

Is it really performance that is measured? A reflection of the South African Government's performance management system

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Abstract: The institutionalisation of performance management in the South African public service is a post-1994 intervention necessitated by the need to counteract the legacy of poor performance in public service institutions. Performance management as an integrated system is not a standalone intervention, but has direct links with other organisational processes. At both the micro-and macro-levels, PMS (performance management system) recognises institutional performance relationships between individuals', teams' and departments' performance contributions for attaining government performance targets. These institutional performance relationships in the South African public service have attracted excessive attention, whilst their performance impact in communities has been overlooked. In addition, the interdependence between the dichotomies of PMS: institutional performance relationships and performance impact have also been overlooked. In the South African context, this condition creates a disparity in terms of which government employees are rewarded for outstanding performance, whilst targeted beneficiaries express dissatisfaction, often with violent protests, over government's performance in the delivery of basic services. The protestors cite poor service delivery in prioritised key performance areas of the South African Government. The granting of performance rewards to government employees is an expression of performance excellence, which should translate into quality service delivery. Such delivery should not only meet the levels of service delivery expectations of targeted communities, but should also result in their total satisfaction. The article is founded on the basis that any disparity between targeted beneficiaries' service expectations and level of satisfaction can be linked directly to government progress in PMS implementation.

Key words:

1. Introduction

Government requires a public service that performs effectively to meet the objective of creating and sustaining a better life for its citizens. Effective performance requires the use of appropriate mechanisms (Sangweni, 2008) for monitoring the implementation of public service programmes and for supporting informed decision making. In the South African public service, a performance management system (PMS) was set up in July 1999 to counteract the legacy of poor performance by government institutions (DPSA, 2001, p. 1). The system is set to cover the period April 1st to March 31st each year and coincides with the financial year of departments in the public service. PMS is critical for enhancing the pace of government delivery, which impacts directly on communities' levels of satisfaction. The first two parts of this article provide a discussion of the

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research problem and a conceptual analysis in which major key concepts are explained.

2. Problem statement

The problem to which awareness is drawn in this article is that scholarly discourse and research on public service performance management systems (PMSs) are often reduced to institutional activities, herein referred to as performance relationships, whilst the systems' impact beyond institutional boundaries is overlooked. The discourse and research have had a major influence on the way public service practitioners define, interpret and implement PMS; the consequence being that there is disparity and inconsistency between government's performance and the expectations of targeted beneficiaries. In South Africa, this disparity manifests itself in conditions in which public service institutions reward themselves for outstanding performance, whilst targeted beneficiaries express their frustration, anger and dissatisfaction with government's pace and performance in the delivery of basic services through nationwide service delivery protests. The way in which PMS is implemented results in government institutions being regarded as simultaneously both players and referees, and the disparity persists despite the influential role defined in various South African legislation that targeted beneficiaries play in government's performance and service delivery.

3. Conceptual analysis

3.1 Basic services

By the delivery of basic services reference is made to those services about which communities have expressed dissatisfaction during service delivery demonstrations. These services, as noted from an analysis of service delivery demonstrations, include municipal services such as housing, sanitation, water, health care, electricity, roads and crime (Roux & Nyamukachi, 2005, p. 689), all of which in terms of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996 are considered basic services. Housing delivery has been recorded as the dominant feature of all the demonstrations that have taken place, and it appears to be the main source of dissatisfaction among demonstrators countrywide. Despite the delivery of these services being a municipal competence, South African municipalities play a critical intergovernmental relations role and, therefore, their performance has to be aligned with performance standards set by national and provincial spheres of government.

3.2 Targeted beneficiaries

In terms of the development profile, South African residential areas can be classified into two main categories that include suburban (highly developed) areas, and townships, informal and rural (poorly developed) residential settlements. It is common practice to classify communities residing in underdeveloped areas as deprived communities. Various pieces of South African legislation identify households and individuals residing in underdeveloped areas as targeted beneficiaries to whom basic services need to be urgently delivered. In terms of an analysis of the record of service delivery demonstrations, deprived communities are the main and sole source of service delivery demonstrations, as opposed to those residing in highly developed residential areas.

3.3 Service delivery pipeline

The concept of "service delivery pipeline" in this context is a colloquial statement in which the meaning of delivery, pipe or line does not exist. This term usually surfaces in reaction to questions on deliverables that the "same" or "another" politician or official once made promise(s) about. The deliverables that are in the delivery pipeline might have been forgotten, or be truly imminent, and sometimes the reaction simply indicates the

inconsistency between promises and what is realistic in terms of plans, available resources and funding. In short, the concept is widely used in statements in which politicians and/or officials say, in general terms, “‘we’ have not forgotten about that, just wait”.

4. Theory of performance management

PMS, as referred to in Patel (1994), Patterson (1987) and the Public Service Commission (PSC) (2008), is a strategic approach to management that equips and harnesses the activities of supervisors, employees and stakeholders at different interaction levels in the achievement of an organisation's strategic goals. The system presents a set of tools and techniques for regular planning, monitoring, measuring and reviewing of the performance of the organisation in terms of indicators and targets for efficiency and impact. As described by the Department of Local and Provincial Government (DPLG) (2001), PMS links individuals' and teams' activities to larger goals and values, the culture of the organisation and the needs of its customers. It is about setting and measuring desired outcomes and activities—its individual employees and components/teams/departments that contribute to the achievement of the organisation's strategy. According to the *White Paper on Local Government 1998*, the Public Finance Management Act of 1999, and the Labour Relations Act of 1995, the aim of PMS is to enable realistic planning, to allow government to assess the impact of its processes and strategies, and to enhance accountability.

PMS represents ways in which government engages citizens in their capacities as voters, affected citizens, consumers and end-users of government services. Citizens gain recognition as partners in resource mobilisation for the development of municipal areas, and their role is therefore seen as critical in government performance and delivery. PMS represents a comprehensive means of turning employees into high performing individuals and is recognised as a mechanism that identifies skills, competency gaps and provides remedies necessitated by performance gaps. PMS is recognised as part of a larger system (Seemela, 2005, p. 10) that consists of numerous interdependent subsystems, which create a work environment in which people are enabled to perform to the best of their abilities (Heathfield, n.d.). As a systematic process, PMS begins when a job position is defined as filled and ends when an employee leaves the organisation. The system aligns the roles of employees with the achievement of organisational objectives.

PMS is ideally not a standalone intervention, but one that integrates various processes (subsystems) in a public institution. It ensures that whilst employees realise personal growth resulting from an institution's training and development interventions, and whilst they gain recognition that enhances opportunities for promotion to senior public service positions, the ability of an institution to deliver on its mandate is as well nurtured. PMS has direct links with numerous processes in a public institution, a few of which are illustrated in Figure 1.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, PMS has direct links to employee job descriptions and performance contracts. This link guarantees that employees' performance is aligned to an institution's strategic objectives and that only assigned tasks or those agreed to by supervisors and supervised employees are assessed. These activities reside within the performance planning stage during which the supervisors and the supervised employees align the supervised employee's performance plan to the institution's strategy and goals. The essence of the planning stage is to allow supervised employees to know exactly what is expected of them, and to get them to agree to set performance standards, indicators and development plans. After it has been agreed to, the performance plan

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represents a formal agreement on which all other stages in the performance cycle will be based.

PMS's link to training and development interventions ensures that in cases where performance gaps have been identified, employees will then be trained and coached to enable them to acquire the competencies that are required by their jobs. The identification of employees' training and development needs are often agenda items of the performance review and feedback stage, during which employees' performance is reviewed. Based on the review of performance, employees get recognition for a job well done and supervisors get the opportunity to militate against performance gaps and barriers. Barriers are often the result of a lack of both the support and physical resources that are necessary for the performance of tasks, and are sometimes the result of employees' personal problems which affect their work performance. It is during this stage that supervisors facilitate a process through which employees are able to access some counselling. Employee assistance programmes (EAPs), as described in Rajin (2009), play a significant role in this regard. The review and feedback phase is important in assisting supervisors to recognise, reward and initiate corrective measures where underperformance is evident. Performance rewards are given as an incentive for outstanding work performance (PSC, 2008, p. 18).



Figure 1 PMS and other organisational processes

The performance cycle ends with the evaluation and assessment stage; sometimes referred to as the performance appraisal, the stage during which employees' performance is evaluated and assessed against predetermined performance standards. The evaluation and assessment stage is critical in the performance cycle, since most decisions are based on its outcome. Promotions, financial and nonfinancial rewards, as well as pay progressions, are based on the outcome of this stage. It is also this outcome that determines whether employees are demoted to lower positions in the case of extremely unsatisfactory performance, or transferred to working environments in which they will be able to perform better. In terms of employees who are on probation, often twelve months of continuous assessment, the evaluation and assessment stage is used to determine the suitability of their skills, competencies and experience and whether they are able to cope with the demands of the job. Despite the emphasis of PMS being placed on individual employees as essential resources for a public institution, it views individuals' performance in a micro-context as contributing to the department's performance, and ultimately to performance of the entire organisation. Organisational performance is an outcome of the sum total of individual employees', teams' and departments' performance contribution, and relies heavily on these institutional performance relationships to be able to make the required impact in communities. This institutional performance relationship is dealt with in the next section.

5. Performance relationship

Figure 2 below demonstrates the relationship between various sources of performance in an organisation and ultimately government in its entirety. As demonstrated, these sources are often interlinked and depend on each other's scope of influence for achieving an organisation's performance expectations/standards. At the micro-level, it often represents existing intergovernmental relations between individual employees, teams of employees and departments, all of whose performance contributes to achieving the organisation's strategic objectives. The figure further demonstrates interdepartmental relations between key individual employees, teams and departments in their scope of influence that often contribute to achieving the performance targets set for the entire organisation. This means that in the absence of this micro-level (institutional) performance relationship, it becomes difficult for organisations to attain their performance targets and, more importantly, to deliver on time in terms of expectations and satisfy the needs of targeted beneficiaries.

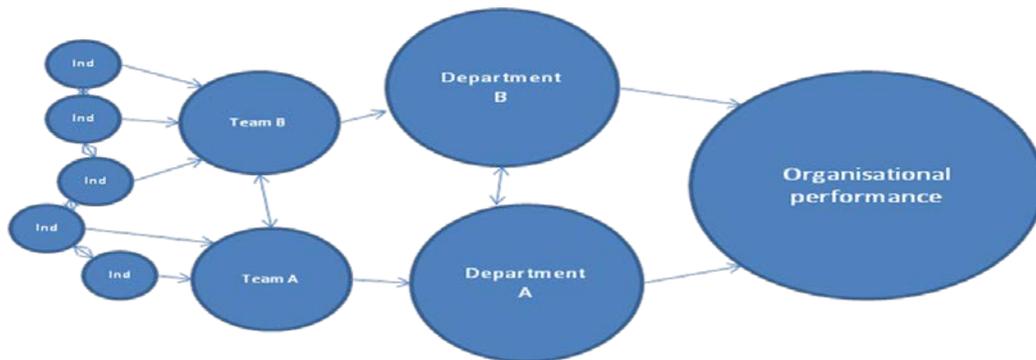


Figure 2 Institutional performance relationships

This illustration further reflects, at the macro-level, the contribution of every government institution, whether in the national, provincial or local sphere of operation, to the entire government's performance. It recognises the PMS as a cross-cutting intervention that enables the entire government to respond in a timely fashion to the needs of society in order to make the intended impact. Additionally, the performance relationship between government institutions across sectors and spheres of operation is required to make the expected impact on society. The performance relationship does not end when an organisation achieves its performance target, but when its performance impact satisfies the needs/expectations of targeted beneficiaries. In practice, institutional performance relationships are seen as a source of performance impact beyond organisational boundaries.

6. Performance management systems in practice

In practice, PMS advances an understanding of the theory outlined in the previous discussion since it explores the existing interdependence between institutional performance relationships and the external environment within which government institutions operate. In contrast to the institutional performance relationships, which reduce PMS to both micro-and macro-level institutional activities, PMS in practice recognises the existence of the interdependence between institutional performance relationships and the sources of mandate from which government institutions and government in its entirety derives. Figure 3 below illustrates a simple and yet holistic demonstration of PMS in practice. It demonstrates a practice in which two dichotomies of PMS are distinguished, that is, the institutional environment in which performance relationships are practised and

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the external environment, an ideal area in which the impact of institutional performance relationships are felt. A further explanation that distinguishes between dichotomies, as illustrated in Figure 3, is that institutional performance relationships are the focus of the current system of PMS implementation, whilst the external environment is often overlooked.

The institutional environment comprises forces over which the institution has control. This environment consists of PMS resources: human, funding (budgets), organisational structures, infrastructure and equipments, and PMS systems: organisational strategy, goals, performance charts, its mandates, policies, methods and procedures, to mention but a few. At the micro-level, the individual employees, teams and departments (within an organisation) are able to use resources and systems to advance their performance relationships.

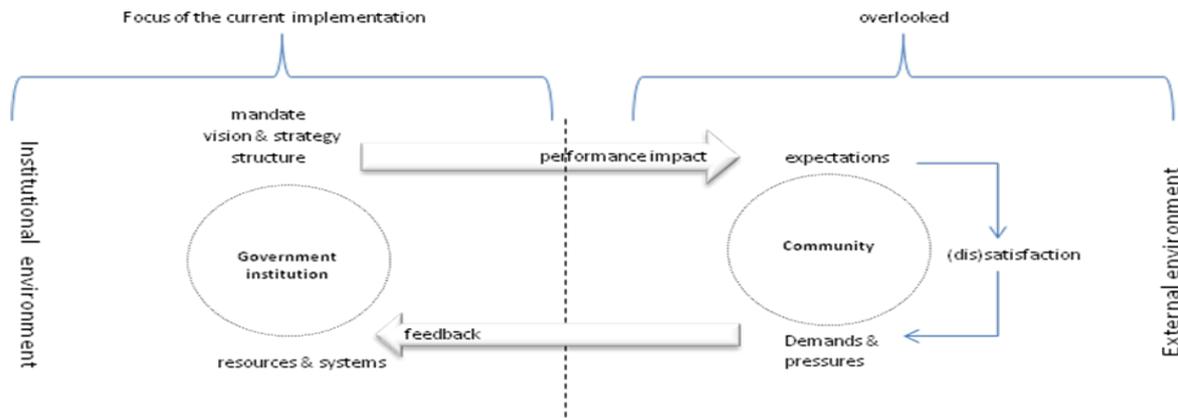


Figure 3 Interdependence between internal and external environments

As illustrated, the second dichotomy of PMS in practice identifies the communities on which government performance relationships have an impact—“the often overlooked”. The external environment consists of factors and forces that are beyond the control of government institutions (Malefane, 2008, p. 11), and consists of the changing physical, technological, social, economic, political and international sub-environments. Despite government institutions’ inability to control external conditions, the degree and intensity with which their performance relationships are conducted need to be informed by and keep pace with the changes in the external environment. This interdependence can be further explained by means of the expectations, demands and pressures of communities, which are in turn absorbed into government policies, strategies, structures, operations and performance standards. Most importantly, the external environment consists of communities whose expectations and demands benefit government institutions.

Although a distinction is often made between the two dichotomies of the PMS, both institutional and external environments are interdependent. This interdependence means that institutional performance relationship activities have to impact either negatively or positively on communities (performance impact), and communities’ expectations, demands and pressures should be absorbed into policy, strategy and performance standards by means of what is here referred to as performance feedback. This interdependence entails that PMS is institutionalised to enable government to respond in time of need. Time, urgency, responsiveness, commitment and accountability are critical in the delivery of government functions. PMS shortens what in South Africa is commonly referred to as “service delivery pipeline” about which most targeted beneficiaries have expressed high levels of impatience. The ultimate goal of the system is to satisfy community needs and make them feel happy. In

the next discussion, attention is drawn to the interdependence between dichotomies of PMS. The discussion reflects on South Africa's experience.

7. The South African experience

The discussion in this part reflects on South Africa's experience of the relationship between the dichotomies discussed previously. This experience reflects on both the performance relationships and performance impact in communities. In terms of performance relationships, the experience recognises government in its entirety (macro-level); that is, government institutions in all spheres of government working jointly to achieve a "common good"—its mandate of basic service delivery to targeted communities. Additionally, it reflects on the impact the performance relationships have had on communities and communities' responses to them (government performance).

7.1 Performance management system implementation

This section gives a progress report on PMS implementation by the South African public service. It reports in particular on the initiation, support, assessment and auditing of the state of readiness of departments to implement PMS. This part of the article is informed by three major reports, namely the DPSA's report on the state of performance management in the public service, the PSC's founding document on organisational performance assessment, and an audit report on the implementation of performance rewards by public service departments. PMS in the South African public sector is described in terms of its role and outcome with regard to employee development; hence it is widely referred to by public sector employees as a performance management and development system (PMDS). PMDS¹ is a post-1994 intervention implemented since 1999 and made official in April 2001 to counteract the legacy of poor performing public service institutions. The reasons that underpinned the need for PMDS reside in service delivery imperatives, the quest for improved performance and the emergence of a new pay progression system based on employee performance (DPSA, 2001, p. 2). The DPSA and the PSC are mandated custodians of the PMDS in the South African public service, and are held accountable for facilitating and overseeing its implementation.

In terms of the DPSA (2001, p. 2), government departments, despite their inability to meet regulatory requirements during 1999-2001, had experienced developments in terms of PMDS implementation. By 2001, only the implementation progress of three national and two provincial administrations was unsatisfactory. The assessment criteria with which departments' readiness to implement PMS determined critical issues and elements against which departmental progress could be benchmarked. These, according to the DPSA (2001, p. 6), were the stages of development, approval of PMS policy, consultation with employee organisations, readiness to implement, elements of the (draft) policies and systems, the development of performance measures, standards and indicators, recognition of team work (and its assessment), and the recognition of the importance of assessing organisational performance and effectiveness.

Despite the declaration of success in the implementation of PMDS by the DPSA (DPSA, 2001, p. 6), the PSC revealed, prior to the initiation of organisational performance assessment (OPA) tool, the absence of correlation between heads of departments' (HoD) performance and that of their departments: exemplified by 80% of HoDs

¹ An instrument that enables performance planning, monitoring and evaluation of employees in salary bands 1-12 in the South African public service.

whose performance evaluations between March 2002 and May 2004 received an overall rating of 4 and above, which meant that their performance was regarded as significantly above expectations; yet during the same period, many service delivery gaps remained and the Auditor-General was concerned with the unsatisfactory state of financial management in certain departments. Considerations like these, as noted by the PSC, emphasize the need to link individual performance to organisational performance (PSC, 2007, p. 3).

The OPA is implemented in accordance with the framework for the evaluation of heads of departments. It is a process of assessing how an organisation has performed against specific goals and targets (PSC, 2002). As part of carrying out OPA activities, the PSC facilitates HoDs' performance evaluations/appraisals, a process adopted by the South African Cabinet and made mandatory for national and provincial departments since December 2002. The evaluation of HoDs' performance, as part of the OPA, is justified in terms of their accountability for the achievement of overall departmental performance targets. In the context of the OPA, HoDs' performance as individuals is not looked at in isolation from the overall progress made by their departments. Although the OPA appears to be reflective of the ideal PMS instrument that matches the changes in the external environment to its focus on service delivery, it continues to face serious challenges. According to the PSC (2007, p. 15), there are instances where service delivery information (in annual reports) is inadequate for any meaningful assessment. Departments do not always report on all the outputs contained in their strategic and annual performance plans. In addition, they do not present progress in ways that would help the reader understand the nature and extent of the achievement and what was not achieved. There is often no clear indication of the actual versus planned performance or, where appropriate, an indication of impact. What has transpired is that performance regarding service delivery cannot be adequately assessed. In terms of the PSC report (2008, p. 82), despite public managers' claims that training has improved their performance, the actual results are not as significant as they rate them to be. Their performance is often exaggerated, a condition that has been widely used to justify performance rewards.

Despite the challenges experienced in assessing service delivery and the moderation procedure which performance appraisals should go through, before performance rewards are allocated most senior managers have been granted performance rewards since 2003 (PSC, 2008, p. 18). There are many incidents in which performance rewards were granted to HoDs during 2003/04, 2004/05 and 2005/06 (PSC, 2008, pp. 16-20) without performance appraisals having been concluded. In addition to performance appraisals of HoDs being incomplete, performance rewards are granted without having been moderated. As well as performance rewards being granted to HoDs, performance rewards during 2003/04, 2004/05 and 2005/06 were allocated in a variety of public service institutions, across spheres of government and across salary bands other than that of HoDs. In addition, despite protests portraying dissatisfaction with government's pace and performance in the delivery of basic services, performance rewards in recognition of government's outstanding performance have been annually budgeted for and granted. The budget for performance rewards adds millions of rands that are drawn from the public purse.

7.2 Performance impact in communities

Despite implementation success in PMDS implementation, mainly highlighted by the granting of performance rewards, the reaction of communities that are served by the same government institutions has consistently been in contrast. The contrast has drawn the attention of local and international observers and political analysts, and has largely been debated to question South Africa's capacity to host the 2010 Soccer World Cup successfully. This contrast manifests itself in terms of service delivery protests/demonstrations, the source with which communities express their dissatisfaction regarding the pace of delivery of basic services. Service

delivery protests started in 2004² in Harrismith in the Free State (cf. Roux & Nyamukachi, 2005, p. 689) and since then have spread to other parts of the country. In terms of an analysis of the record of the protests, in June 2005 alone, demonstrations took place in 21 South African local municipalities, and in July of the same year approximately 50 towns and cities were affected by violent³ protests (Venter, 2005).

In 2004/05 alone, there were 881 (Investor Relations Information Network (IRIN), 2007) illegal protests and 5,085 legal protests across 90% of municipalities. In terms of their spread, protests appear to be an experience of the poor and marginalised communities in the peripheries of metropolitan areas (townships, including informal settlements) and rural areas. In Gauteng Province (South Africa's economic hub), demonstrations by Soweto and Merafong municipality residents have called for major political interventions that has attracted national government political and administrative interventions, whilst in rural areas demonstrations often go unnoticed or are reduced to unpatriotic action by communities.

Among the recent cases of service delivery protests are those witnessed in March and April 2009 in Khayelitsha, Cape Town's largest township in which demonstrators claimed the reasons for demonstrating as a lack of access to toilets, water, electricity and sanitation (Mbiza & Prince, 2009). The major recent demonstration, in which demonstrators in around 220 towns (Kelder,⁴ 2009) threatened to withhold municipal taxes, resulted from claims of poor service delivery in municipalities. As reported by Kelder (2009), municipalities' poor performance in delivering services has led to conditions in which residents have begun carrying out municipal functions themselves. Other extreme incidents included demonstrations by, notably, Gauteng's Khutsong residents who threatened to violently boycott the 2009 national elections in the municipal area if their demands were not met. Suffice is to say that the African National Congress's (ANC) election campaign served as a political intervention that calmed most public service delivery protests. Most of the party's election campaigns revolved around issues of government performance and the reassurance to deprived communities in townships and rural areas of government's commitment to basic service delivery, in particular, priorities identified in its election manifesto.

Despite an acknowledgement of specific municipal areas in which demonstrations have taken place, they represent countrywide outrage (Powell & Breytenbach, 2006), the impact of which has had devastating effects across South Africa's nine provinces. The protests, in terms of the study by the Centre for Development Enterprise (cf. Da Costa, 2007), indicate a common factor in all areas in which they occur. Demonstrators claim experiences of indifferent treatment and contempt, and insensitive, unresponsive and unaccountable political officials. Political analysts believe that unrealistic service delivery targets and "wild" election promises intensify the frequency of the demonstrations. Service delivery demonstrations appear to be the main source of criticism around the government's performance in the delivery of basic services to targeted beneficiaries.

8. Analysing performance impact in communities

Judged by the service delivery protests, it can be concluded that government's performance, despite performance rewards being granted, has a minimal effect/impact on targeted beneficiaries. Protests appear to be

² Ten years (decade) after the 1994 first democratic elections in South Africa.

³ Often illegal protests in which protestors express anger, frustration and loss of patience and attack (stoning) the police. Protestors are often arrested by the police. Protestors in certain circumstances burn tyres and rubbish to close major roads that cross municipal areas.

⁴ A member of the National Taxpayers' Union (NTU).

the only way of expressing anger and frustrations and a loss of patience. A question that arises from this analysis is: To what extent are the performance targets of departments (and of the entire government) informed by the service delivery needs/impact they have to make.

From the discussion on PMS implementation, it becomes clear that there is no performance alignment between the three spheres of government: national, provincial and local. The reports about the state of PMS implementation merely focus on the implementation results of national and provincial departments, which make performance relationships with municipalities impossible. The reports are silent about how municipal performance fits into broader government performance. Municipalities in South Africa are an important source of basic service delivery, and are better placed to partner and communicate performance gaps to targeted beneficiaries than national and provincial spheres of government.

Disparity is evident under circumstances in which government employees receive performance rewards, whilst at the same time recipients/targeted beneficiaries express dissatisfaction with government performance. This disparity suggests that the PMDS is not working as it is supposed to; it is internally focused and fails to recognise the impact it has to make on communities. This situation not only presents conditions in which public funds are used to reward poor performance, but also conditions in which government employees are placed at the centre of government service delivery at the expense of targeted beneficiaries. The practice does not uphold South Africa's service delivery principles (Batho-Pele) which put communities at the centre of government delivery, while instead government officials are given priority.

There also appears to be a lack of clear communication by means of which deprived communities are informed about service delivery progress and performance gaps. The reason that attests to existing lack of communication between government and deprived communities is the speedy response that protests are able to attract. Immediately after or during a protest is the only time that senior political and official interventions are sought. The tendency is that the level of seniority of interveners (of the political office-bearers) to depend on the economic strength of the municipality in which the protest has taken place and the degree of violence associated with protest. This tendency is demonstrated by the record of interventions sought between rural and metropolitan areas in the country. A case in which high-level interventions are sought is inconsistent with local conditions and renders the interventions inappropriate, since follow-ups on corrective measures necessitated by the demonstrations are often not carried out.

9. Conclusion

The main objective of this article was to create an awareness of the influence of scholarly discourse and research on the way public service practitioners define, interpret and implement PMS, the consequences of which have been disparity and inconsistency between government performance and the expectations of the targeted beneficiaries. This disparity was analysed by referring to the theory of PMS, its practice and South African experiences in terms of both institutional performance relationships and performance impact in communities. It is from an analysis of performance relationships and performance impact in communities that the article recognises the absence of any link to the way in which public service institutions continue to reward themselves despite soaring criticism and dissatisfaction, often expressed in terms of service delivery protests by targeted beneficiaries.

This article concludes that positive institutional performance relationships, often used to justify conditions in

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which employees and institutions are rewarded for outstanding performance, should not be seen as an end, but should have a direct, positive impact on targeted communities. Because of the absence of a link between government's positive institutional performance relationships and degree of satisfaction through performance impact on communities, this article enquires whether it is really performance that is being measured or not. The article advocates a review of the South African PMS and, key to this review, is the recognition of the need to engage targeted beneficiaries of government performance and service delivery in general.

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