



# ARE STRATEGIC PLANS A MAGIC WAND FOR ENHANCING PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS IN MALAWI?

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## Abstract

*In 2000, the Government of Malawi instituted a policy directive on governance urging all Ministries, Departments and Agencies to develop strategic plans as part of public reforms strategy. The aim behind was that by introducing strategic plans in public organizations there will be efficient service delivery by the organizations and that consumers will get public value from improved services. However, despite the introduction of strategic plans, evidence suggests that public organizations continue to register dismal performance in achieving the commitments derived from the strategic plans. This study comes to fill the literature gap against a dichotomy of two schools of thought as to whether or not strategic plans enhance performance in public organizations in Malawi. The objective of the study was to assess whether or not strategic plans are a magic wand for enhancing performance in public organizations by focusing on Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority and Malawi Posts Corporation. The study engaged both principal-agent and public value theories and took a qualitative research approach using primary and secondary data sources. Results of the study showed that public organizations perform dismally despite having strategic plans because they face governance challenges that impede on performance. The study recommends that there should be both incentives and penalties for public organizations for them perform efficiently and effectively to the satisfaction of their principal, the Government. There should also be a comprehensive legal enforcement mechanism for strategic plans in public organizations in Malawi.*

*Keywords: Governance, public sector reforms, strategic plan, public service delivery*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a study whose aim was to assess whether or not strategic plan is a magic wand for enhancing performance in public organizations in Malawi. Strategic plan is a widely adopted management approach in contemporary organizations and underlying its popularity is the assumption that it is a successful tool in public and private organizations that has positive consequences for organizational performance as per Walter and Monster (2019). The Government of the Republic of Malawi introduced strategic plans in public sector organizations in September, 2000 as part of public sector reforms. The aim of introducing strategic plans was to enhance performance in public organizations. It was believed that the introduction of strategic plans will lead to efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of public services as the public sector acts as an engine for development.

Public organizations in Malawi play a significant role in the economy. In accordance with the 2003 Public Finance Management Act, public organizations also known as state owned enterprises (SOEs) are defined within the broad spectrum of a statutory body as a corporate or unincorporated body that has been set up as a specific entity to provide a specific good and/ or service. This includes any corporation or subsidiary of a corporation where Government directly or indirectly controls the composition of any board of directors, controls more than 50% of the voting power of the body or holds more than 50% of any of the issued share capital of the body either directly or through another agency or statutory body. Public organizations are a channel that Government uses to address its strategic economic and social objectives and its commercial objectives.

The introduction of strategic plans grew apace in the public sector from the 1980s onwards as per George and Desmidt (2014). According to Walter and Monster (2019), recent evidence has shown strategic plan's widespread diffusion in the public sector-for example, in Norwegian municipalities (Johnsen, 2017), US transit agencies (Poister, Pasha and Edwards, 2013) and Canadian public service organizations (Elbana, Andrews and Pollasen, 2016). This momentum was assisted by New Public Management (NPM) and managerial reforms that promoted private sector management practices in public organizations. The logic behind adopting SP in public organizations was that if it helped private organizations perform better, then it should do the same for public organizations (Bryson, 2018). As such, Strategic plan as a management and administrative tool has now become a valuable tool and major technique that organizations use to posture themselves with a sense of direction, increase operational efficiency, and increase market share and productivity in the ever-changing environment (Belz, 2017).

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Throughout the world, the public sector is charged with the responsibility of offering efficient and effective service to the public of any given economy or country. Strategic plan has been central to several public sector reform efforts. Examples include GPRA modernization Act in the United States of America (GAO, 2011), Best value in England and Wales (Boyne et al, 2002), and the Policy Management Cycle in Flanders (George et al, 2018). These reforms further indicate that strategic plan has been perceived favourable by policy makers and has become a core element of public management as stated by Bryson (2018).

Kimuyu (2015) observes that in recent times, many public sector organizations have been engaging in activities that will improve their service delivery to their clients. One such activity is the development of strategic plans. Not only is a strategic plan used as a tool to improve service delivery in most organizations, it is also an indicator of top management's commitment to developing and implementing coherent and comprehensive organizational strategies and a key for promoting inclusive public management in a democratic society and a way of creating public value (Bryne, 2010). It is through strategic plan that an organization can predict changes in the environment and act proactively as per Bryson (2018).

However, despite the introduction of strategic plans in public sector organizations by the Government of Malawi, both Kayuni (2016), M'banga and Sharma (2021) state that evidence suggests that government agencies continue to register unsatisfactory performance in achieving commitments derived from the strategic plans. This is despite that every financial year these public sector organizations enter into an agreement with the Government called 'Shareholder's Letter of Expectations' where they agree on targets in order to improve public service delivery. This dismal performance is also evidenced by the Malawi Annual Economic Report (2023).

This study is aimed at assessing whether or not strategic plan is a magic wand for enhancing performance in public organizations in Malawi. This is against a background of divergent views and beliefs that exist amongst scholars, practitioners and academicians as to the role of strategic plans in public organizations with one school of thought led by Jakhotiya (2017), Wolf & Floyd (2017), Bryson (2018) and Bert (2019) backing the implementation of strategic plan as an efficient and effective tool for achieving organizational goals and objectives stating that a strategic plan has become a valuable tool and major technique that organizations use to posture themselves with a sense of direction, increase operational efficiency, and increase market share and profitability in the ever-changing environment.

On the other hand, another school led by Mintzberg (1994), Vinzart and Vinzart (1996), Poisture & Streib (2004), George (2018), Phiri (2019), M'banga and Sharma (2021) oppose the view as they state that contrary to the positive performance derived from elaborate and well

developed and designed strategic plans, evidence suggests that some organizations with strategic plans continue to register unsatisfactory performance in achieving commitments derived from the implementation of strategic plans. This group criticizes strategic planning by asserting that public sector organizations are not meant to embark on strategic plans because it tends to reinforce a unitary, centralized hierarchical mode of decision making which is antithetical to the types of flexible, decentralized decisions organizations must take in a changing environment. They have even wonder if strategic plan as a management tool 'works.'

However, this dichotomy has not been fully harmonized in current literature in that whilst strategic plan has been considered as an integral feature in the success of organizations, some scholars still contend that it is not worthwhile and only a waste of resources. As such, this area was of utmost importance for research and motivated this study as there is a research gap in the available literature as to whether or not strategic plan is a magic wand for enhancing performance in public organizations in Malawi and hence the need for an empirical study to assess how strategic plan enhances performance in public organizations in Malawi.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research study was conducted at Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) and Malawi Posts Corporations (MPC) which were used as a unit of analysis. These organizations were selected because they are both public organizations and operate in the communications sector whereby MACRA is a regulator and MPC is an operator. The choice of these public organizations was because the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development has been reporting MACRA in its Annual Economic Reports and Consolidated Reports for State Owned Enterprises in Malawi as one of the well performing public organization in the communications sector and MPC as one of the organizations with a dismal performance.

Based on the objectives of the study, the researcher used qualitative research approach. This approach was adopted because it provides the flexibility to consider different dimensions of the problem in question. As asserted by Wilson (2014), qualitative research approach is feasible to generate rich, quality data on the subject matter.

The study had 50 participants in total which were selected by purposive sampling. These respondents were top managers from MACRA, MPC, Government officials and other stakeholders like the academia who understand how a strategic plan works. The research used a number of data collection methods. Primary data sources were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KII) and secondary data sources through desk research using journals, books, magazines and the internet in assessing how strategic plan enhances performance in public sector organizations in Malawi.

The study was undertaken with an open mind in order to guard against infidelity of implementation as espoused by Creswell (2016) and Saunders (2019). As such the researcher crafted his interview guide questions in a way to go around this. After gathering all the data, the researcher therefore analyzed the data using content analysis.

## **STRATEGIC PLAN AND PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS**

### **Concept and definition of strategic plan**

According to Tan and Platts (2005), the concept of strategic plan originated from the Greek word 'strategos' which when translated literally means 'generalship' or 'general of the army'. Blackberry (1994), gives a brief history about the term strategy as he states that it was a word used in the military to make a distinction between the plan and tactics and all the preparations that took place before the battle. It was believed that proper preparations ensured success on the battleground.

Millet (1986) adumbrates that the application of principles of military strategy to business competition known as strategic management is a more recent discipline dating back to the 1950s and is used synonymously with the term strategic planning. Strategic planning as a process is more concerned with the big picture and its focus is on the results or outcome rather than products or outputs. Drucker (1974) defined strategic planning as 'the planning for an organization's future that includes setting major overall objectives, the determination of basic approaches to be used in pursuing these objectives and the means to be used in obtaining the necessary resources to be employed.

The definition by Drucker is not different from Bryson (2018) who defines strategic planning as systematic process in which an organization's leaders define their vision for the future and identify their organization's goals and objectives for managing the organization. It is a deliberative, disciplined approach to producing fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why. This is the definition that this study adopts as it will assist in assessing how strategic plan as a final outcome to this process assists in enhancing performance in public organizations.

The definition by Bryson is also in line with Adair (2002) who state that strategic planning is about determining what is important in the long term for the organization. In other words, strategic planning is about determining an organization's key priorities in the long term that the organization should start working on today. It is to this end that Byrne (2010) agrees with Adair by stating that not only is strategic planning undertaken by public sector organizations an important indicator of top management's commitment to developing and implementing coherent

and comprehensive organizational strategies, but it is also a key means for promoting inclusive public management in a democratic society and a way of creating public value.

From this strategic planning process, a document is produced that is more concerned with defining what outcomes should be rather than the process of achieving those outcomes and this document is called a strategic plan. It is this document which is the premise on which this research assessed to find out whether or not it enhances performance in Public Organizations in Malawi.

### **Empirical evidence on the role of strategic plans in enhancing performance in public organizations**

Several studies have been conducted on strategic plans in public organizations but most of them have either concentrated on the process of devising the strategic plans rather than the implementation thereof. For example, Ugboro (2011) and Johnsen (2015) who conducted their studies in the USA showed that strategic plans in Government were a successful innovation that contributed positively towards improving the agencies performance. Likewise, Huang (1997) who conducted his research in Florida's Department of Corrections in USA found that all managers expressed commitment to the strategic planning process and made positive assessment of its organizational impact. However, his study can be faulted as it concentrated on the executive management in the organizations leaving behind the other workers as they too are involved in strategic plan processing in the organization.

Bryson (2018) who conducted his research in Minnesota, USA, discussed strategic plan for public and non-profit organizations and how it can strengthen and sustain organizational achievement. He found that the way a strategic plan is formulated in a public and non-profit organization determines the achievement of organizational goals and objectives. However, Bryson mainly focused on the process of strategic plan as regards its formulation as opposed to its implementation *per se* and hence it becomes a bit problematic to decipher the results a strategic plan can produce on implementation.

In Australia, Bunning (2007) alleges that strategic plans in public organizations faces challenges because of traditional beliefs hold that planning ahead more than is necessary is impossible, dangerous, or a waste of time as it involves many stakeholders and the plan itself locks you in so much so that it is difficult to change when circumstances change or when Governments change before the completion of the plan. Consequently, it is embarrassing and more difficult to change direction in the future if circumstances change.

Johnsen (2014) who conducted a study in Norway found out that a strategic plan is used extensively in the public sector and has improved service delivery. Elbanna (2016) researching

in 150 public service organizations in Canada found that there is a strong positive relationship between strategic plan processing and implementation which depends more on mediation by managerial involvement. This position is entrenched by Walter and Monster (2019) who concluded that strategic plan has a positive, moderate and significant impact on organizational performance in both the private and public sectors across international settings. They therefore suggested that strategic plan should be part of standard managerial approaches in contemporary organizations.

In Africa, the relationship between strategic plan formulation and implementation is enunciated by Ndegwah (2014) and Abok (2014) and who conducted their research in Kenyan public organizations and concluded that strategic plans if well implemented in the organization is an effective tool towards growth. This was so despite the challenges that the implementation of the strategic plans faced like managerial skills, institutional policies and resource allocation. This was echoed by Harrison (2022) who emphasized the need for incorporating all the stakeholders in the process of developing the strategic plan as well as having an efficient and effective communication channel as part of the process.

In South Africa, Dlamini et al (2020) states that in many South African institutions, strategic plans are viewed as work of top management, a misconception which compromises service delivery. This is because in most institution, top management do not involve junior employees in the process of devising and formulating strategic plans in the organizations.

In Malawi, Kayuni (2016) analysed the strategic plan process in the public sector by asking who initiated the process, what approach determined the process and what is the possible potentiality of the adopted strategic plan approach in enhancing the reform agenda. He concluded that leadership (political and professional) has played a role in the failure of strategic plans and management to achieve its goals as the leaders are responsible for spearheading the process.

This is corroborated by Malunga (2007) who looked at improving the role of strategic plan in local Non-Governmental Organizations in Malawi and argued that an effective strategic plan requires top manager's active roles in defining the strategic direction of the organization and creating an environment that recognizes a strategic plan as a tool of strategic management.

From the foregoing, it is concluded that the trend is that most of the scholars who wrote on strategic plans focused on the process of formulation of the strategic plans as opposed to 'why' and 'how' strategic plans can be a magic wand in enhancing performance in public organizations. This motivated this research as there hasn't been much empirical research on whether or not strategic plans is a magic wand in enhancing performance in public

organizations which has resulted in minimal systematic evidence-based research in how a strategic plan can enhance performance in public sector organizations.

### **Criticisms on the debates on effectiveness of strategic plans in public organizations**

Debate on the effectiveness of strategic plans in organizations began as far back as 1980s by opponents to strategic plan such as Mitchell and Birnbaum (1981) who stated that there is no clear systematic relationship between strategic plan and a firm's performance. Since then, several authors have criticized the effectiveness of strategic plans like Collins and Porras (1994) who claimed that companies do not grow or make profits because of strategic plans-this is only mythical. According to them growth comes by experimentation, error, opportunism, accident etc. They observed that many companies do make profits even without strategic plans in place.

Shrader, Taylor, and Dalton (1984) state that strategic plan is not effective in public organizations and cannot enhance performance because of its rigidity as it encourages excessive bureaucracy in organizations. This was corroborated by Mintzberg (1994) and Miller and Cardinal (1994) who criticized strategic planning by asserting that strategic planning is not equal to strategic thinking and that a strategic plan tends to reinforce a unitary, centralized hierarchical mode of decision making which is antithetical to the types of flexible, decentralized decisions organizations must take in a changing environment. They have wondered if strategic plan as a management tool 'works.'

The debate is also supported by Vinzart and Vinzart (1996) who note that strategic planning is rigid and drives out important innovations that are not a part of the plan and Martin (2014) who emphasized the big lie of strategic plan and claimed that strategic plan deceived managers into believing that a strategy can be controlled. This debate is echoed by George (2018) who concluded that public sector organizations are not to embark on strategic plans as they are wastage of time.

This debate is juxtaposed by proponents of strategic plan such as (Poister (2010), Martin (2014) and Bryson (2018) who assert that although strategic plans have been around in the public sector since the 1970s and it was the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm that fast-tracked its adoption by public organizations since the 1990s onwards. Against a backdrop of increasing globalization, the rapid pace of technological innovation, shifting social and demographic trends, and the increasing knowledge intensity, strategic plan has been touted by these authors as the most effective instrument in public organizations' performance. This validity is entranced because a strategic plan has a positive, moderate and significance impact on organizational performance according to Walter and Monster (2019).



However, much as there has been a debate on the effectiveness of strategic plan in public organizations, there has not been much empirical study which identifies which of the two perspectives has the most empirical validity and hence this study on assessment on whether or not strategic plan is a magic wand for enhancing performance in public organizations in Malawi.

### **Theoretical framework for strategic planning in public organizations**

Bryson (2018) states that there are a number of theories which explain strategic plan in public and non-profit making organizations. Some of the main theories include New Public Management (NPM) theory, Public Choice theory, Principal-agent theory and Public value theory.

According to Tambulasi and Kayuni (2013) NPM is an approach that seeks to build an administration by implementing flexibility, transparency, minimum government, de-bureaucratization, decentralization, the market orientation of public services and privatization. As such, the employment of NPM would not be in tandem with the objectives of this study.

Sikwese (2021) states that Public Choice theory advocates the application of economic models of human action to politics and other social activities, basically pointing to the behaviour of individuals that men and women always seek to maximize their benefits and pursue the least costs in their decisions. Again, the employment of this theory will also not of much consequence to this study as it runs counter to the study objectives.

However, this research will employ two theories which are principal-agent theory and public value theory which are more relevant to this study in light of the research objectives.

#### **(a) Principal-agent theory**

Since public administration is an eclectic subject, it derives ideas and a lot of concepts from other disciplines. According to Cheshire, Fifoot, and Furnston (2017) Principal-agent theory is a contractual and governance theory which sets out a fiduciary relationship between the principal and the agent. In this case, the shareholders of the public organization are taken as 'principals', and they appoint directors to act as 'agents' to run the affairs of the public organization on trust. When principals appoint agents, their aim is to ensure that the agents run the affairs of the organization according to the aims and objectives to which they established the public organization. In other words, the shareholder, who is the owner or principal of the organization, delegates day-to-day decision making in the company to directors, who are the shareholder's agents.

Pont (2020) clarifies this by stating that in corporate governance, the directors are vested with the following fiduciary duties in running the organization, viz, duty to act in accordance with the purposes for which the organization was made, duty to use powers for a proper purpose, duty to promote the success of the organization, duty to exercise independent judgment, duty of care and skill, duty to avoid conflict of interest, amongst others.

The problem that arises as a result of this system of corporate ownership is that the agents do not necessarily make decisions in the best interests of the principal. One of the principal assumptions of principal-agency theory is that the goals of the principal and agent conflict and that creates the 'agency problem' as stated by Busch, Macgregor and Watts (2015).

In this study therefore, the main reason why Government who is the owner or principal shareholder in public organizations establishes public organizations is to deliver efficient and effective services to its citizenry. Knowing Government as principals cannot be involved in day-to-day running of the affairs of the public organizations, they appoint directors who make decisions on behalf of Government in the day-to-day running of the public organizations as agents as per Muhome (2016). However, when the directors are running the affairs of the public organization, they must make sure that they do that to the satisfaction of their principals lest there will be the agency problem.

In Malawi, Government instituted strategic plans in public organizations to enhance delivery of public services and that those services deliver public value. It is the directors who ensures that this aim is achieved by ensuring that they efficiently and effectively run the affairs of the public organization. It is the director's duty to assess how a strategic plan will enhance performance of the public organizations and if they face any challenges, the directors are supposed to consult the principal and work together in overcoming the challenges and find out the outcome as stated by Solomon (2020).

### **(b) Public value theory**

This theory was advocated by Moore (1995) as an alternative approach to the New Public Management theory and espouses principles of good governance. The theory describes the value that an organization or activity contributes to the society and is centred around the needs of the public as citizens as well as consumers, the creation of value rather than achieving targets. Public value theory urges leaders and managers of public and non-profit organizations to be effective strategists to fulfil their missions, meet their mandates, satisfy their constituents, and create public value (Bryson, 2018).

Moore's central proposition in advocating the concept of public value in public management was that public resources should be used to increase value in a way which is

analogous to how the private sector creates, increases, or maximizes value on inputs to the satisfaction of its customers. The crux of thought of public value theory is that if the private sector is guided in their operations by the shareholder values, so too public sector managers should be guided by the citizen's choices as citizens are ideally the shareholders of the public service as stated by Seddon (2008).

According to Bryson (2018) Public value theory has four key dimensions which augur well with the aim and objectives of this study. These are:

- (a) *Outcome achievement*-this is the extent to which a public body is improving publicly valued outcomes across a wide variety of areas. These can be social, economic, environmental, and cultural outcomes.
- (b) *Trust and legitimacy*-this is the extent to which an organization and its activities are trusted and perceived to be legitimate by the public and key stakeholders
- (c) *Service delivery quality*-this is the extent to which services are delivered in a high-quality manner that is considerate of user's needs. These will be maximized when service users are satisfied and when they perceive the service to be accessible, convenient, and responsive to their needs.
- (d) *Efficiency*-this is the extent to which an organization is achieving maximal benefits with minimum resources. (Bryson 2018, pp 215-220)

By using these key dimensions, the question arises on how strategic plans is a magic wand for enhancing performance in public organization by creating public value. Sikwese (2021) states that for public managers to be guided by the citizenry, there is need to have a mechanism for engaging these citizens in planning, delivery, and evaluation. It is the strategic plan which will be used in holding public officers and managers accountable for the quality delivery of services they are responsible for and to evaluate public value in the delivery chain. It is therefore public value that will concretize the aims and objectives of this study to assess whether strategic plan enhances the performance in public organizations.

### **Linkages between Principal-agent theory and Public Value Theory**

The linkage of principal-agent theory to public value theory rests on the fact that the Government who is the principal in the public organization sets up the organization with the affairs of the public organization to the directors who act as agents on behalf of the Government and their aim in managing and running the day-to -day affairs of the public organization is to ensure that the services provided create a public value to the citizenry whom the Government has created the public organization for. Once the directors are running the affairs to the contrary

then there will be an agency problem as they are under a fiduciary duty to create public value in their managing the public organization.

In order to create public value, the Government as the shareholder has directed that the directors should put an instrument that will be used to measure their performance and evaluate the public value and that is the use of a strategic plan.

### **Strategic plan in public sector organizations in Malawi**

Initially, strategic planning in the public sector organizations in Malawi were not mandatory. It largely depended on the preferences of particular leadership in their respective Ministry, Departments or Agency (MDAs) to either initiate the process or not as per Kayuni(2016). Strategic plans in Malawi were introduced with the establishment of public sector reforms in the early 2000 when Government started implementing the more comprehensive public sector reforms initiatives for Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). According to Tambulasi and Kayuni (2013), Public sector reforms in Malawi can be categorized into two: The first-generation reforms and the second-generation reforms. The first-generation reforms refer to those implemented in the Kamuzu Banda era while the second-generation reforms are those implemented in the democratic era.

The democratic era reforms undertaken between 1994-2014 aimed at improving efficiency and effectiveness of all branches of the state i.e., the Executive, the Legislature, and the Judiciary. It is in this democratic era that public sector organizations in Malawi started developing strategic plans following the directive from Government through a circular that directed that all Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) should develop strategic plans as part of a renewed impetus for Reforms according to Kayuni (2016).

However, since the promulgation of the public sector reforms, the renewed impetus for reforms and the subsequent introduction of strategic plans, there have been mixed views on the role of strategic plans in enhancing performance in public organizations. According to the 2023 Malawi's Annual Economic Report, some public sector organizations with strategic plans performed well whilst others did not. This has led to a debate as to whether strategic plans assist in enhancing performance in public organizations or is just another white elephant that gathers dust in the offices of Management personnel given that public sector reforms have been heralded as a panacea for enhanced service delivery and public sector efficiency and effectiveness as per Khunga and Magolowondo (2023).

## Brief Overview of MACRA and MPC

MACRA was established under the Communications Act of 1998 of the Laws of Malawi. According to Section 4 of the Act, it is charged with the responsibility of ensuring that reliable and affordable ICT services are provided throughout Malawi. MACRA has the power to regulate the whole communications sector in respect of telecommunications, broadcasting, postal services and the management of the radio frequency spectrum.

MACRA plays a critical role in the management of Malawi's ICT sector and provision of ICT services and according to Section 6 of the Act, its mandate includes:

- (a) To protect the interests of consumers, purchasers and users of telecommunication services
- (b) To promote open access to information by means of communication services
- (c) To promote efficiency and competition among persons involved in the telecommunication services or supply of communications equipment
- (d) To encourage the introduction of new communication services
- (e) To promote research in telecommunications industry including radio communications; and
- (f) To foster the development of communication services and technology in accordance with internationally recognized standards.

In order to efficiently and effectively accomplish its mandate, MACRA developed a strategic plan spanning from 2015-2020 that was used as a guiding tool in its planning, implementation and monitoring of its activities to improve the delivery of services in the ICT sector and ensure that its stakeholders and consumers get public value in the services that MACRA regulates (MACRA Strategic Plan, 2015-2020).

MPC was established by the Communications Act, 1998 following a decision by Government to split the Malawi Posts and Telecommunications Corporations (MPTC) into two entities namely Malawi Posts Corporation and Malawi Telecommunications Limited (MTL) in order to improve quality and coverage of communication services in the country. Before the establishment of MPTC in 1995, posts and telecommunications co-existed as Government departments under the Ministry of Transport and Communications, before falling under the Ministry of Information now referred to as Ministry of Information and Digitization.

MPC was established with the aim of providing all reasonable facilities for transmission of postal articles throughout Malawi and between Malawi and other countries, and that it should conduct its affairs according to commercial principles. According to Section 76 of the Communications Act, 1998, MPC has the following mandate:

- (a) To provide postal services & perform other services incidental to transmission of postal articles
- (b) To establish and operate post offices
- (c) To provide financial services

In 2003, MPC was granted a designated Postal Operator license by MACRA meaning that it is the sole provider of postal services in Malawi. MPC developed a strategic plan for the period 2017 to 2022. According to MPC, its strategic plan was developed as a direct response to Government of Malawi's desire to improve the transmission of postal articles throughout the Republic of Malawi, and between Malawi and other countries, and to do this commercially in order to efficiently and effectively satisfy its customers and stakeholders (MPC Strategic Plan, 2017-2022).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research study interviewed 50 respondents, out of which 40 expressed a good understanding of how strategic plan works in a public organization representing 80% response rate.

Out of the respondents who were interviewed, it transpired that the majority, 85% indicated that they had encountered problems in implementing strategic plan due to governance, political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal challenges which affected successful service delivery and creation of public value as follows:

### *a) Governance challenge*

The respondents reported that they most of their leaders had not embraced public sector reforms by Government and the introduction of strategic plans in their institutions as they felt threatened by change that this would bring. This posed a threat in implementing strategic plan as there was resistance from the top.

### *b) Political challenge*

The respondents reported that it was a challenge to implement strategic plan successfully due to political interference by Government in the process. It was noted that, due to change of Government after the 2020 elections most public organizations had their top management teams replaced and this affected proper implementation of the strategic plan as the new teams had to be oriented on the implementation of the plans.

### *c) Economic challenge*

The respondents reported that due to inadequate funding of the public organizations, it was a challenge to implement strategic plans as most of the activities that were lined up for implementation required some funding.

### *d) Social challenge*

The respondents indicated the lack of adequate capacity in most of the public organizations as the general malaise in the implementation of strategic plans. It was observed that most

members of the Executive Management team in most public organizations lacked knowledge on strategic plan process lest alone implementation and this affected service delivery.

*e) Technological challenge*

The respondents indicated that technology is a challenge to most Malawians let alone in public organizations as most people are not conversant with it. As most organizations are moving away from the use of brick and mortal methods to the use of technology, it was a challenge to implement strategic plan.

*f) Environmental challenge*

The respondents reported that they faced environmental challenges in implementing strategic plans as there was limited monitoring and evaluation frameworks to measure the success due to unwillingness by the leaders to embrace change.

*g) Legal challenge*

The respondents indicated that there was lack of a comprehensive legal framework for the implementation of strategic plan in public organizations. They further reported that there is a laissez-faire approach in implementation of strategic plan due to lack of a proper legal framework. There are no measures taken when a public organization does not successfully implement strategic plan and no rewards given to those who successfully implement strategic plans.

From the foregoing, the research found that strategic plan as a public sector reform initiative is a magic wand for enhancing performance in public organizations but not as much as expected. This is in line with Khunga and Magolowondo (2023) who also found that some public sector reform initiatives such as performance contracts helps to improve service delivery but only marginally due to some challenges. In the case of strategic plan, some challenges which the public organizations face include political, economic, social, technological, environmental, legal and governance challenges as observed by M'banga and Sharma (2021).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research set out to assess whether or not strategic plans are a magic wand for enhancing performance in public organizations in Malawi. The research used the case of MACRA and MPC as a unit of analysis. The research has shown that strategic plan is a magic wand in enhancing performance in public organizations in Malawi but to an extent due to some challenges such as political, economic, social, technological environmental and legal challenges. These are some of the challenges that need to be addressed if strategic plan is to truly be a magic wand in enhancing performance in public organizations in Malawi

The study therefore recommends that the Government of Malawi as the principal should have political will by putting in place supportive policies and stringent measures to enable strategic plan enhance performance in public organizations in order to create public value and deter a laissez-faire attitude on implementation of strategic plans in public organizations. The Government need to develop a legal framework for the implementation of strategic plans in all public organizations in Malawi with stringent measures to punish public officers who do not implement strategic plans in their organizations.

Added to this, there is need to increase awareness to the general public on the performance of the public organizations to enable them to demand the value they should get from the delivery of services. The citizens need to be vigilant to demand such services and even take to court public organizations that are not delivering the services to their satisfaction. This is called active citizenship.

Since this study only focused on two public organizations due to limited time and resources, the researcher recommends a further study to obtain an in-depth study on how strategic plan can enhance the performance in public organizations using a quantitative methodological approach. The study will be significance as the results will inform policy makers on how strategic plan enhances performance in public organizations in Malawi.

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