee..." is unaware of HR risk management. While they might recognise risks, their understanding may not be professional, as you have identified."* Participant 1 (Male, KII, 6th May, 2025).

Consequently, staff predominantly encounter only the visible outputs of risk management, such as notices or policy changes, instead of the foundational rationale that informs these actions (P9). Consequently, policies are understood primarily through their visible outcomes, rather than the underlying risk logic that originally informed their creation and implementation. This limits employees' capacity to comprehend the reasons for changes and how those changes contribute to organizational risk mitigation efforts.

A significant factor that reinforces employees' perceptions of being excluded is the incomplete or broken feedback loop operating between management and employees. Participant 9 stated that the ultimate product is never observed. Employees would be informed of the operational, health, and safety risks they face and would then certify them. Management will implement identified actions but do not report on results.

> "*Partially because... the end product is never seen. They would be told. They certify what the risks are that we are going through in terms of maybe their operations, health and safety issues and so on, which they would identify. Management will implement identified actions. They do not report results*." Participant 9 (Female, KII-7th May, 2025).

This lack of visible follow-through creates a black box effect: employee input is collected but not meaningfully acknowledged or acted upon. Such circumstances suggest organizational consultation mechanisms may become symbolic, fostering disenfranchisement and futility. The findings indicate that employees perceive their contributions as inconsequential, thereby discouraging their sustained participation in risk management. This transfers operational knowledge from employees to management, which limits the organization's ability to identify emerging human resource



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risks early. Poor feedback hinders engagement and creates operational risk, thereby weakening the organization's human resource response and eroding morale.

This finding extends Zulu's (2015) observation that fifty-eight per cent of respondents were unaware of formal mitigation mechanisms. The present findings show that even when employees know policies, they may not believe them due to inconsistent implementation. Ghani et al. (2019) found that employees poorly understand risk management processes. The present findings reinforce and extend this: even when understood, policies may not be believed if implementation is inconsistent. This finding shifts the problem from awareness to credibility, requiring different remedial interventions.

From a relativist standpoint, the awareness deficit shows more than just poor communication; it reveals a fundamental disconnect between the risk narratives created by governance systems and those developed by employees from their daily experiences. Human resource professionals construct risk as a technical problem requiring systematic identification and mitigation. Employees construct risk through the lens of their immediate concerns: Will I be promoted fairly? Will my benefits be paid? Will my contract be renewed? Until these different narrative constructions are aligned, formal risk management will remain disconnected from employee experience.

### 4.1.3 The Contradictory Nature of Involvement

Participant 4's account initially suggests broad employee involvement; however, closer analysis reveals a distinction between performative participation and substantive engagement. While formal structures for consultation exist, actual involvement is often limited to senior staff or designated representatives such as risk champions (P1). From a management perspective, participation in committees or policy processes is interpreted as meaningful engagement. However, the findings show that the broader workforce frequently experiences exclusion, revealing a disconnect between institutional claims of participation and employees' lived realities.

> "*Yes... I believe so because, as I mentioned, when policies are in place, firstly, we... even when drafting some policies, there is much involvement. Teams are set up from different departments and job grade levels."* Participant 4 (Female, KII, 8th May, 2025)

Despite this formal inclusion, the findings indicate that participation is narrow in scope and limited in reach. As a result, most employees remain detached and sceptical. This creates a perception gap that weakens the legitimacy of human resource governance, as excluded employees question both transparency and fairness in decision-making processes. This finding aligns with institutional theory's concept of decoupling, as articulated by Meyer and Rowan (1977), which suggests that organisations embrace formal structures for legitimacy while actual practices remain unchanged. The present findings demonstrate that such decoupling is systematically reproduced through organisational routines and the behaviour of managers who face competing pressures from different stakeholders. When organisations consult employees performatively only, they may inadvertently confirm employees' suspicions that their voices are not valued, thereby worsening rather than improving perceptions.

### 4.1.4 The Primacy of Personal Concerns

Employee attitudes toward human resource risk management are shaped by pragmatic, self-interested considerations, not abstract notions of organisational wellbeing. This finding shows employees interpret human resource systems through their employment conditions, focusing on career progression, benefits, and opportunities rather than governance or institutional risk objectives. Participant 12 emphasised this individualistic perspective, noting that employees' primary concern is conditions of service and their dissatisfaction. Participant 4 elaborated on this transactional mindset:

> "*As employees, they simply want the best for their staff... However, as HR, we must now update them on recruitment processes and their observance." An individual seeking only training perceives their actions as self-serving."* Participant 4 (Female, KII-9th May, 2025).

This individualistic focus challenges human resource practitioners because employees often evaluate risk mitigation through a zero-sum lens. Policies strengthening organisational resilience may be seen as restrictive barriers, limiting access to promotions, training, or other career benefits. Human resource initiatives risk resistance if employees believe they impede personal advancement. Human resource practitioners must align risk mitigation with employees' interests, linking governance objectives to personal circumstances and opportunities, not institutional well-being.

This finding suggests that human resource governance cannot be effective if framed solely in institutional terms; it must also be linked to employees' perceived opportunities and personal trajectories. From a problematic integration theory perspective (Russell & Babrow, 2011), employees construct risk narratives that integrate uncertainty about policy outcomes with the value they attach to career progression. When policies are perceived as threatening career advancement, employees resist them regardless of their institutional benefits.



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### 4.1.5 The Erosion of Trust

Employee perceptions of human resource governance are characterised by deep skepticism regarding neutrality and fairness. Human resources is increasingly viewed as aligned with management interests rather than functioning as an impartial institutional actor. This perception manifests in claims of double standards, which undermine confidence in governance systems.

> "*I think that is what you end up practising... you can have beautiful policies... You have top management, but if the policies are not being respected, management practices are contrary to what you have taught the employees, their perception of what you do will be very poor without a lot of respect, even when you also want to correct them as HR, sometimes you start having challenges because they are seeing you apply double standards".* Participant 4 (Female, KII-9th May, 2025).

This trust deficit is structural rather than purely communicative. Inconsistent enforcement of rules generates cynicism, reduces compliance, and weakens cooperation. Importantly, the issue does not stem from a lack of policies, but from perceived inconsistency in their application. Restoring trust therefore requires more than procedural reform. It demands sustained visibility of fairness, consistency in enforcement, and demonstrable alignment between policy and practice.

The study's evidence suggests that only consistent action will enable Human Resources departments to restore credibility, reinforce legitimacy, and enhance risk management efficacy. This finding connects to the organisational justice literature, as reviewed by Colquitt et al. (2001). When employees perceive that decisions are based on relationships rather than merit, they experience violations of distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. These perceived violations weaken commitment to organisational goals and reduce voluntary compliance with policies that employees see as illegitimate.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Employee Perceptions of HR Risk Management*

| Perception Theme | Manifestation | Implications |
|---|---|---|
| Policy-practice disconnect | Formal policies exist but are inconsistently implemented | Employees view policies as symbolic rather than functional |
| Favouritism and nepotism | Belief that personal relationships determine outcomes | Erosion of trust in governance systems |
| Limited risk awareness | Employees encounter only policy outputs, not risk rationales | Reduced engagement with risk identification processes |
| Broken feedback loops | Employee input is collected but not acknowledged | Discouragement from future participation |
| Personal concerns dominate | Employees evaluate policies through career impact lens | Resistance to policies perceived as restrictive |
| Double standards | Perceived inconsistency in policy enforcement | Cynicism and reduced compliance |

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study investigates senior human resource professionals' accounts of employee perceptions of human resource risk management in Zambian quasi-governmental organizations. The main finding reveals a persistent, detrimental gap between formal policies and practical implementation. This discrepancy transcends mere execution failure; it represents a fundamental narrative and interpretive divide. Various actors construct divergent meanings of risk, fairness, and governance, ultimately causing an erosion of trust in HR governance processes.

Employees were reported by participating HR professionals to perceive that favouritism and nepotism, rather than merit, influence recruitment and promotion. Moreover, participants reported that employees have limited understanding of formal risk management processes and often see only the results without grasping the underlying reasons. Participants further described employees as sometimes viewing human resource initiatives as restrictive barriers to their personal growth, thereby contributing to resistance and cynicism. They also described consultation processes in which employee input was gathered without sufficient subsequent acknowledgement, thereby reinforcing perceptions of exclusion.

A critical consequence is the erosion of trust. Participants reported that employees perceive double standards in policy enforcement, which diminishes their respect for human resource functions and reduces compliance with governance systems. The theoretical contribution of the study lies in showing that the policy-practice gap is not adequately explained by the presence or absence of formal policies. It is also produced through the meanings organisational actors attach to those policies and through their experiences of how policies are enacted. From a relativist



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and social constructionist perspective, risk governance therefore becomes effective not only when formal mechanisms exist, but when those mechanisms acquire credibility through consistent organisational practice. The study concludes that effective human resource risk governance in this context requires more than just improved procedures. It requires reshaping risk narratives and implementing structural reforms that demonstrate genuine commitment to fairness and meritocracy.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The study proposes several key recommendations. First, individual organizations should establish regular climate surveys and structured feedback mechanisms that allow employees to communicate their experiences of HR governance and receive feedback on how their concerns have been addressed. Closing the feedback loop should be treated as a governance process rather than simply a communication activity. Second, organisations should integrate HR risk management into performance management and accountability systems. This would make responsibility for HR risk more visible and reduce the separation between HR policies and broader organisational risk management. Third, organisations should strengthen change-management processes when introducing new HR policies. Policy implementation should be accompanied by clear communication explaining the risk being addressed, the reason for the policy, expected organisational and employee implications, and mechanisms for monitoring implementation.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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