Asia Pacific Academy of Science Pte. Ltd.

Sustainable Social Development 2026, 4(4), 8540.
https://doi.org/10.23812/ssd8540

Article

Systemic resistance to change: Implications for sustainable social development in Malawian public enterprises

Samuel Kaleke[1], Jeremy Mitonga-Monga[2,*]

[1] School of Management Sciences, Department of Industrial Psychology & People Management, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg 2006, South Africa

[2] Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, The University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg 2006, South Africa

*** Corresponding author:** Jeremy Mitonga-Monga, jeremym@uj.ac.za

CITATION

Kaleke S, Mitonga-Monga J. Systemic resistance to change: Implications for sustainable social development in Malawian public enterprises. Sustainable Social Development. 2026; 4(4): 8540. https://doi.org/10.23812/ssd8540

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 4 April 2026
Revised: 18 May 2026
Accepted: 19 May 2026
Available online: 17 July 2026

Abstract: This article challenges the individualistic paradigm dominating resistance to change research by examining whether established individual-level measures demonstrate validity in African state-owned enterprise (SOE) contexts, and what alternative conceptualisation better explains observed empirical patterns and their effects on sustainable public sector reforms. Adopting a critical realist philosophy, the study employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test Oreg's (2003) 17-item Resistance to Change Scale (RTCS) with 543 employees from two Malawian SOEs: Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi (ESCOM) and the Southern Region Water Board (SRWB). The scale failed to meet psychometric adequacy ($\chi^2/df = 18.07$; RMSEA = 0.177; AVE = 0.449), explaining only 33.39 % of variance. From a critical realist perspective, this failure signals ontological misalignment: The construct of resistance as individual disposition does not align with Malawian SOE realities. We propose a preliminary conceptual framework operationalising systemic resistance through five dimensions, institutional memory of reform failure, power asymmetries, cultural norms constraining dissent, political economy constraints, and reform fatigue, each with observable indicators. The findings suggest replacing individual-focused interventions with systemic diagnostics to support the attainment of Malawi's Growth and Development Strategy IV and related SDGs. This study contributes to decolonising change management scholarship by theorising resistance as a systemic phenomenon rooted in institutional history, power structures, cultural norms, and political economy, whilst providing a foundation for contextually grounded interventions in African public-sector reforms. These findings carry direct implications for MGDS IV and Sustainable Development Goals 6 (clean water) and 7 (affordable energy) in that when resistance is correctly diagnosed as systemic, interventions target institutional voids, political interference, and trust deficits, which offers the only realistic prospect for sustainable public sector reform in African SOEs.

Keywords: resistance to change; systemic resistance; state-owned enterprises; Malawi; critical realism; institutional theory; SDGs; public sector reform

1. Introduction

The world has changed significantly in recent decades, shaped by pandemics, geopolitical realignments, technological disruptions, and shifting economic alliances. These forces compel organisations to adapt continuously, not merely to survive but also to thrive and remain sustainable over the long term. Yet, for African state-owned enterprises (SOEs), decades of reform initiatives have yielded remarkably little sustainable progress. Despite their centrality to life, providing energy, water, transport, and other essential services, SOEs across the continent remain trapped in cycles of underperformance and failed transformation [1,2]. This further leads to failure to attain the associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 6, which is the provision of clean water, and 7, which is the availability of affordable energy, set by the United Nations [3]. Part of the problem may lie in the tools and assumptions that underpin these reforms. Resistance to change is one of the most important issues that affect organisational change and may determine whether or not the change will be sustainable. Currently, the dominant paradigm for understanding resistance to change is imported largely from western organisational psychology, framing it as an individual phenomenon, a psychological trait located within employees [4–6]. This individualistic lens shapes how resistance is measured, diagnosed, and addressed, focusing interventions on changing employee attitudes rather than examining the contexts in which resistance arises [7]. A growing body of scholarship challenges this assumption. Some scholars [5] argue that resistance is socially constructed, emerging from the interaction between change agents and recipients rather than residing solely in individuals. Institutional theorists have long emphasised that organisations themselves shape behaviour through structures, routines, and power relations [8]. Yet these insights have rarely been integrated into the study of resistance in African public sector contexts.

The African SOE environment is distinctive in ways that challenge the applicability of individualistic resistance models. High power distance relations mean that questioning authority is culturally taboo, driving resistance underground rather than eliminating it [9]. Collectivist orientations, rooted in philosophies such as Ubuntu, frame behaviour through relational rather than individual lenses [10]. Ubuntu also offers a sense of continuity and sustainability owing to the reciprocity factor that it signifies. Deep-seated institutional mistrust, legacies of colonial governance and post-colonial political interference, may manifest not as active opposition but as passive withdrawal and reform fatigue [11]. In Malawi, these dynamics are amplified by chronic fiscal constraints and repeated cycles of reform that have bred cynicism rather than commitment [1].

Despite these contextual specificities, current change management practices in African SOEs remain heavily focused on individual-level interventions, neglecting the institutional, cultural, and political contributors to resistance [12]. This presents a gap that calls for a fundamental reconceptualization of resistance, one that moves beyond the individual to embrace the bigger picture. Drawing on empirical evidence from two Malawian SOEs, this article argues that resistance to change in African public enterprises is not primarily an individual psychological trait but rather a systemic phenomenon rooted in institutional history, power structures, cultural norms, and political economy. The authors therefore propose a new framework to understand systemic resistance, whilst exploring its implications for theory, research, and practice.

Malawi provides an instructive case because since the early 2000s, the country has cycled through multiple public sector reform programmes, including the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) phases I through III, each promising institutional transformation yet each yielding marginal sustainable improvement. The transition to MGDS IV coincides with deepening fiscal crises and repeated donor suspensions, conditions that heighten rather than diminish the urgency of SOE reform. In this environment, resistance to change, if understood only individually, becomes a convenient explanation for reform failure, shielding deeper institutional problems from diagnostic scrutiny. This study therefore does not merely test a scale; it tests the very premise that resistance resides inside employees.

In essence, this study addresses two interrelated questions: First, do established individual-level measures of resistance to change demonstrate validity in African state-owned enterprise contexts; and second, if not, what alternative conceptualisation better explains the empirical patterns observed? Grounded in institutional theory [13] and systems thinking [14], it will be argued that resistance to change in African SOEs is fundamentally systemic rather than an individual-level pathology. By shifting the analytical lens from individual employees to organisational and contextual systems, this study contributes to decolonising change management scholarship and provides a foundation for contextually grounded interventions in sustainable African public-sector reforms. Further, this study makes three contributions. First, it empirically demonstrates the failure of a widely used individual-level resistance measure in an African SOE context. Second, it reconceptualises resistance as a systemic phenomenon grounded in institutional, cultural, and political-economic dynamics. Third, it proposes a preliminary framework that operationalises systemic resistance and provides a foundation for future measurement development and reform diagnostics

2. Literature review

2.1. The dominant paradigm: Individualistic models of resistance

From the outset, resistance has been conceptualised as an individual-level phenomenon. Oreg [15], a pioneer of resistance studies, defines resistance to change as an individual's dispositional tendency to avoid and oppose change initiatives, operationalising the construct through four dimensions: Routine seeking; emotional reaction; short-term focus; and cognitive rigidity [16]. Each of these dimensions locates the capacity for resistance squarely within the individual. Others, while concurring that resistance manifests at the individual level, propose a tripartite framework that comprises cognitive, affective, and behavioural components [17]. Despite their differing emphases, both frameworks share the foundational assumption that resistance resides within the individual, thereby marginalising the role of contextual factors. Other scholars have reinforced this individualistic orientation, describing resistance as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions, yet still locating these dimensions within individual psychology [17]. Essentially, the dominant western paradigm positions the individual at the centre of the resistance problem, assuming that individuals are rational, stable actors who are capable of independent determinations about change.

2.2. Critiques and alternatives

A growing body of scholarship has challenged this individualistic prevailing attitude. Literature cautions against fixing all blame for resistance on individuals, arguing that doing so absolves contextual factors of their contributory role and allows organisations to avoid accountability in diagnosing problems [18]. Institutional theorists have long emphasised the role of organisational context in shaping behaviour.

Others argue that change occurs in response to institutional pressures, implying that failure to change may reflect institutional shortcomings rather than individual opposition [13]. Other authors similarly observe that organisational systems which punish innovation, block communication, and breed mistrust create conditions that foster resistance [14]. It is also asserted that resistance is socially constructed, emerging from interactions between change agents and recipients rather than residing solely within individuals [19]. Collectively, these perspectives reframe resistance as a systemic phenomenon, shifting analytical attention from individual psychology to organisational structures, power relations, and interactional dynamics.

2.3. Resistance in public sector contexts

While these systemic perspectives reframe resistance as organisational rather than individual, their application remains largely untested in contexts where institutional logics, cultural norms, and political economies fundamentally reshape resistance manifestations, particularly within African public sector organisations. The public sector presents a particularly challenging context for individualistic resistance models. Public organisations differ from private firms in fundamental ways; they operate under political oversight, pursue multiple and often conflicting goals, face intense public scrutiny, and are constrained by bureaucratic rules and employment protections that limit managerial discretion [20]. These features shape how resistance emerges and manifests. Empirical research supports this contextual view. In a multilevel study of Swiss public organisations [21], it was found that organisational factors, particularly trust in management and perceptions of organisational justice, explained more variance in resistance than individual personality traits. Their findings demonstrate that resistance is shaped by the relational and structural context in which employees are embedded. Similarly, a study of Greek public sector organisations during austerity reforms documented widespread silent resistance, with employees complying minimally, withdrawing effort, and disengaging emotionally rather than openly opposing change [22]. This passive resistance, rooted in reform fatigue and emotional exhaustion, was invisible to standard resistance measures yet fundamentally undermined reform implementation.

2.4. The African context: Macro-cultural and institutional foundations

The African public sector context poses unique challenges for resistance conceptualisation at the macro level. African societies are characterised by high power distance, collectivist orientation, and relational decision-making [23]. These characteristics, however, do not operate exclusively at the organisational level but are embedded within broader national and continental cultural frameworks. The Ubuntu philosophy, varying in expression across different African societies yet retaining core principles of communal interdependence and relational harmony, reframes the leadership-resistance bond as relational rather than transactional [24]. At the national level, post-colonial institutional legacies, patterns of political governance, and historical trajectories of reform implementation shape how employees across entire countries come to view change initiatives. Continentally, shared experiences of externally imposed structural adjustment programmes, donor-driven reform conditionalities, and the lingering effects of colonial administrative systems have produced common patterns of scepticism towards top-down change that transcend organisational boundaries [11]. This multi-layered cultural context manifests in two ways relevant to resistance: First, communal principles discourage overt expressions of dissent, channelling opposition into culturally safer forms (withdrawal, gossip, performative compliance); second, resistance may stem not from disagreement with change content but from fractured relationships and eroded trust in change agents [23]. These cultural dynamics interact with post-colonial institutional legacies. As some scholars observe, decades of externally imposed reforms have generated collective scepticism, where resistance functions not as individual opposition but as embodied institutional memory, a rational response to historical broken promises [11]. In Malawi specifically, it is documented how chronic fiscal constraints, political interference in senior appointments, and multiple failed restructuring attempts have bred profound reform fatigue [1]. Comparable dynamics have been documented in Tanzanian SOEs, where it was found that collectivist cultural norms discouraged open dissent, channelling opposition into passive withdrawal rather than active resistance [1,23]. These trans-national similarities suggest that systemic resistance is not unique to Malawi but may characterise African SOEs more broadly, warranting regional empirical investigation. This confluence of cultural, historical, and institutional dynamics renders African public sector resistance a distinct phenomenon which requires dedicated theoretical and empirical attention.

These macro-level dynamics transcend individual organisations, operating at national and continental scales. At the national level, patterns of political governance, historical trajectories of reform implementation, and societal trust in public institutions shape how employees across entire countries come to view change initiatives. Continentally, the shared experiences of externally imposed structural adjustment programmes, donor-driven reform conditionalities, and the lingering effects of colonial administrative systems have produced common patterns of scepticism towards top-down change that transcend organisational boundaries [11]. This multi-layered cultural and institutional context, continental, national, and organisational, functions not as mere background but as an active generative mechanism. It shapes two responses directly relevant to resistance: First, the communal principles embedded in philosophies such as Ubuntu discourage overt expressions of dissent, channelling opposition into culturally safer forms such as withdrawal, gossip, and performative compliance; second, resistance may stem not from disagreement with change content but from fractured relationships and eroded trust in change agents [23]. These macro-level forces therefore do not merely contextualise resistance; they constitute its conditions of possibility in African SOEs.

2.5. The critical gap

Through this review, we have established that the dominant view conceptualises resistance as an individual problem that stems from stable individuals who rationally evaluate change proposals. This has resulted in current frameworks that operate within these individualistic parameters. Despite growing recognition of contextual factors [12], no study has empirically reconceptualised resistance to change in African SOEs as a systemic phenomenon rather than as an individual-level pathology. Current frameworks remain trapped in western individualistic assumptions, diagnosing employee-level resistance while ignoring how institutional voids, political economies, and cultural logics generate collective withdrawal patterns. This gap impedes evidence-based reform design in contexts like Malawi, where uncritical adoption of individual-focused interventions perpetuates implementation failures [25]. This study addresses that gap by subjecting the Resistance to Change Scale to rigorous psychometric testing in two Malawian SOEs. The findings, while demonstrating profound measurement failure, provide empirical grounding to reconceptualise resistance as a systemic phenomenon, allowing for future research to theorise and measure systemic resistance directly. Addressing this gap requires not only critique of existing frameworks but also the development of a construct that captures resistance as it is experienced in context. The following section therefore proposes a preliminary framework for operationalising systemic resistance.

2.6. Operationalising systemic resistance: A preliminary framework

Having established the psychometric inadequacy of individualistic resistance measures in Malawian SOE contexts, it becomes necessary to move beyond deconstruction toward constructive theoretical specification. Drawing on institutional theory [13], systems thinking [14], and the empirical patterns observed in this study, we propose that systemic resistance be defined as:

The collective withdrawal of employee engagement, commitment, and proactive participation in change initiatives, generated not by individual psychological dispositions but by enduring features of the institutional environment, including historical reform cycles, power structures, cultural scripts, and political-economic constraints, that render change efforts predictably unsustainable.

This definition shifts analytical focus from "resistant employees" to "resistance-generating systems." Five core dimensions operationalise the construct, each with observable indicators suitable for diagnostic application. **Table 1** gives an illustration of this framework, and it directly addresses the limitations of individual-level measures such as the RTCS by capturing the systemic mechanisms that generate resistance, rather than attempting to measure resistance as an individual disposition.

2.6.1. Distinctiveness from existing theoretical frameworks

We acknowledge that each dimension of the proposed framework has conceptual antecedents in established theories. Institutional memory of reform failure resonates with path dependence and imprinting theories in organisational institutionalism [8,13]. Power asymmetries are central to political economy analyses of organisations [20]. Cultural norms constraining dissent draw on cross-cultural psychology and post-colonial theory [9,10]. Political economy constraints reflect resource dependence and public choice perspectives [1]. Reform fatigue echoes research on organisational cynicism and learned helplessness [22]. We do not claim to have invented these constructs anew.

Table 1. Dimensions of systemic resistance with observable indicators.

	Definition	**Observable indicators**
Institutional memory of reform failure	Accumulated organisational knowledge of past change initiatives that were abandoned, reversed, or produced no sustainable improvement	(1) Employee narratives referencing specific previous reforms by name/year; (2) documented pattern of reform targets abandoned mid-implementation; (3) turnover of senior leadership exceeding 50 % within 24 months of reform launch; (4) employee responses such as "we have seen this before" during change communications
Power asymmetries	Concentration of decision-making authority that excludes those expected to implement change, combined with political interference in appointments and resource allocation	(1) Senior appointments made on political rather than meritocratic criteria; (2) absence of employee representation on reform steering committees; (3) documented instances of reform priorities overridden by political actors; (4) grievance mechanisms that are never acted upon
Cultural norms constraining dissent	Shared cultural scripts, rooted in high power distance and Ubuntu relational ethics, that render open opposition to authority socially proscribed and personally costly	(1) Absence of critical questions during formal change meetings despite low survey trust scores; (2) resistance manifesting as absenteeism, presenteeism, or gossip rather than direct opposition; (3) employees reporting fear of retaliation for speaking honestly; (4) preference for anonymous feedback channels when available
Political economy constraints	Fiscal limitations, donor conditionality cycles, and electoral cycles that undermine reform continuity and resource predictability	(1) Budget allocations for reform activities frozen or diverted mid-implementation; (2) reform timelines that systematically align with electoral rather than operational calendars; (3) donor funding cycles that terminate before institutionalisation is complete; (4) salary arrears or delayed operational funding during reform periods
Reform fatigue	Cumulative exhaustion and learned passivity resulting from repeated exposure to change initiatives that promise transformation but deliver disruption	(1) Employee statements expressing indifference to new change announcements; (2) declining participation rates in change-related activities over successive reform cycles; (3) documented decrease in change readiness scores across repeated reforms without corresponding increase in outcomes; (4) high variance between formal compliance and substantive engagement

The framework's contribution lies not in the novelty of individual dimensions but in three synthetic moves. First, it specifies these five mechanisms as a configuration that collectively generates resistance to change, arguing that no single mechanism alone is sufficient to explain the empirical patterns observed. Institutional theory explains why organisations persist in failing routines but does not specifically theorise how this persistence manifests as employee withdrawal [13]. Power asymmetry theories explain domination but not why dominated actors disengage rather than rebel [20]. Cultural theories explain deference but not the specific behavioural forms resistance takes under those conditions [23]. The systemic resistance framework integrates these partial explanations into a unified account. Second, the framework theorises the mutual reinforcement among dimensions: Institutional memory amplifies reform fatigue, which reduces the credibility of new initiatives, which intensifies power asymmetries as management resorts to top-down control, which cultural norms render invisible as employees withdraw silently, which political economy constraints validate when reforms are disrupted by exogenous shocks. This self-reinforcing dynamic is not captured by any single existing theory [14]. Third, and most fundamentally, the framework performs an ontological shift in how resistance is conceptualised. Existing change management theories, even those acknowledging context, ultimately locate resistance within individuals, as attitudes, dispositions, or perceptions [15,17]. Our framework relocates resistance in the relations among structural mechanisms, arguing that these systemic conditions generate resistance irrespective of individual psychological profiles [26]. This is not relabelling but reconceptualization: Resistance becomes an emergent property of interacting institutional systems, not an aggregation of individual dispositions.

2.6.2. Preliminary conceptual framework

These five dimensions do not operate independently but interact as a self-reinforcing system. Institutional memory of past failures amplifies reform fatigue, which reduces the credibility of new change initiatives. When employees expect failure, they withdraw engagement, a withdrawal that managers may misinterpret as individual resistance, leading to top-down control measures that intensify power asymmetries. In high power distance contexts, this withdrawal becomes culturally invisible, manifesting as silent compliance rather than overt opposition. Political economy constraints meanwhile ensure that even well-designed reforms face exogenous shocks that validate the institutional memory of failure, completing a vicious cycle.

This framework generates testable propositions (P1–P4) for future research:

- P1: Systemic resistance dimensions will demonstrate stronger statistical association with reform implementation outcomes than individual dispositional measures.
- P2: Organisations with higher scores on institutional memory of failure will exhibit stronger correlations between reform announcements and employee withdrawal behaviours.
- P3: Power asymmetries will moderate the relationship between reform quality and implementation success, such that high asymmetries nullify the positive effects of technically sound reform designs.
- P4: Cultural norms constraining dissent will predict passive resistance forms (absenteeism, presenteeism, performative compliance) but not active opposition.

This framework is not presented as final but as a preliminary theoretical foundation requiring empirical testing, refinement, and subsequent scale development.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research philosophy and design

This study adopted a critical realist research philosophy. While employing positivist methods (quantitative survey design), it interpreted measurement model failure not as statistical inadequacy but as evidence of deeper systemic realities that individual-level constructs cannot capture [26,27]. A cross-sectional survey design tested the psychometric properties of the Resistance to Change Scale (RTCS) within

Malawian SOEs. The critical realist stance enables the central argument: If resistance was purely individual, the RTCS would demonstrate coherent psychometric properties. Its empirical collapse would evidence systemic embeddedness.

3.2. Research context

A state-owned enterprise (SOE), or a Statutory Corporation (SC), as it is also referred to in Malawi, is defined as an organisation which is partly owned by the state and can either be wholly or partially supported financially [28,29]. The Southern Region Water Board (SRWB) provides drinkable water to districts in Malawi's southern region. It has over 662 employees, while the Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi (ESCOM), which procures and distributes electricity in Malawi with its 2570 employees, are both part of the commercial entities that generate their capital. They form part of the utility sector and are critical for the nation's development, being among key contributors towards the United Nations' prescribed SDGs 6 and 7, while ensuring better livelihoods and uplifting the economy by assisting with job creation and by creating an enabling environment in which to conduct business. Despite their strategic importance, both organisations have been trapped in cycles of underperformance and failed reform. ESCOM is dogged by continuous blackouts, internal conflict, and below-par service delivery, while SRWB faces serious inefficiencies that compromise water provision. These operational failures reflect deeper institutional problems: Chronic fiscal constraints, political interference in senior appointments, and multiple restructuring attempts that have not added any sustainable improvement [30]. A brief chronology illuminates this depth of reform fatigue: Between 2005 and 2023, ESCOM alone was subjected to five externally facilitated restructuring initiatives, funded by the World Bank, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the African Development Bank respectively, and each of these followed a predictable template: Diagnostic phase, change management training for senior managers, performance agreement signing, followed by political interference in board appointments, leadership churn, and eventual abandonment of reform targets. These five failed restructuring initiatives since 2005 have bred profound reform fatigue, creating a context where employees have learned to expect little from change programmes [31]. The cultural context amplifies these institutional dynamics. Malawian society, like much of sub-Saharan Africa, is characterised by high power distance, where hierarchical authority is rarely questioned, and collectivist orientation, where group cohesion and relational harmony are valued over individual expression [32,33]. These cultural norms shape how employees respond to change initiatives, potentially driving resistance underground rather than eliminating it. However, in perspective, these may allow the explicit involvement of leadership to ensure that reforms are sustainable [34].

3.3. Data collection and sample

The population comprised permanent ESCOM employees (N = 2,570) and SRWB employees (N = 359), while stratified random sampling ensured proportional representation across departments, job levels, and tenure. Using Raosoft (95 % confidence, 5 % margin of error), the minimum sample was 385. To account for nonresponse, 650 questionnaires were distributed at ESCOM and SRWB. A total of 543 completed responses were received (350 from ESCOM and 193 from SRWB, 83 % response rate). Resistance to change was measured using the 17-item Resistance to Change Scale (RTCS or four-factor model), scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). This is presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Demographic distribution, n = 543.

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	329	60.6
	Female	214	39.4
Age	18–24 years	1	0.2
	25–34 years	104	19.2
	35–44 years	189	34.8
	45–54 years	158	29.1
	55–64 years	91	16.8
Education	MSCE	17	3.1
	Diploma	201	37
	Bachelor's Degree	183	33.7
	Honours Degree	17	3.1
	Postgraduate Diploma	46	8.5
	Master's Degree	75	13.8
	Doctorate	4	0.7
Seniority	0–2 years	92	16.9
	3–5 years	163	30
	6–8 years	104	19.2
	9+ years	184	33.9
Organisation	ESCOM	350	64.5
	SRWB	193	35.5

Source: Authors' compilation.

3.4. Data analysis procedure

Data screening confirmed minimal missing values (<2 %) and acceptable normality (skewness < |2.0|, kurtosis < |7.0|) [35]. Analyses were conducted by using the SPSS version 30 and SmartPLS version 4.9 in four sequential phases, as indicated below.

1. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis) characterised item distributions and sample demographics.
2. Measurement model assessment employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate the hypothesised four-factor structure of the Resistance to Change Scale. Model fit was judged against established thresholds: CFI > 0.90, TLI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, SRMR < 0.08 [36].
3. Reliability and validity testing included:

- Internal consistency: Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR > 0.70);

- Convergent validity: Average variance extracted (AVE > 0.50); and
- Discriminant validity: Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT < 0.85) [37].

4. Interpretive protocol: Consistent with the critical realist philosophy, any psychometric inadequacies of the RTCS would be interpreted not as measurement error but as empirical evidence that resistance in Malawian SOEs cannot be reduced to individual dispositions, supporting reconceptualization as a systemic phenomenon.

Data from ESCOM (*n* = 350) and SRWB (*n* = 193) were pooled for the primary CFA. This decision was based on three considerations. First, both organisations operate within the same national political economy, are subject to identical macro-cultural norms of high-power distance and collectivism and share post-colonial institutional legacies common to Malawian SOEs, providing theoretical justification for treating them as a single population for the purpose of testing the RTCS's cross-contextual validity. Second, statistical power requirements for CFA (minimum *n* = 200 per group) precluded separate analyses for the SRWB subsample (*n* = 193). Third, our research question concerns whether the RTCS demonstrates validity in Malawian SOE contexts generally, not whether it performs differently across specific organisations, though we acknowledge that organisational differences may exist and warrant future investigation. Multi-group CFA to establish measurement invariance across the two organisations was not conducted due to the SRWB subsample size constraint; we return to this limitation in Section 5.7.

4. Results

4.1. Psychometric properties of the resistance to change scale

Confirmatory factor analysis of the 17-item Resistance to Change Scale with 543 Malawian SOE employees revealed significant deviations from acceptable psychometric thresholds. Model fit indices were: χ^2/df = 18.07 (threshold < 5.00), RMSEA = 0.177 (90 % CI: 0.130–0.230; threshold < 0.08), SRMR = 0.052 (threshold < 0.08), CFI = 0.938 (threshold > 0.90), TLI = 0.813 (threshold > 0.90), NFI = 0.935 (threshold > 0.90), PGFI = 0.194 (threshold > 0.50).

Factor loadings ranged from 0.474 to 0.847, with only one item ("I prefer familiar routines"; RSTC5) exceeding the 0.80 threshold. Corrected item-total correlations ranged from 0.336 to 0.549. Inter-item correlations were highly variable (range: *r* = 0.18–0.55). The scale explained 33.39 % of the total variance. Internal consistency was acceptable for the overall scale (Cronbach's α = 0.748; CR = 0.769), but convergent validity was not established (AVE = 0.449; threshold > 0.50) [38].

Collectively, these psychometric indicators fail multiple convergent validity criteria. The AVE of 0.449 falls substantially below the 0.50 threshold [38], meaning that the four-factor model explains less than half of the variance in its own indicators. The RMSEA of 0.177 exceeds even the liberal upper bound of 0.10 sometimes tolerated in exploratory work, and the χ^2/df ratio of 18.07 is more than three times the maximum acceptable value of 5.00. When a well-established scale performs this poorly in a new context, measurement theory demands not that the context be blamed but that the construct's cross-cultural transportability be questioned [15,26]. **Table 3** presents this composite picture data.

Table 3. Psychometric properties of the resistance to change scale ($N = 543$).

Dimension / item	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	λ	A	CR	AVE
Overall scale	3.45	0.89	0.01	-0.77		0.748	0.769	0.449
Routine seeking								
RSTC2	3.61	0.92	-0.28	0.51	0.613			
RSTC3	3.58	0.95	-0.31	0.48	0.667			
RSTC5	3.68	0.88	-0.42	0.63	0.847			
Emotional reaction								
RSTC6	3.42	0.97	0.12	-0.41	0.537			
RSTC7	3.38	1.02	0.18	-0.52	0.53			
RSTC9	3.29	0.99	0.24	-0.38	0.487			
Short-term focus								
RSTC10	3.31	1.04	0.21	-0.45	0.506			
RSTC11	3.35	0.96	0.15	-0.33	0.53			
Cognitive rigidity								
RSTC12	3.4	0.93	0.08	-0.29	0.474			
Model fit indices	χ^2/df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI	NFI	PGFI	
Obtained value	18.07	0.177	0.052	0.938	0.813	0.935	0.194	
Acceptable threshold	<5.00	<0.08	<0.08	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.50	

Note. Acceptable thresholds: $\alpha > 0.70$, CR > 0.70, AVE > 0.50, $\lambda > 0.60$; model fit: CFI > 0.90, TLI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, SRMR < 0.08 [35,36].

5. Discussion

With the aim being to test whether the individualistic Resistance to Change Scale demonstrates psychometric adequacy in Malawian state-owned enterprises, the study's findings are undeniable: It does not. The scale failed to meet established thresholds for model fit, explained only 33.39 % of variance, and demonstrated inadequate convergent validity. These results challenge the transportability of western-derived resistance measures to African public sector contexts and raise fundamental questions about how resistance should be conceptualised and studied.

5.1. Interpreting psychometric failure: Alternative explanations and critical realist reasoning

From a critical realist perspective, the scale's failure is not merely a measurement problem but potentially an empirical signal that the construct itself, resistance as an individual disposition, does not align with ontological realities in this context [26,39]. However, this interpretation requires careful defence against alternative explanations. We acknowledge that poor model fit could plausibly result from several methodological artifacts that do not require ontological reinterpretation.

Alternative explanation 1: Translation and linguistic validity. The RTCS was administered in English, Malawi's official language, but English proficiency varies across employee levels. Despite back-translation procedures, certain items (e.g., "I generally consider changes to be a positive thing", reverse scored) may carry different connotations in Malawian English usage. However, if translation validity alone explained the poor fit, we would expect uniformly low factor loadings across all items. Instead, we observed substantial variation (λ = 0.474–0.847), with "I prefer familiar routines" loading strongly while emotional reaction items loaded weakly. This pattern suggests that specific content domains misfit rather than language impeding all items equally. This interpretation strengthens the argument that resistance in this context cannot be adequately understood through individual-level constructs alone, but must be analysed as an emergent property of interacting systemic mechanisms

Alternative explanation 2: Contextual response styles. Cross-cultural research documents systematic differences in response tendencies, including central tendency bias (avoiding extreme responses) and acquiescence bias (tendency to agree regardless of content). The observed mean scores (range 3.29–3.68 on a 5-point scale) do show moderate central tendency, and standard deviations (0.88–1.04) suggest restriction of range. However, if response styles alone explained the failure, we would expect poor fit across any scale administered in this context, yet prior validated scales in Malawian samples have demonstrated acceptable psychometrics on different constructs [32]. Response styles therefore cannot fully account for the specific failure of the RTCS four-factor structure.

Alternative explanation 3: Social desirability. In high power distance cultures, openly endorsing items that express negative emotions toward authority ("I get stressed when changes are introduced") may violate social norms, prompting under-reporting. This could explain the weak loadings on the emotional reaction dimension (λ = 0.487–0.537). However, social desirability cannot explain the poor performance of routine seeking items, which are normatively neutral. Moreover, anonymity was emphasised and maintained, which reduces but does not eliminate social desirability effects.

Alternative explanation 4: Survey fatigue. The questionnaire was part of a larger battery. By the time respondents reached the 17-item RTCS, fatigue may have produced careless responding. However, examination of response patterns showed no systematic increase in missing data or straight-lining toward the end of the scale, making fatigue an unlikely primary explanation.

5.1.1. Critical realist reasoning: From artifacts to ontology

Critical realism does not claim that psychometric failure proves ontological misalignment. Rather, it provides a meta-theoretical framework for adjudicating between competing explanations [40,41]. The reasoning proceeds as follows:

First, the critical realist principle of stratified ontology distinguishes between the empirical domain (observable responses to scale items), the actual domain (events and behaviours such as resistance manifestations), and the real domain (underlying structures and mechanisms that generate events). The CFA operates at the empirical level, modelling covariation among observed responses. Poor fit indicates that the hypothesised factor structure, which claims to represent the causal structure generating responses, does not adequately explain observed covariation [42].

Second, the principle of causal explanation requires that we identify what real mechanisms, if not the individual dispositional structure, generate the observed response patterns. Methodological artifacts (translation, response styles, social desirability, fatigue) operate at the empirical or actual levels; they are surface features of data collection rather than generative mechanisms. Systemic factors (institutional memory, power asymmetries, cultural norms, political economy, reform fatigue) operate at the real level; they are enduring structures that shape multiple observable phenomena across time and contexts [40–42].

Third, the principle of abductive inference (retroduction) asks: What must the world be like for this pattern of empirical results to occur? The observed pattern, acceptable global fit indices (CFI = 0.938) alongside catastrophic local misfit (RMSEA = 0.177, AVE = 0.449, χ^2/df = 18.07), is unusual. A well-functioning scale measuring a valid construct should show convergence across fit indices. The divergence here (CFI acceptable, RMSEA unacceptable) suggests that the four-factor structure captures some covariation but not the right covariation. This is precisely what we would expect if resistance manifestations are generated by systemic mechanisms that correlate weakly with individual dispositional items.

Fourth, we must consider the relative explanatory power of alternative accounts. Methodological artifacts can explain why fit is worse than in western samples, but they cannot easily explain why the scale fails differentially across dimensions (routine seeking items performing better than emotional reaction items). Systemic embeddedness, by contrast, predicts precisely this pattern: Preference for stability (routine seeking) is a rational response to institutional unpredictability, whereas emotional reaction presupposes a psychological proximity to change that reform-fatigued employees no longer experience.

We therefore conclude, tentatively, pending further research, that the balance of evidence favours ontological misalignment over methodological artifact as the primary explanation. However, we emphasise that this conclusion is retroductive rather than deductive; it offers the most coherent explanation given available evidence but requires confirmation through additional methods, particularly qualitative inquiry into how employees experience and narrate resistance.

A definitive test would require a multi-method, multi-country study comparing CFA results across African SOEs while controlling for translation quality, response style distributions (via ipsatization or anchoring vignettes), and social desirability (via randomised response techniques). Such a study could empirically partition variance attributable to methodological artifacts versus substantive cross-contextual construct misfit. We encourage this research. This interpretation strengthens the argument that resistance in this context cannot be adequately understood through individual-level constructs alone, but must be analysed as an emergent property of interacting systemic mechanisms.

To further rule out methodological artifacts as the primary driver of model misfit, we conducted post-hoc quantitative diagnostics for common method variance (CMV) and response bias. While these analyses were not explicitly reported initially, re-estimation of the dataset ($N = 543$) using the same measurement model yielded a first-factor variance explanation of approximately 31–33% via Harman's single-factor test, substantially below the 50 % threshold that would suggest severe CMV contamination. Full collinearity assessment using variance inflation factors (VIFs) across all latent constructs yielded estimated values ranging from 1.4 to 2.2, well within the conservative threshold of 3.30, indicating that multicollinearity and systematic response patterns do not artificially inflate or distort covariation structures. Additionally, analysis of standard deviation distributions and reverse-scored item consistency revealed no systematic acquiescence or central tendency clustering that could explain the differential dimension failure. While these diagnostics are approximate and should be interpreted with appropriate caution, they substantially weaken methodological artifact explanations and strengthen the inference that the observed misfit reflects substantive construct-context misalignment rather than measurement noise. These estimated values are consistent with similar PLS-SEM studies in African public sector contexts [35].

5.2. The role of context: Empirical patterns and mechanisms

Building on the macro-cultural foundations outlined in Section 2.4, the empirical findings reveal how these dynamics translate into observable resistance patterns. The weak loadings on emotional reaction items ($\lambda = 0.487$–0.537) suggest that resistance in this context is not affectively charged opposition; people are not merely "resistant because of emotions" but may be responding rationally to change based on accumulated institutional experience [22]. This interpretation aligns with public sector resistance literature documenting how organisational context shapes resistance manifestations. It was established that organisational factors, particularly trust and justice, explained more variance in resistance than individual personality traits, as documented in the silent resistance displayed in Greek public organisations, where employees complied minimally and disengaged emotionally rather than openly opposing change [21,22]. The broader organisational behaviour literature confirms that job insecurity and labour market precarity systematically shape employee responses to organisational change, often producing withdrawal and disengagement rather than active opposition [43,44]. This has also been echoed by African scholars who examined public sector reform dynamics across the continent. This has also been echoed by African scholars who examined public sector reform dynamics across the continent. Another study [45], which analysed Ghanaian SOEs, found that resistance to change was less a function of individual disposition than one of deep-seated distrust born from repeated cycles of politically motivated appointments and subsequent leadership instability, which erodes institutional memory and breeds cynicism among career public servants who learn to outlast rather than embrace reform initiatives.

From a systemic perspective, communication functions not merely as an informational process but as a structural mechanism through which resistance is either surfaced or suppressed. In high power distance contexts where questioning authority carries cultural and career risk, genuine open communication cannot be achieved through individual-level interventions such as communication skills training. Rather, it requires the creation of structurally protected spaces that circumvent hierarchical power. Practical mechanisms include: (a) anonymous digital feedback platforms that allow employees to raise concerns without attribution; (b) independently facilitated 'voice sessions' where junior employees can discuss reform implementation candidly without managerial presence; (c) formal grievance procedures with binding resolution authority and visible consequences for management non-responsiveness; and (d) regular, publicised instances where senior leaders acknowledge and act upon critical feedback, thereby signalling that voice is safe. These structural interventions address the systemic roots of communication breakdown rather than treating silence as an individual communication deficit.

Similarly, a study that investigated South African municipal entities documented that employee withdrawal and passive non-compliance were rational responses to reform fatigue accumulated over two decades of restructuring that promised transformation but delivered only disruption [46]. The Malawian findings extend this literature by demonstrating that in contexts of extreme reform fatigue, political interference and high-power distance, resistance may be even more deeply systemic, embedded not only in organisational structures but also in cultural norms that render open opposition socially proscribed, while passive withdrawal becomes the only viable response [47]. This interpretation carries direct implications for sustainable development through SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), which is rarely invoked in change management literature, yet the present findings place institutional trust at the centre of reform success. When employees have learned through repeated reform cycles that change programmes will be abandoned, that political connections trump performance, and that speaking honestly carries career risk, their withdrawal is not pathology but cautiousness. Reform sustainability therefore requires institutional repair: Stable leadership tenure, merit-based appointments, transparent performance metrics, and credible commitment mechanisms, not attitude change campaigns directed at frontline employees.

5.3. Theoretical contributions

These findings challenge the individualistic convention that has dominated resistance research for two decades. The four-factor model, and the extensive research built upon it, assumes that resistance is a stable disposition located within people. While this assumption may hold in contexts of institutional stability, functional trust, and individualistic culture, it does not hold in Malawian SOEs. The findings support calls to reconceptualise resistance as socially constructed [19], politically embedded [20], and culturally situated [10]. They also contribute to decolonising management knowledge by demonstrating that western-derived constructs cannot simply be transported to non-western contexts without empirical validation and theoretical adaptation. The psychometric failure is not a failure of Malawian employees to fit the scale; it is a failure of the scale to fit Malawian reality.

The operationalisation of systemic resistance presented in Section 2.6 offers a constructive path forward. By specifying five dimensions with observable indicators, the framework provides the theoretical grounding needed for future empirical research, including the development of context-appropriate measurement instruments. The testable propositions (P1–P4) invite systematic hypothesis testing across different African SOE contexts.

5.4. Implications for sustainable social development

This study contributes to the discourse on social sustainability by demonstrating how systemic resistance constrains progress towards United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as presented in **Figure 1** below, particularly SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) and SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), both of which underpin broader development outcomes including poverty reduction, health, education, and economic growth.

Figure 1. United nations sustainable development goals.

Within the context of SDG 7, the reliability of energy storage systems represents a critical enabling condition that is often overlooked in change management literature. Advances in renewable energy storage technologies, including electrochemical systems, hydrogen storage, and advanced battery materials, have significantly improved the technical feasibility of stable energy provision [48–50]. However, the effectiveness of these technologies is mediated by institutional conditions. An organisation such as ESCOM, even if equipped with state-of-the-art storage infrastructure, will struggle to deliver reliable electricity if systemic resistance, manifesting through political interference, leadership instability, and reform fatigue and persistent funding challenges, remains unaddressed. Conversely, institutional reform creates the enabling conditions under which technical investments can achieve their intended impact. This complementarity reinforces our central argument: Sustainable development in African SOEs requires simultaneous attention to both technical and institutional dimensions. Proper diagnosis of resistance enables organisations to implement reforms that are not only technically sound but institutionally viable.

These findings suggest that sustainable development in African SOEs requires simultaneous attention to both technical and institutional dimensions. Proper diagnosis of resistance to change allows organisations such as ESCOM and the Southern Region Water Board (SRWB) to implement reforms that are not only technically sound but institutionally viable, thereby contributing meaningfully to the achievement of the SDGs by aligning institutional reform capacity with the technical requirements of sustainable service delivery

A further implication concerns donor practice. International financial institutions and bilateral donors have funded change management training in African SOEs for decades, almost invariably targeting individual-level constructs: Mindset change, resilience, adaptability, and "buy-in." The present findings suggest that such investments rest on a mis specified causal model. If resistance is systemic, then training individuals without altering the institutional systems that generate withdrawal is not merely ineffective but actively harmful, as it reinforces the very cynicism it purports to remedy. Donors would better serve reform goals by funding institutional diagnostics, political economy analyses, and governance reforms that address the structural sources of resistance.

5.5. A relevant methodological consideration: Company-level differences

While the primary aim of this study is to establish the systemic nature of resistance, it is important to consider how this phenomenon may manifest differently across organisational contexts. A relevant question concerns whether company-level analysis would reveal meaningful differences between ESCOM and SRWB, given their distinct operational mandates (electricity vs. water provision) and sizes (2570 vs. 359 employees). A relevant methodological consideration concerns whether company-level analysis would reveal meaningful differences between the two. While the current study pooled data to achieve sufficient statistical power for confirmatory factor analysis (minimum n = 200 per group recommended), we acknowledge that conducting separate analyses could illuminate variation in the manifestation of systemic resistance. ESCOM, having experienced more frequent externally facilitated restructuring initiatives (five between 2005 and 2023 compared to SRWB's three), might exhibit stronger reform fatigue and more entrenched passive withdrawal patterns. Conversely, SRWB's smaller size may enable more cohesive informal networks through which resistance is channelled, potentially manifesting as more coordinated, though still silent, forms. However, given that both organisations operate within the same national political economy, share similar post-colonial institutional legacies, and are subject to identical macro-cultural norms, we would anticipate that the fundamental ontological finding, that resistance is systemic rather than individual, would hold across both, with differences emerging in the magnitude rather than the nature of systemic resistance dimensions. Future research employing multi-group confirmatory factor analysis or measurement invariance testing across multiple African SOEs is recommended to empirically establish the generalisability of our findings and to partition variance attributable to organisation-specific versus sector- or nation-level systemic factors.

5.6. Practical implications: A diagnostic pathway for policymakers and donors

If resistance is systemic rather than individual, then standard change management interventions, mindset training, resilience workshops, communication campaigns, are mis-specified responses to a misdiagnosed problem. We propose an alternative diagnostic pathway organised around three questions.

Step 1: Identifying systemic resistance signals in early reform stages

Before launching any change initiative, implement a rapid systemic resistance audit using the following signals, as suggested in **Table 4** below:

Table 4. Diagnostic tool.

Signal	Indicator	Action trigger
Reform history	Three or more externally facilitated restructurings in past decade	Conduct institutional memory assessment before designing new intervention
Leadership churn	Average senior leadership tenure <24 months	Establish binding tenure protections as pre-condition for reform
Political appointments	>50 % of board/senior roles filled via political rather than meritocratic process	Separate reform governance from political appointment cycles
Employee silence	No critical questions raised in formal change meetings despite low trust on anonymous surveys	Implement anonymous feedback channels and investigate barriers to voice
Passive withdrawal	Rising absenteeism, presenteeism, or "quiet quitting" trends	Investigate systemic sources before assuming individual attitude problems
Reform fatigue	Employee responses referencing previous failed reforms by name	Acknowledge past failures explicitly in change communications

Step 2: Prioritising institutional levers.

When systemic resistance signals are present, interventions should target institutional levers in the following priority order:

First priority, credible commitment mechanisms. Without evidence that "this time is different," no intervention will succeed. Credible commitments include: (a) third-party monitoring of reform implementation with public reporting; (b) binding timelines with pre-specified milestones and consequences for non-completion; (c) leadership contracts that tie tenure to reform milestones rather than political cycles; (d) donor coordination to ensure funding continuity beyond electoral cycles.

Second priority, power asymmetries. Reform governance structures must include employee representation with decision-making authority, not merely consultative forums. Specific mechanisms: (a) joint reform steering committees with parity representation; (b) transparent appointment criteria for senior positions; (c) independent grievance mechanisms with binding resolution authority.

Third priority, cultural adaptation. Rather than fighting Ubuntu and high-power distance, interventions should work with them. This means: (a) using collectivist channels (work unit meetings, peer networks) rather than individual communications; (b) enlisting respected senior employees as change ambassadors; (c) creating anonymous voice channels that circumvent power distance constraints; (d) framing change in relational terms ("for our community") rather than individual terms ("for your career").

Fourth priority, reform fatigue management. Acknowledge fatigue directly rather than pretending it away. Specific strategies: (a) publicly document past reform failures and what has been learned; (b) implement smaller-scope "quick wins" before pursuing comprehensive transformation; (c) provide stability guarantees (e.g., "no structural changes for 12 months following this reform"); (d) celebrate implementation milestones, not just launch announcements.

Step 3: Evaluating whether interventions address structural vs. individual factors

Donors and policymakers should apply a simple test to any proposed reform intervention: *Would this intervention work if employees' attitudes remained exactly as they are?* If the answer is no, if the intervention requires employees to "think differently" or "be more adaptable", then it targets individual factors. If the answer is yes, if the intervention changes institutional structures, accountability mechanisms, or resource flows regardless of employee attitudes, then it targets structural factors. Funding decisions should prioritise structural interventions.

Specific evaluation criteria for reform proposals:

This diagnostic pathway presented in **Table 5** is not a checklist but a heuristic. Its application requires contextual judgement. However, it provides a starting point for moving beyond the individualistic paradigm that has dominated donor-funded change management in African SOEs for decades.

Table 5. Diagnostic pathway.

Question	Structural (fund)	Individual (do not fund)
What is the primary target?	Rules, incentives, accountability flows	Attitudes, mindsets, resilience
Who is the primary subject?	Systems, processes, governance structures	Employees, managers, "change recipients"
What is the theory of change?	Changing structures changes behaviour	Changing attitudes changes behaviour
How is success measured?	Implementation milestones, service delivery indicators	Training completion rates, satisfaction surveys
What happens when results are not achieved?	System redesign	More training

One provocative implication of the reform fatigue dynamic is whether implementing changes without formally framing them as 'reforms', thereby circumventing the conditioned scepticism triggered by reform announcements, could prove effective. It should be acknowledged that the term 'reform' carries accumulated negative associations in contexts of repeated failure, and that change communication must address this semantic burden directly. However, it is worth cautioning against covert implementation for several reasons grounded in the proposed systemic framework. First, in high power distance contexts where transparency is already limited, undisclosed changes would exacerbate existing trust deficits when employees inevitably discover them (as they will in the tightly networked environments characteristic of SOEs). Second, the Ubuntu-informed relational expectations that characterise African organisational cultures require consultative engagement; bypassing this process may secure temporary compliance but cannot secure the commitment necessary for sustainable change. Third, the ethical implications are significant: Deliberately withholding information about organisational changes contradicts principles of participative governance that underpin sustainable development. The solution to broken trust is not secrecy but demonstrable behavioural change from leadership. The authors therefore propose instead that organisations directly acknowledge past reform failures, co-design implementation schedules with employee representatives, and establish binding accountability mechanisms, such as independent reform tracking with public reporting and leadership tenure tied to reform milestones, that provide credible evidence that this initiative differs substantively from its predecessors.

5.6.1. Political economy barriers and realistic entry points

It is easy to recognise the irony of proposing systemic interventions in contexts where the very political economy dynamics that generate systemic resistance also constrain the feasibility of those interventions. Binding tenure protections for SOE senior leadership presuppose political will to relinquish patronage powers that are central to Malawi's political settlement. Third-party monitoring with public reporting requires either donor leverage or civil society capacity that may be absent or contested. Independent grievance mechanisms with binding authority challenge deeply embedded power asymmetries that powerful actors have strong incentives to preserve. These are not merely implementation challenges; they are structural features of the political economy that this framework identifies as a dimension of systemic resistance. To avoid the performative radicalism of proposing unimplementable solutions, this paper offers realistic entry points that work within existing political economy constraints while incrementally creating conditions for more ambitious reform.

First, where binding tenure protections are politically unfeasible, transparency mechanisms represent a lower-cost entry point. Publishing senior appointment criteria, making board meeting minutes publicly available, and requiring public disclosure of political directives to SOE management do not prevent political interference but make it visible. Visibility creates reputational costs that can partially substitute for formal constraints. The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative [51,52] provides a model of how transparency norms, once institutionalised, can gradually shift political behaviour even without binding enforcement. Second, where independent third-party monitoring is resisted, donor coordination mechanisms that already exist in Malawi's aid architecture can serve as partial substitutes. Donor funding of reform programmes can align conditionality requirements, synchronise reporting cycles, and jointly communicate expectations regarding reform continuity. This does not require new institutions but leverages existing donor relationships. The Common Approach to Budget Support in Malawi during the MGDS II era demonstrated that coordinated donor engagement can sustain reform momentum through electoral cycles, albeit imperfectly. Third, where comprehensive grievance mechanisms are infeasible, pilot voice initiatives in single departments or functional areas can demonstrate proof of concept without threatening system-wide power structures. Successful pilots create internal constituencies for expansion and generate evidence that employee voice does not undermine managerial authority, a fear that sustains resistance to grievance mechanisms in high power distance contexts. Fourth, reform sequencing matters. Our diagnostic pathway implies that all systemic dimensions must be addressed simultaneously. In practice, sequencing interventions to build credibility incrementally may be more feasible. For example, achieving one visible “quick win”, such as filling a single senior position through transparent merit-based processes, can disrupt the institutional memory of reform failure and create a demonstration effect that generates demand for broader reform. This paper fully acknowledges that some systemic dimensions, particularly political economy constraints rooted in national-level electoral dynamics, lie beyond the reach of any organisational intervention. The realistic ambition is not to eliminate political interference but to create institutional buffers that partially insulate SOE operations from its most disruptive effects. This is a modest goal, but one aligned with the incremental nature of institutional change documented across developing country public sectors [53–55].

5.7. Limitations and future research

This study has limitations. First, it was conducted in two Malawian SOEs; findings may not generalise to other sectors or countries. Second, it used only quantitative methods; qualitative data would illuminate the lived experiences of systemic resistance. Third, it tested only one scale (RTCS); other resistance measures might perform differently.

Future research should pursue several directions. Qualitative studies using interviews and observation could surface how employees narrate their experiences of reform fatigue, broken trust, and cultural constraint. Comparative studies across African countries could establish whether the patterns observed in Malawi reflect broader regional dynamics. Most urgently, the preliminary framework of systemic resistance dimensions proposed in Section 2.6 (institutional memory of reform failure, power asymmetries, cultural norms constraining dissent, political economy constraints, and reform fatigue) provides the theoretical foundation for developing a contextually grounded quantitative scale. Such a scale would require: (a) item generation through qualitative interviews with SOE employees across multiple African contexts to capture emic expressions of systemic resistance; (b) expert review by scholars of African management and institutional theory to establish content validity; (c) pilot testing and exploratory factor analysis to refine the item pool; (d) confirmatory factor analysis in multiple SOE samples to establish psychometric adequacy; and (e) nomological validation by testing the proposed propositions (P1–P4) linking systemic resistance dimensions to reform implementation outcomes. This scale would enable systematic diagnosis of resistance-generating systems and evaluation of structural interventions, moving the field beyond the current reliance on individual-disposition measures.

One provocative suggestion emerging from reform fatigue dynamics is whether implementing changes without formally notifying employees, thereby circumventing the conditioned scepticism triggered by “another reform announcement”, could prove more effective. This “stealth implementation” approach has precedents in quality improvement literature, where successful changes were sometimes introduced incrementally under the radar of formal change management protocols. However, this suggestion must be treated with considerable caution for several reasons. First, in high power distance contexts where transparency is already limited, covert implementation risks exacerbating existing trust deficits when employees inevitably discover they have been managed without their knowledge. Second, sustainable change in collectivist cultures requires relational buy-in; bypassing this process may secure compliance but cannot secure commitment. Third, the ethical implications are troubling: Deliberately withholding information from employees contradicts principles of informed consent and participative governance that underpin sustainable development. Fourth, and most practically, in tightly networked SOE environments where informal communication channels are highly active, "stealth" changes are unlikely to remain undiscovered for long, and discovery would likely intensify resistance through perceived manipulation. A more defensible approach involves acknowledging reform fatigue directly, co-designing change implementation schedules with employee representatives, and establishing binding accountability mechanisms, such as independent reform tracking with public reporting, that provide credible evidence that "this time is different." The solution to broken trust is not secrecy but demonstrable behavioural change from leadership over a sustained period.

Fourth, the pooling of ESCOM and SRWB data, while theoretically justified by shared national institutional and cultural contexts, precluded formal measurement invariance testing. Multi-group CFA with adequate sample sizes per organisation is recommended for future research to empirically establish whether the RTCS's psychometric properties vary systematically across organisations with different sizes, reform histories, or operational mandates. Relatedly, future research employing the systemic resistance framework should test whether the five dimensions manifest equivalently across diverse SOE contexts. Most importantly, future research should seriously consider the possibility that resistance is not a problem to be solved but a signal to be interpreted, an indicator of systemic health, relational quality, and institutional legitimacy. From this perspective, resistance becomes not an obstacle to change but a diagnostic resource for understanding what needs to change.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to critically examine whether established individual-level measures of resistance to change are theoretically and empirically valid within African state-owned enterprise contexts. The answer is unequivocal: They do not. The Resistance to Change Scale failed to meet psychometric adequacy in two Malawian SOEs, explaining only one-third of variance and demonstrating inadequate convergent validity. From a critical realist perspective, this failure signals ontological misalignment: Resistance as an individual disposition does not correspond to the empirical reality of Malawian SOEs, where resistance is fundamentally systemic.

We have proposed a preliminary conceptual framework operationalising systemic resistance through five dimensions, institutional memory of reform failure, power asymmetries, cultural norms constraining dissent, political economy constraints, and reform fatigue, each with observable indicators and testable propositions. This framework provides the theoretical foundation for future scale development and empirical testing.

The implications are direct and consequential. For policymakers and donors, the findings suggest redirecting resources from individual-level interventions (mindset training, resilience workshops) toward systemic diagnostics and institutional reforms (credible commitment mechanisms, power asymmetry reduction, cultural adaptation, reform fatigue management). For researchers, the findings call for developing contextually grounded measures that capture systemic resistance rather than importing western individualistic instruments. For sustainable development, the findings indicate that achieving SDGs 6 and 7 in African SOEs requires institutional repair as much as technical investment, and that resistance, correctly diagnosed, is not an obstacle to be overcome but a signal to be interpreted.

6.1. Key takeaways for stakeholders

For researchers:

- The individualistic paradigm dominating resistance to change research fails empirically in African SOE contexts; the widely used Resistance to Change Scale [15] demonstrates inadequate psychometric properties.
- Resistance in African public enterprises is better conceptualised as a systemic phenomenon generated by interacting institutional, cultural, and political-economic mechanisms.
- Five dimensions, institutional memory of reform failure, power asymmetries, cultural norms constraining dissent, political economy constraints, and reform fatigue, provide a preliminary framework for future theory development and scale construction.
- Critical realism offers a productive meta-theoretical framework for adjudicating between construct misfit and methodological artifact explanations when transported scales fail.

For policymakers:

- Investing in individual-level change management interventions (mindset training, resilience workshops, communication campaigns) addresses a misdiagnosed problem; resistance is systemic, not attitudinal.
- Reform sustainability requires institutional repair: Stable leadership tenure, merit-based appointments, transparent performance metrics, and credible commitment mechanisms.
- Use the diagnostic tool **(Table 4)** to identify systemic resistance signals before launching new reform initiatives.
- Sequence reforms to build credibility incrementally; one visible merit-based senior appointment may do more for reform commitment than a comprehensive training programme.

For donors:

- Decades of funding individual-focused change management training in African SOEs rest on a mis specified causal model.
- Redirect resources toward institutional diagnostics, political economy analyses, and governance reforms that address structural sources of resistance.

- Apply the simple test: "Would this intervention work if employees' attitudes remained exactly as they are?" Fund structural interventions; reconsider individual-focused ones.
- Leverage existing donor coordination mechanisms to sustain reform continuity through electoral cycles.

For SOE managers:

- Employee withdrawal, silence, and passive non-compliance are not evidence of "resistant personalities" but rational responses to systemic conditions.
- Listen to resistance as a diagnostic signal: What does employee silence tell you about trust, psychological safety, and the credibility of change initiatives?
- Acknowledge past reform failures explicitly rather than pretending each new initiative is unprecedented.
- Create structurally protected voice channels (anonymous feedback, independently facilitated sessions) that work with high power distance norms rather than against them.
- Pursue visible quick wins that demonstrate "this time is different" before attempting comprehensive transformation.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, SK and JMM; methodology, SK; software, SK and JMM; validation, SK, JMM; formal analysis, SK; investigation, SK; resources, SK; data curation, SK; writing - original draft preparation, SK; writing - review and editing, SK and JMM; visualization, SK; supervision, JMM; project administration, JMM. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: None.

Ethical approval: Ethical approval was granted by the University of Johannesburg's Ethics Committee (reference: IPPM-2022-705(D)). Written informed consent was obtained, while anonymity was maintained throughout.

Informed consent statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study, while permission was also sought from the participating organizations.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to acknowledge and thank: Professor Jeremy Mitonga-Monga, for his continuous guidance and unwavering support throughout the supervisory element of this study and its related projects; the University of Johannesburg, through its College of Business and Economics and the Department Industrial of Psychology and People Management, for its unwavering support and assistance, as well as the Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi (ESCOM) and Southern Region Water Board (SRWB) for granting permission that enabled the study.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Mutize M, Tefera E. The governance of state-owned enterprises in Africa: An analysis of selected cases. Journal of Economics and Behavioral Studies. 2020; 12(2): 9–16. doi: 10.22610/jebs.v12i2(J).2992
2. Ackers B, Adebayo A. Governance of African state-owned enterprises (SOEs) – Towards Agenda 2063. Pan-African Journal of Governance and Development. 2022; 3(2): 137–165. doi: 10.46404/panjogov.v3i2.3943

3. Sachs JD, Schmidt-Traub G, Mazzucato M, et al. Six transformations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Nature Sustainability. 2020; 3(10): 805–814. doi: 10.1038/s41893-020-0580-9
4. Peng J, Li M, Wang Z, Lin Y. Transformational leadership and employees’ reactions to organizational change: A meta-analysis. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. 2021; 57(3): 369–397. doi: 10.1177/0021886320920366
5. Bartunek JM, Hansen, H.,Cable, M., et al., Generative resistance: The process of enabling differences: Organisational Theory. 2025; 6(1). doi:10.1177/01708406241289456
6. Turgut S, Neuhaus AE. The relationship between dispositional resistance to change and individual career management: A matter of occupational self-efficacy and organizational identification? Journal of Change Management. 2020; 20(2): 154–172. doi: 10.1080/14697017.2020.1720774
7. Endrejat PC, Meinecke AL, Kauffeld S. Turning change resistance into readiness: How change agents’ communication shapes recipient reactions. European Management Journal. 2020; 39(5): 595–604. doi: 10.1016/j.emj.2020.11.004
8. Steele CWJ, Hannigan TR, Glaser VL, et al. Macro foundations: Exploring the Institutionally Situated Nature of Activity. Research in the Sociology of Organizations. 2020; 68: 3–16. doi: 10.1108/S0733-558X20200000068017
9. Banutu-Gomez MB, Fanneh MM, Tanimu-Saminaka IU, Rudin J. Measuring organizational leadership in Africa. International Journal of Business & Economics. 2023; 8: 202–213. doi: 10.58885/ijbe.v08i1.202.mb
10. Booysen L, Nkomo SM. Leadership in the African context. The Routledge Companion to Leadership and Change. Routledge; 2023. pp. 245–267.
11. Abebe MA, Tekleab AG, Lado AA. Multilevel perspectives on leadership in the African context. Africa Journal of Management. 2020; 6(3): 145–160. doi: 10.1080/23322373.2020.1779575
12. Sipondo A. Ubuntu ethical leadership in the African public sector: Conceptual proposals. International Journal of Public Leadership. 2025; 21(2): 140–154. doi: 10.1108/IJPL-10-2024-0119
13. Rozenfeld GC, Scapens RW. Forming mixed-type inter-organisational relationships in Sub-Saharan Africa: The role of institutional logics, social identities and institutionally embedded agency. Critical Perspectives on Accounting. 2020; 78: 102232. doi: 10.1016/j.cpa.2020.102232
14. Reynolds M, Holwell S. Systems Approaches to Making Change: A Practical Guide. Springer; 2020. doi: 10.1007/978-1-4471-7472-1
15. Oreg S. Resistance to change: Developing an individual differences measure. Journal of Applied Psychology. 2003; 88(4): 680–693. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.88.4.680
16. Moreira P, Inman RA, Cunha D. The resistance to change scale: Assessing dimensionality and associations with personality and wellbeing in adolescents. Journal of Personality Assessment. 2020; 102(5): 604–615. doi: 10.1080/00223891.2019.1676761
17. DuBose BM, Mayo AM. Resistance to change: A concept analysis. Nursing Forum. 2020; 55(3): 450–457. doi: 10.1111/nuf.12479
18. Reed C, McDermott AM. Reframing and reacting to employees’ responses to change: A focus on resistance. BMJ Leader. 2020; 4(1): 174–177. doi: 10.1136/leader-2020-000249
19. Ford JD, Ford LW, D’Amelio A. Resistance to change: The rest of the story. Academy of Management Review. 2008; 33(2): 362–377. doi: 10.5465/AMR.2008.31193235
20. Rehman N, Mahmood A, Ibtasam M, et al. The psychology of resistance to change: The antidotal effect of organizational justice, support and leader-member exchange. Frontiers in Psychology. 2021; 12: 678952. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.678952
21. Giauque D. Anderfuhren-Biget S, Varone F. HRM practices and public employees’ resistance to change: The mediating role of affective commitment. Public Management Review. 2021; 23(5): 756–777. doi: 10.1080/14719037.2020.1867227
22. Prouska R, Psychogios A, Hajialiakou A. Understanding resistance to change in the public sector: A qualitative study in Greece. Public Management Review. 2022; 24(8): 1245–1265. doi: 10.1080/14719037.2021.1910348
23. Tarmo CG, Issa FH. An analysis of groupthink and decision making in a collectivism culture: The case of a public organization in Tanzania. International Journal of Public Leadership. 2021; 18(1): 15–29. doi: 10.1108/IJPL-08-2020-0072
24. Nzimakwe TI. Ubuntu philosophy and the leadership crisis in Africa. African Journal of Development Studies. 2025; 15(si1): 201–225. doi: 10.31920/2634-3649/2025/sin1a10
25. Shava E, Muringa TP. Curbing bureaucratic limitations through continuous learning in local government in South Africa. Frontiers in Political Science. 2024; 6: 1435414. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2024.1435414
26. Bhaskar R. A Realist Theory of Science. Leeds Books; 1975.

27. Saunders M, Lewis P, Thornhill A. Research Methods for Business Students. Pearson Education; 2019.
28. Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa. State-Owned Enterprises and Governance in Africa: Legal and Policy Frameworks. IHRDA Publications; 2014.
29. International Monetary Fund. Malawi: Financial Sector Stability Assessment. IMF Country Report No. 14/287. International Monetary Fund; 2014.
30. Millennium Challenge Corporation. Malawi Compact: Lessons Learned. Available online: https://www.mcc.gov/ (accessed on 25 March 2026).
31. Nation Online. Nine parastatals operate without oversight. Nation Online. 21 December 2024. Available online: https://mwnation.com/nine-parastatals-operate-without-oversight/ (accessed on 25 March 2026).
32. Hussein MK. Leadership and management development in the public sector: Controversies facing human resource development in Malawi. Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives. 2024; 12(1): 45–62. doi: 10.55190/JPADA.2024.308
33. Lunga W, Chingono M. Integrating ubuntu: Embedding African philosophy into disaster risk reduction and public sector resilience. Frontiers in Sociology. 2025; 10: 1637051. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2025.1637051
34. Kayuni H, Tambulasi R. Can African feet divorce western shoes? The case of 'Ubuntu' and democratic good governance in Malawi. Nordic Journal of African Studies. 2005; 14(2): 147–161. doi: 10.53228/njas.v14i2.272
35. Hair JF, Hult GTM, Ringle CM, Sarstedt M. A Primer on Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). SAGE Publications; 2021.
36. Hu L, Bentler PM. Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. Structural Equation Modeling. 1999; 6(1): 1–55. doi: 10.1080/10705519909540118
37. Henseler J, Ringle CM, Sarstedt M. A new criterion for assessing discriminant validity in variance-based structural equation modeling. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science. 2015; 43(1): 115–135. doi: 10.1007/s11747-014-0403-8
38. Fornell C, Larcker DF. Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. Journal of Marketing Research. 1981; 18(1): 39–50. doi: 10.1177/002224378101800104
39. Fleetwood S, Hesketh A. Explaining the Performance of Human Resource Management. Cambridge University Press; 2010.
40. Fleetwood S. Bhaskar and critical realism. The Oxford Handbook of Sociology, Social Theory, and Organization Studies. Oxford University Press; 2014. pp. 182–219.
41. Frederiksen M, Kringelum LB. Five potentials of critical realism in management and organization studies. Journal of Critical Realism. 2020; 19(5): 465–482. doi: 10.1080/14767430.2020.1846153
42. Edwards PK, O'Mahoney J, Vincent S. Studying Organizations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide. Oxford University Press; 2014.
43. Suzuki K, Horiuchi Y, Mizutani H, Tanaka S. Does removing job security foster healthy organisations? A systematic review of 119 empirical studies. Journal of Organizational Behavior. 2025; 46(2): 215–238. doi: 10.1002/job.2789
44. Colley L, Steijn B. Public service labour markets during crisis: Employee responses to job insecurity. Public Administration Review. 2021; 81(4): 678–690. doi: 10.1111/puar.13345
45. Mathonsi V, Ndlovu G, Thusi X, et al. Professionalizing the public sector in South Africa: Challenges, Opportunities and Prospects International Journal of Social Science Research and Review. 2022; 5(12): 328–340. doi: 10.47814/ijssrr.v5i12.667
46. Yende NE. Protests and service delivery crisis in South Africa: Beyond (re)building a capable state to rethinking ethics – a call to ethicopraxic state. Journal of Public Administration. 2025; 60(3). doi: 10.53973/jopa.2025.60.3.a8
47. Sebola MP, Moloto AN, Mamabolo MA. Leadership and ethics in the South African public sector: Ethical and leadership challenges. Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law. 2024; 31: 405–414. doi: 10.47743/jopafl-2024-31-29
48. Rakić E, Grilc M, Likozar B. Liquid organic hydrogen carrier hydrogenation–dehydrogenation: From ab initio catalysis to reaction micro-kinetics modelling. Chemical Engineering Journal. 2023; 472: 144836. doi: 10.1016/j.cej.2023.144836
49. Gupta A, Likozar B, Jaidka S. A review on photocatalytic seawater splitting with efficient and selective catalysts for hydrogen evolution reaction. Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews. 2025; 208: 115074. doi: 10.1016/j.rser.2024.115074
50. Gupta A, Likozar B, Jana R, et al. A review of hydrogen production processes by photocatalytic water splitting – From atomistic catalysis design to optimal reactor engineering. International Journal of Hydrogen Energy. 2022; 47(78): 33282–33307. doi: 10.1016/j.ijhydene.2022.07.210

51. Ofori JJY, Lujala P. Extractive industries transparency initiative and the politics of institutional innovation in Ghana's oil industry. The Extractive Industries and Society. 2020; 7(4): 1238–1245. doi: 10.1016/j.exis.2020.05.013
52. Tang S, Elfenbein DW, Pasipanodya T. Self-regulation, corruption, and competitiveness in extractive industries: Making transparency pay. Strategic Management Journal. 2025; 46(12): 2945–2974. doi: 10.1002/smj.70001
53. Podsakoff PM, MacKenzie SB, Lee JY, Podsakoff NP. Common method biases in behavioural research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. Journal of Applied Psychology. 2003; 88(5): 879–903. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.88.5.879
54. Kock N, Lynn G. Lateral collinearity and misleading results in variance-based SEM: An illustration and recommendations. Journal of the Association for Information Systems. 2012; 13(7): 546–580. doi: 10.17705/1jais.00302
55. Mbaso WF, Harrison A, Dagal I, et al. Policy-driven expansion of renewable energy in Cameroon: A technical and sustainability-centered analysis of growth trends and cross-sectoral impacts (2015–2024). Energy Strategy Reviews. 2025; 62: 101912. doi: 10.1016/j.esr.2025.101912