

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN MALAWI'S PUBLIC SECTOR: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The Malawi government introduced the Individual Performance Management System (IPMS) to enhance accountability, transparency, and efficiency in the civil service. Phase one was piloted in eleven Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) to transition from rigid, top-down performance appraisals to a more participatory model. Using a mixed-methods approach including secondary data from government reports and primary data from interviews with IPMS Desk Officers, Chief Human Resource Officers, and Directors of Human Resources, this study explores opportunities and challenges in implementing IPMS. Findings reveal increased engagement and accountability but also highlight constraints, including resistance to change, inadequate management support, limited resources, and the absence of a structured reward-and-sanctions framework. Applying the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework (ICCMF), the study demonstrates that IPMS effectiveness depends on the alignment and sequencing of leadership commitment, institutional capacity, incentives, and change management processes. The findings underscore the need for sustained leadership engagement, systematic capacity building, and incentive alignment to move IPMS beyond procedural compliance toward transformative performance management in Malawi's public sector.

Keywords: Individual Performance Management System (IPMS), public sector reform, performance evaluation, civil service, accountability, Malawi

INTRODUCTION

Performance management is fundamental to public sector reform efforts aiming at increasing efficiency, accountability, and service delivery (Aguinis 2019; Kroll and Vogel 2020). Individual Performance Management Systems (IPMS) have been used globally to align individual effort with corporate goals, owing to New Public Management (NPM) concepts and the results-oriented ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals (OECD 2019a; World Bank 2021).

The Malawi government established IPMS as part of larger reforms to replace obsolete assessment methods, including Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs), which were often subjective and inefficient. While promising, early implementation of IPMS has been inconsistent, due to opposition, limited capacity, and insufficient incentives (Government of Malawi 2023). While existing research has mostly focused on public-sector reforms at the macro-institutional level (Chinsinga and Mangani 2016; Tambulasi 2010), this study takes a unique micro-level approach, examining IPMS implementation during its pilot phase in Malawi's public sector.

While the present study does not propose a new theoretical framework, it contributes to previous studies by improving the integration of the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework (ICCMF) into performance management reforms in low-capacity public-sector settings. By focusing on micro-level implementation patterns within Malawi's pilot MDAs, the study presents empirically grounded findings that expand knowledge of how established theories work in practice.

This study fills that gap firstly by presenting empirical data on the implementation of Malawi's Individual Performance Management System (IPMS). Secondly, by applying the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework (ICCMF) at the organisational level to

demonstrate how leadership behaviour, institutional capacity, performance culture, and change management interact to determine reform outcomes. Thirdly, by contributing to current performance management literature by demonstrating how the lack of genuine incentives and transparent commitment from leadership lowers IPMS to a procedural compliance tool rather than a behavioural performance instrument. These findings provide context-specific lessons for Malawi and other African public sector contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Perspectives on Performance Management Systems

While performance management systems are commonly promoted as tools to enhance accountability and efficiency, most of the available literature adopts an objective approach, assuming that system adoption leads to improved outcomes (Aguinis 2019; OECD 2019b; Kroll and Vogel 2020). This assumption is increasingly being challenged in public-sector environments, where formalised performance systems are frequently combined with inadequate enforcement, restricted incentives, and established organisational norms, thereby diluting their behavioural impact (World Bank 2021). This shows that the effectiveness of performance management depends on institutional capability and change management processes rather than on system design, an area that has received little attention in many developing countries.

Empirical research shows that participative goal formulation, regular feedback, and coaching methods boost productivity and morale (Erialdy 2024). Harahap (2021) adds that effective IPMS implementation depends on integrating corporate culture with performance systems, and Kroll (2021) emphasises the importance of strong leadership participation in sustaining changes.

Performance Management in the African Public Sector

Performance management reforms in Africa face institutional and contextual constraints, including limited capacity, insufficient ICT infrastructure, and resistance to change (OECD 2019b). Evidence from Tanzania's judiciary shows that clear communication, training, and tying

evaluation findings to rewards can enhance the effectiveness of performance management systems (Dominic and Rutenge 2024). However, bureaucratic conservatism and inadequate resources sometimes impede improvements, and many countries have yet to develop a performance-driven culture.

In Botswana, the government implemented a performance management system (PMS) as part of a broader public-sector reform initiative. The system's integration with the Balanced Scorecard approach is critical to its effectiveness, as it enables monitoring of Key Result Areas (KRAs), Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and performance targets. The PMS is further strengthened by its linkage to both departmental and individual performance plans. In addition, strong political leadership support and stakeholder involvement have contributed to improved service delivery outcomes within the public sector (Naidoo and Sisa 2017; Public Service Commission 2018).

In South Africa, public service agencies have implemented the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) to assess the performance of members of the Senior Management Service (SMS). The PMDS aims to improve individual employee performance by aligning with corporate goals. One of its main advantages is its institutional integration into departmental management systems throughout the public sector. However, studies show that the PMDS's effectiveness is hindered by inadequate day-to-day performance management by immediate supervisors, which hinders consistent implementation (Public Service Commission 2018).

Similarly, in Malaysian public institutions, performance is measured using a performance management system which enables administrative monitoring and strategic control over organisational direction. The system is deemed effective since it involves management and key stakeholders throughout the performance management process. In contrast, Indonesia uses a Balanced Scorecard System to assess public-sector performance. This method has improved internal and external communication and enabled rigorous assessment of individual and organisational performance against strategic objectives (Public Service Commission 2016).

These comparative lessons demonstrate that whilst performance management systems are widely used in the public sector in developing countries, their success depends on leadership commitment, institutional integration, and the degree to which performance management is incorporated across all organisational levels, problems that remain relevant in Malawi's IPMS implementation.

Mathias and Ncube (2020) demonstrate how performance management changes are more likely to influence employee behaviour when appraisal results are clearly linked to incentives, promotion opportunities, and corrective measures. Similarly, comparative research from Zambia and Botswana shows that poor implementation of performance-related rewards and sanctions hinders the institutionalisation of performance management methods, regardless of whether formal procedures are in place (Musonda and Chansa 2021). These outcomes are highly consistent with the Malawian experience observed in this study, in which respondents commonly cited a lack of meaningful incentives and inconsistent administration of sanctions as significant barriers to IPMS effectiveness. Recent policy-oriented assessments reinforce this interpretation, highlighting that performance management reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa frequently fail when performance information is separated from human resource decisions and motivating structures (World Bank 2022).

Performance Management Reforms in Malawi

Studies on Malawi's public sector reforms have provided useful insights towards institutional restructuring and policy goals; yet they primarily use macro-level or top-down perspectives that ignore employee experiences and behavioural responses (Chinsinga and Mangani 2016; Tambulasi 2010; Cammack 2012).

Malawi has introduced several performance appraisal systems over time, including Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) and open review systems. However, these have been criticised for subjectivity, lack of transparency, and weak feedback mechanisms (Government of Malawi 2016; World Bank 2021).

The introduction of the Individual Performance Management System (IPMS) sought to address these shortcomings by encouraging engagement, accountability, and alignment of individual and organizational goals (Government of Malawi 2023). However, implementation remains uneven across Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) due to resistance to change, resource constraints, and inadequate leadership support.

While previous research provides useful insights into institutional and structural barriers to performance management reforms, it frequently understates the behavioural mechanisms by which reforms are accepted, rejected, or symbolically complied with. Much of the research views leadership, incentives, and capacity as static variables, ignoring the interactive and sequential consequences of implementation. This constraint limits the explanatory power of existing frameworks, especially in low-capacity public sector environments.

Identified Gaps in the Literature

Although various studies have examined Malawi's wider public sector reforms (Chinsinga and Mangani 2016; Tambulasi 2010; Cammack 2012), there has been limited empirical investigation into how individual civil servants engage with and respond to the Individual Performance Management System (IPMS). Most research adopts a top-down approach, ignoring employee realities like motivation, capacity, and perceptions of fairness.

Furthermore, insufficient attention has been given to the impact of structured incentives, sanctions, and change management processes in shaping IPMS adoption. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the experiences of employees in 11 pilot MDAs and applying the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework (ICCMF) to analyse factors influencing IPMS effectiveness.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework (ICCMF), which is well-suited to examining organisational reforms such as the Individual Performance Management System (IPMS).

The ICCMF is based on theories of organisational change and capacity building, stressing that successful reform depends on four interconnected dimensions (Lewin 1951; Lusthaus *et al.* 2002; North 1990; Kotter 1996; Aguinis 2019):

- i. Leadership and governance;
- ii. Institutional capacity (resources, skills, and systems);
- iii. Performance culture (values, incentives, and norms); and
- iv. Change management processes (communication, participation, and resistance management).

These dimensions are commonly highlighted in public sector reform literature (Fernandez and Rainey 2020; Kroll 2021; OECD 2019b). Adopting the ICCMF in this study enables a systematic analysis of how leadership practices, institutional resources, organisational culture, and change management strategies affect the effectiveness of IPMS implementation across Malawi's Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs).

According to recent research, successful performance management changes depend not only on formal system design but also on organisational readiness, leadership commitment, and long-term change management competence (Fernandez and Rainey 2020; Kroll 2021). OECD (2019b) emphasises the importance of managerial capability, incentive alignment, and performance feedback channels in implementing performance management systems. Similarly, research on public sector change in developing countries emphasises that reform outcomes are influenced by interactions between formal rules, informal norms, and leadership behaviour (Van der Voet, Kuipers and Groeneveld 2016; Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017). These

findings add to the ICCMF's focus on capacity limits, change processes, and leadership dynamics, all of which are particularly relevant in Malawi's public sector. The independent variables: leadership and governance, institutional capacity, performance culture, and change management processes are predicted to have an impact on the dependent variable, which is the effective implementation of the IPMS

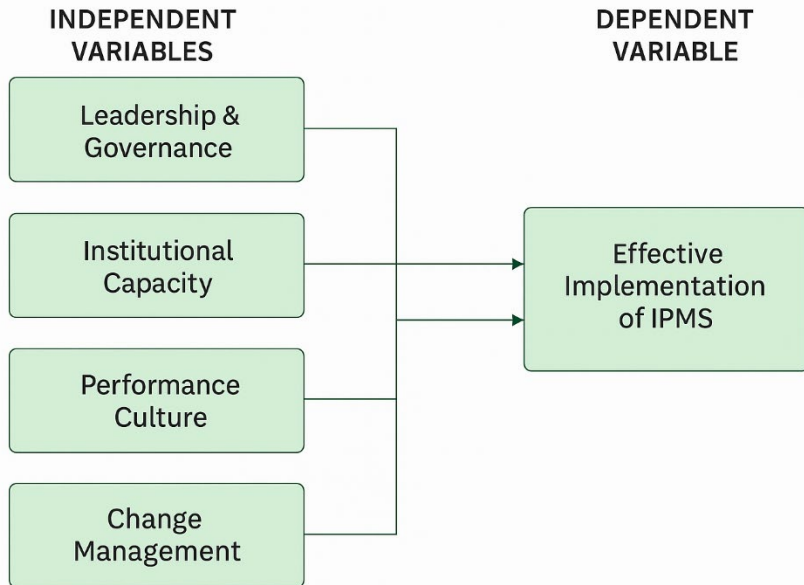


Figure 1: Conceptual framework adopted for this study

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative analysis of IPMS implementation reports with qualitative data from interviews with civil servants at 11 pilot Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the study phase, analysed individually, and finally combined during interpretation, using the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework (ICCMF) as the analytical framework. This

approach allows for the triangulation of data while also providing qualitative insights to explain variances in quantitative performance data, improving analytical rigour and contextual validity.

Data Collection Tools

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with civil officials participating in IPMS implementation in the pilot MDAs. Supervisors, performance appraisal coordinators, and employees directly involved in the performance planning and review processes were among those interviewed. Interviews were held between April and August 2024, either in person or electronically, depending on the participant's availability. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes and was guided by an interview procedure that addressed the core characteristics of the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework (ICCMF), including leadership commitment, institutional capacity, incentives, and change management practices. Interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed after participants provided informed consent. Where recording was not possible, extensive field notes were made. To maintain confidentiality, no personal identifiers were included in transcripts or reports, and participants were assigned anonymised codes (e.g., MDA-1, Interviewee-A). Before collecting data, the competent institutional authority provided ethical approval.

Sampling

Purposive sampling included seven HR Directors, five Chief HR Management Officers, and 11 IPMS Desk Officers. Purposive sampling was used to select 11 pilot MDAs based on their direct engagement in the first IPMS deployment and the availability of key informants with hands-on expertise. The selected MDAs were drawn from a spectrum of government functional sectors, including service delivery, regulatory, and administrative institutions, to account for differences in organisational setting, leadership practices, and capability levels. While the sample includes roughly 22 per cent of all pilot MDAs, the primary criterion for selection was analytical rather than statistical representativeness. The MDAs were full of information instances, suitable for evaluating the early implementation dynamics, problems, and possibilities connected with IPMS deployment. This approach aligns

with qualitative and mixed-methods research approaches, which value depth of understanding and contextual variety over numerical accuracy.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from IPMS reports and assessment forms were analysed descriptively to determine patterns in participation, compliance, and reported performance results among pilot MDAs. Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed using codes which aligned to the four pillars of the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework (ICCMF): leadership and governance, institutional capacity, performance culture, and change management procedures. Interview transcripts were read several times to establish familiarity with the data before the first codes were created. Coding was driven by the ICCMF, with inductive codes emerging from the data. Credibility was enhanced through a triangulation of interviews and documentary data, while dependability was supported through systematic coding aligned with ICCMF dimensions.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Ethical clearance was granted by the Department of Human Resource Management and Development (DHRMD). The selected institutions provided ethical approval for the study prior to data collection. All participants were provided with explicit information about the study's goal, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All interviewees provided informed consent prior to data collection. Given the hierarchical character of the Malawian public sector and the sensitivity of performance rating systems, special precautions were taken to protect participants from potential harm. Interviews were conducted to avoid power imbalances, and participants were assured that their answers would not be shared with supervisors or institutional authorities. Anonymity was preserved by deleting all personal identifiers and using coded Bibliography to institutions and respondents in transcripts and reports.

The data were securely stored in password-protected electronic files accessible only to the researchers. Audio recordings and transcripts

were used solely for research purposes and will be erased upon completion of the study, in compliance with institutional data protection requirements. To improve ethical rigour and trustworthiness, findings are presented in aggregate form and accompanied by anonymised quotations to avoid deductive exposure.

Limitations

While the selected MDAs offer valuable insights into pilot-phase implementation dynamics, the results must be understood as analytically representative rather than statistically generalised to other government MDAs. To minimise the potential of response bias among key informants, interviews were conducted with assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, and respondents were asked to reflect on the challenges and benefits of IPMS implementation. Further, the interview data were compared with documentation evidence from IPMS reports to uncover discrepancies and improve trustworthiness. In addition, qualitative interview data were rigorously matched to documentation evidence from IPMS implementation reports to identify areas of agreement and disagreement. This triangulation improved the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings by lowering reliance on self-reported impressions and increasing confidence in analytical interpretations. Despite these mitigation efforts, the findings are still context-specific and should be interpreted within the institutional and temporal constraints of the pilot phase. Future research could extend this analysis by incorporating longitudinal data and a broader range of MDAs to assess how IPMS dynamics evolve over time.

RESULTS (ORGANIZED ACCORDING TO ICCMF DIMENSIONS)

Themes were derived through iterative coding and are presented with illustrative quotations to demonstrate analytic transparency.

ICCMF Dimensions	Key Findings	Quotes
Leadership & Governance	<p>Some MDAs demonstrated strong top-down support, proving how leadership commitment acts as a signalling mechanism that shapes employee perceptions of reform legitimacy, while others lacked visible leadership commitment.</p> <p>According to quantitative research, 68 percent of respondents reported minimal senior management involvement in IPMS implementation, with only 22 percent reporting that supervisors routinely conducted performance feedback sessions. A document examination indicated that just five of the 11 pilot MDAs had formally recorded leadership evaluations of performance results.</p>	<p><i>“Without a push by our directors, most staff wouldn’t take IPMS seriously.”</i> Interviewee, MDA 1</p>
Institutional Capacity	<p>Digital forms improved efficiency, but inadequate training and weak ICT infrastructure limited adoption.</p> <p>According to survey data, 61 percent of respondents did not obtain formal IPMS training since its implementation. Additionally, only four of the 11 pilot MDAs claimed to have operational electronic performance tracking systems.</p>	<p><i>“We often had to improvise because we lacked proper IPMS training.”</i> Interviewee, MDA 3</p>
Performance Culture	<p>Employees welcomed open feedback mechanisms, yet an absence of</p>	<p><i>“Even if you perform well, nothing happens,</i></p>

	<p>rewards or sanctions reduced motivation.</p> <p>However, only 29 percent of the respondents believed that IPMS results influence promotion decisions, whereas 54 percent claimed performance appraisals had no noticeable impact on incentives or sanctions.</p>	<p><i>so some feel it's a waste of time."</i></p> <p>Interviewee, MDA 7</p>
Change Processes	<p>Resistance to change persisted, partly due to poor communication and unclear guidelines. Approximately 47 percent of the respondents said that IPMS aims were inadequately conveyed, while 58 percent stated they were not effectively consulted during system implementation.</p>	<p><i>"Most staff see it as extra work because no one explained the bigger picture."</i></p> <p>Interviewee, MDA 9</p>

Table 1: Results Organised According to ICCMF Dimensions

DISCUSSION

Analysed through the lens of the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework (ICCMF), the situation in Malawi illustrates that dedicated leadership not only facilitates the implementation of IPMS but also sends a behavioural signal that influences civil servants' views on the legitimacy and aims of reform. This builds on previous studies that highlighted managerial engagement as a key factor in success (Kroll 2021) by demonstrating that leadership actions specifically affect how institutional capacity, incentives, and reform goals are perceived at the operational level.

Resistance to reform, frequently characterised as cultural or attitudinal, developed instead as an immediate reaction to insufficient leadership indicators and incentives, as well as concerns about IPMS effectiveness. By portraying resistance as a logical response to unclear institutional indicators rather than an inherent opposition to performance monitoring, AJPDSG|VOL 8 (1) 2025

this reframing subverts conventional narratives. According to behavioural public administration viewpoints (Grimmelikhuijsen *et al.* 2017; Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Tummers 2019), officials' engagement was more dependent on perceptions of fairness, leadership consistency, and organisational norms than on formal directions.

The results also show that rather than functioning independently, ICCMF dimensions interact. While the lack of incentives damaged IPMS's credibility and raised criticism, leadership commitment influenced how capacity shortages were perceived. This interactional trend implies that both the alignment and sequencing determine the effectiveness of reform. Reforms risk being reduced to mere compliance if evaluation tools are introduced without aligning incentives, expertise, and institutional preparedness.

Limitations in training and ICT infrastructure, for instance, remain major obstacles. Uneven implementation across MDAs resulted from incomplete digitalisation and a lack of concurrent commitment to skills development, demonstrating how technological advancements can worsen inequality if they are not supported by ongoing capacity-building (Erialdy 2024; Harahap 2021). Similarly, inadequate connections between performance outcomes and incentives or penalties weakened motivational mechanisms and strengthened views of IPMS as administrative rather than transformative.

Lastly, civil servants perceived IPMS as an additional administrative burden due to weaknesses in change management, particularly in outreach and awareness. Prior to using performance assessment techniques, reform design must incorporate communication, incentives, and leadership commitment, as shown in other African contexts (Dominic and Rutenge 2024). When combined, these results demonstrate that the relationship between institutional capacity and reform acceptance is moderated by leadership commitment, which serves as a credible signal.

Implications:

- Strengthening training and leadership engagement can institutionalise IPMS and improve service delivery in Malawi.
- The study demonstrates how adopting ICCMF can guide implementation analysis and reveal overlooked dimensions, such as culture and change processes, in the African context.
- Having structured management strategies can reduce resistance and enhance staff ownership of IPMS.
- Through capacity-building initiatives, MDAs can prioritise continuous training and ICT readiness.

Although based on civil servants' micro-level experiences, these findings have wider significance for the design of public sector reform by demonstrating how behavioural reactions aggregate into institutional consequences during early implementation phases. By linking micro-level behavioural responses to institutional reform dynamics, this study strengthens the conceptual application of ICCMF and offers a behaviourally grounded explanation for the uneven outcomes of IPMS in public sector reforms.

The Malawian perspective is consistent with research from other low-capacity settings where the credibility of reforms depends more on leadership behaviour than technical design. For example, studies comparing bureaucracies in Asia and Africa indicate that even with formal frameworks in place, reforms fail when leaders do not demonstrate consistent commitment. This demonstrates how leadership signalling is relevant across contexts and influences the legitimacy of transformation.

This work advances theory by redefining ICCMF as a dynamic rather than a static diagnostic tool and by demonstrating that reform outcomes are determined by the arrangement and interplay of dimensions. This advances the study of performance management from theoretical

interpretations to a behavioural and institutional analysis, in which micro-level opinions combine to create macro-level reform outcomes.

The results highlight the need for policymakers to incorporate behavioural factors alongside technological tools when designing reforms. Communication tactics, incentive alignment, and leadership modelling are essential to the legitimacy of reforms. Without them, performance management risks being seen as a symbol of adherence, undermining the desired change.

Despite being based on Malawi's civil service, the implications are applicable to global reform environments. Leadership behaviour and incentive systems are important mediators of reform acceptance in settings with uneven institutional capacity. This implies that in order to attain substantial instead of administrative change, global reform initiatives need to focus more on behavioural dynamics.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides novel empirical evidence regarding behavioural and institutional factors shaping IPMS implementation in Malawi by focusing on the experiences of implementation professionals within pilot MDAs and applying the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework at the organizational level. Additionally, this study extends our understanding of IPMS adoption as a behavioural and institutional process rather than a simple technical change, by shifting the focus from policy objectives to implementation behaviour among pilot MDAs. It shows that perceived leadership commitment, incentive credibility, and change management approaches have a greater impact on employee engagement towards IPMS than formal policy design. Perceived leadership commitment, incentive credibility, and change management techniques are all important considerations.

Beyond its policy implications, this study advances performance management theory by illustrating how leadership behaviour serves as a credibility signal that influences employee involvement in reform attempts. The findings indicate that without aligned incentives and

continuous leadership engagement, performance management systems risk becoming procedural artefacts rather than drivers of behavioural change.

Theoretical and Conceptual Contribution:

This study adds conceptual depth to the public sector performance management literature by extending the Institutional Capacity and Change Management Framework (ICCMF) with a micro-level behavioural perspective. Rather than viewing leadership, capacity, incentives, and change management as separate enablers, the findings show how these aspects interact and must be sequenced to promote behavioural change. The Malawian case demonstrates that leadership commitment serves as a credibility signal, mediating employees' interpretations of performance changes, whereas the absence of incentives undermines the motivating assumptions underlying performance management theory. The study contributes to our understanding of why performance management systems in developing public sector contexts frequently become procedural rather than transformative by relating micro-level employee behaviour to institutional reform dynamics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen leadership commitment and accountability.**

Effective IPMS adoption necessitates ongoing and visible leadership participation. Senior managers should be formally held accountable for IPMS outcomes by being required to participate in performance planning, review meetings, and feedback sessions. IPMS implementation metrics should be expressly included in leadership performance agreements to strengthen managerial ownership and credibility.

- **Invest in continuous capacity building and digital readiness.**

The Ministry responsible for human resource management should provide regular IPMS training programs, including refresher courses for managers and employees. Training should

go beyond procedural compliance and include performance coaching, goal planning, and the utilisation of performance data for decision making. In parallel, investment in reliable ICT infrastructure and user-friendly digital performance monitoring tools is critical to ensuring uniformity across MDAs.

- **Align IPMS with incentives and sanctions.**

To strengthen the performance culture, IPMS outcomes should be routinely linked to real rewards and corrective actions. Promotional decisions, recognition programs, and professional development opportunities should all be explicitly linked to proven performance outcomes. Similarly, underperformance should result in defined corrective actions, ensuring that IPMS serves as a behavioural management tool rather than an administrative need.

- **Improve change management and communication strategies.**

IPMS implementation should be supported by a complete change management plan that prioritises early consultation, clear communication of objectives, and ongoing staff sensitisation. MDAs should use participatory methodologies that allow employees to contribute to goal creation and system refinement, lowering opposition and increasing ownership.

By addressing these areas, Malawi's IPMS can become a model for results-based management in the region.

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