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# Normalized Dysfunction: The Persistence of ICT Governance Failure in a Highly Regulated Public Sector

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## Abstract

Public-sector ICT environments are typically characterized by dense governance architectures intended to ensure accountability, compliance, and effective oversight. In South Africa, this architecture includes statutory financial management legislation, treasury regulations, audit regimes, and corporate governance codes that collectively prescribe how information systems should be governed. Despite this extensive framework, ICT governance failures continue to recur across public-sector organizations, appearing consistently in audit outcomes and practitioner accounts. Rather than being isolated breakdowns, such failures often persist across reporting cycles and leadership changes. This study examines how ICT governance failure becomes normalized and sustained over time in a highly regulated public-sector context. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 55 government information technology officers across national, provincial, and local government, the analysis shifts attention from why governance fails to how failure is accommodated within everyday organizational practice. The findings show that governance failure is routinely treated as an expected and manageable condition, absorbed through audit rituals, ceremonial governance structures, layered accountability arrangements, and the delegation of governance responsibility to technical units. These practices allow organizations to maintain procedural legitimacy while leaving underlying governance deficiencies largely unaddressed. By conceptualising governance failure as a socially produced and institutionally sustained outcome, the study extends institutional and governance-as-practice perspectives in ICT governance research. A system or process that is far from perfect is still able to function efficiently, provided that the necessary procedures are implemented correctly. This demonstrates that a system can accomplish routine tasks despite its flaws. Prior research highlights the difficulty of implementing and sustaining ICT governance in heavily regulated public sector environments. In these areas ICT reform projects have been repeatedly initiated yet have failed to deliver the expected outcomes. In practice, the results can be used to inform diagnostic and risk-focused evaluations of ICT governance by assisting public-sector organizations in recognizing when governance arrangements are perpetuating, rather than resolving, chronic dysfunction.

**Keywords:** institutional theory, normalization, decoupling, audit ritualism, public sector persistence, South Africa, digital governance

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## 机能障碍作为常态：严格监管的公共部门内信息通信技术管理系统的持续制度侵权

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## 摘要

公共部门的信息通信技术（ICT）管理领域通常具有复杂的管理机制体系，旨在确保问责制、合规性和有效监督。在南非，公共部门的ICT管理以“公共财政管理法”、国库法规、审计程序和企业治理准则为基础。这些规范和机制的集合决定了信息系统的管理原则与操作流程。尽管存在广泛的规范管理框架，但公共部门组织中的ICT管理违规行为仍在持续重现。这些违规现象在审计报告和实践专家的评估中被系统性发现，并且无论领导层如何更迭，它们往往跨越多个报告周期持续存在。本文分析了在严格监管的公共部门中，ICT管理违规行为如何固化为持久性实践的影响因素。通过对国家级、地区级和市级公共ICT部门负责人进行的55次访谈所获得的定性数据，本研究将焦点从寻找管理问题的成因，转向探究此类违规行为如何在日常组织实践中被稳固。本研究结果表明，ICT管理中的违规行为逐渐被视为一种可接受且可控的状态。其持续存在得益于形式化的审计程序、管理结构的运作，以及将ICT管理责任下放至技术部门，这使得系统能够维持运转，而无需解决根本性的管理问题。本研究将ICT管理系统中的违规行为视为社会与制度因素共同作用的结果，从而为ICT管理研究的制度性及实践导向方法发展作出贡献。即便系统远非完美，只要遵循形式正确的程序，其仍可保持运作能力，从而在存在缺陷的情况下维持常规任务的执行。既有研究表明，在严格监管的公共部门环境中，ICT管理的实施与可持续性面临显著挑战，导致ICT领域的改革虽多次推行，却未能取得预期效果。本研究结果可用于开展ICT管理的诊断性与风险导向评估，以识别现行管理机制并非旨在消除长期存在的违规行为，反而可能使其持续复现的情形。

**关键词：**制度理论、制度侵权的稳固、制度分歧、审计的仪式化、公共部门的可持续性、南非、数字管理。

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## 1. Framing the Paradox

Public-sector ICT environments operate within an extensive and highly formalized governance architecture. Over time, governments have introduced a growing body of statutory instruments, treasury regulations, audit regimes, and governance codes intended to strengthen accountability, enforce compliance, and improve organizational performance. In South Africa's public sector, this architecture is anchored in the *Public Finance Management Act* (PFMA), detailed *Treasury Regulations*, and corporate governance codes such as *King IV*, all of which prescribe how information systems should be governed, controlled, and overseen [Public Finance..., 1999; Treasury Regulations..., 2000; 2012; King IV report..., 2016]. In principle, this density of governance arrangements suggests an environment in which ICT-related failure should be systematically detected, corrected, and prevented.

Empirical evidence from audit outcomes and practitioner accounts, however, presents a more troubling picture. Despite the formal presence of governance frameworks and oversight structures, ICT-related deficiencies continue to recur across public-sector organizations. These include repeated audit findings, persistent control weaknesses, stalled or underperforming systems, and long-standing governance gaps that remain visible across successive reporting cycles [Consolidated general report..., 2022]. Rather than being isolated or exceptional, such failures appear to endure even in organizations that demonstrate ongoing compliance with formal governance requirements.

Governance failure is generally regarded in academic literature as an aberration, or a departure from well-established norms, within otherwise functioning systems. The breakdown is often seen as something that can be rectified through the adoption of better systems, stricter enforcement of existing rules, improvements in leadership, and upgraded technical capabilities. While these explanations are valuable, they do not fully account for the persistence of failure observed in practice. What remains insufficiently examined is how repeated ICT governance failure comes to be accommodated, stabilized, and, over time, accepted as part of normal organizational life. In many public-sector contexts, failure does not trigger sustained correction; instead, it becomes predictable, managed through routine reporting, and absorbed into established governance cycles.

This study shifts attention away from why ICT governance fails and towards how such failure becomes normalized and reproduced over time. Rather than examining governance enactment processes or the conditions under which governance generates value—both addressed elsewhere in the broader research programme—this paper focuses on the organizational and institutional dynamics through which governance breakdown persists. Drawing on qualitative evidence from senior public-sector ICT leaders, the analysis examines how governance failure becomes expected, how formal governance rituals continue in the absence of resolution, and how dysfunctional arrangements are sustained across audit cycles and leadership changes [Latchu, 2022]. The aim of the study is to explain why, despite the presence of extensive governance

frameworks, ICT governance failure persists as a normalized condition within the public sector.

## 2. Selective Literature Review—From Governance Failure to Normalization

### 2.1. Governance Failure Beyond Absence or Non-Compliance

Traditionally, ICT governance failure within the public sector has been considered the result of poor leadership, limited capability, inadequate compliance with established frameworks, or weak controls. In the context of governance, a breakdown can be understood as a divergence from a preconceived ideal state of governance. This is typically framed as something that be corrected with better system planning, stronger regulations, or enhanced management capabilities. From this perspective, failure is treated as temporary and correctable in nature, signalling the need for intervention rather than constituting a stable organizational condition.

In highly regulated public-sector environments, however, this framing sits uneasily with empirical observations. Formal governance arrangements are often present, compliance processes are routinely performed, and oversight structures continue to operate, even as the same deficiencies reappear across reporting cycles. Recurring audit findings over time indicate that problems often persist despite the implementation of corrective actions and repeated promises of rectification. In such contexts, failure does not necessarily mean a lack of governance; nor does failure necessarily lead to change.

A key limitation of failure-oriented theories is that they assume organizational recovery once deficiencies in corporate governance have been uncovered. These analyses focus mainly on what does not work in governance arrangements rather than on the reasons why effective governance does not occur in such cases; as a result, they offer little insight into situations where governance structures are in place, but the outcomes of this governance are ineffective. What is less well explained is how organizations continue to function, report, and justify performance in the presence of ongoing governance shortcomings.

### 2.2. Institutional Normalization and Decoupling

Institutional perspectives provide a useful lens for understanding why governance failure may persist even in highly regulated environments. In many government departments, a major role is fulfilled by formal governance structures; these serve to demonstrate department compliance with legal obligations and accountability requirements. Such processes and procedures can be consistently used and preserved even when the impact on organizational practice is either inconsistent or minimal. In these situations, the governance framework is not tightly connected to the organization's ongoing work and activities, which allows the organization to appear as if it is obeying governance framework rules while enabling it to meet internal needs and other pressures [Public Finance..., 1999; King IV report..., 2016].

Evidence from audit outcomes suggests that this condition can become routinized over time. Again and again, the same issues related to ICT controls, risk management, and systems assurance come to light as successive audits are conducted; this persists despite committees being established, policies being put in place, and corrective action plans being implemented. The incorporation of such findings usually leads to the integration of relevant recommendations into existing reporting procedures, as well as audit tests [Consolidated general report., 2022]. Consequently, a pattern is reinforced in which boards and management teams engage in governance activities without ever addressing the fundamental weaknesses that have been identified [Latchu, 2022].

Importantly, such normalization does not necessarily reflect deliberate non-compliance or governance neglect. Rather, it reflects how organizations adapt to environments characterized by strict regulations, limited capacity for corrective action, and ongoing operational difficulties. Under these conditions, governance arrangements may retain their symbolic and procedural importance, even as their capacity to alter outcomes remains constrained [Treasury Regulations., 2012; King IV report., 2016].

### 2.3. Research Gap

While prior research and audit evidence clearly document recurring ICT governance deficiencies, far less is known about how such failure becomes taken for granted within organizations. Existing accounts tend to emphasize the identification of weaknesses and the formulation of remedial actions, offering limited insight into how repeated failure is accommodated, rationalized, and sustained over time [Consolidated general report., 2022]. As a result, organizations tend to incorporate such findings into existing reporting processes and audit scrutiny. Consequently, a cycle is reinforced in which boards and management teams engage in governance practices without adequate consideration on the underlying weaknesses that have been identified.

Practitioner-oriented evidence suggests that public-sector organizations often learn to operate within the boundaries of persistent governance breakdown. Formal accountability processes continue, compliance activities are performed, and assurance is repeatedly provided, even as underlying problems remain unresolved [Latchu, 2022]. Outstanding questions remain regarding how failures in public-sector governance are perpetuated and how these systems persist despite ongoing operational failures.

A key issue in the successful adoption of ICT systems is how failures in the governance of these technologies become embedded within organizational culture. This embedding can occur through the normalization and reproduction of failure over time. The present study seeks to examine this process. Specifically, the focus is on why failures in heavily regulated public-sector environments occur and continue to recur, and on the organizational procedures and institutional expectations that allow such failures to persist.

## 3. Research Methodology

This study draws on the same qualitative dataset that underpins the broader research program, comprising semi-structured interviews with 55 government information technology officers (GITO) across South Africa's national, provincial, and local spheres of government. GITO hold senior leadership positions in the field of ICT and operate at the intersection of statutory governance requirements, executive decision-making, and ICT operational delivery. Their position affords them long-term visibility into formal governance arrangements as well as the practical realities of ICT oversight within public-sector organizations [Latchu, 2022].

While the dataset is shared with related analyses, this paper applies a deliberately different analytical lens. Rather than examining how governance instruments are enacted in practice or how governance contributes to the realization of ICT-related benefits, the analysis focuses on how governance failure is experienced, accommodated, and normalized over time. Attention is directed towards moments in which participants describe adaptation, resignation, or routine acceptance of unresolved governance deficiencies, particularly where such conditions recur across audit cycles and leadership transitions. In this sense, the analysis is concerned not with performance or outcomes, but with persistence.

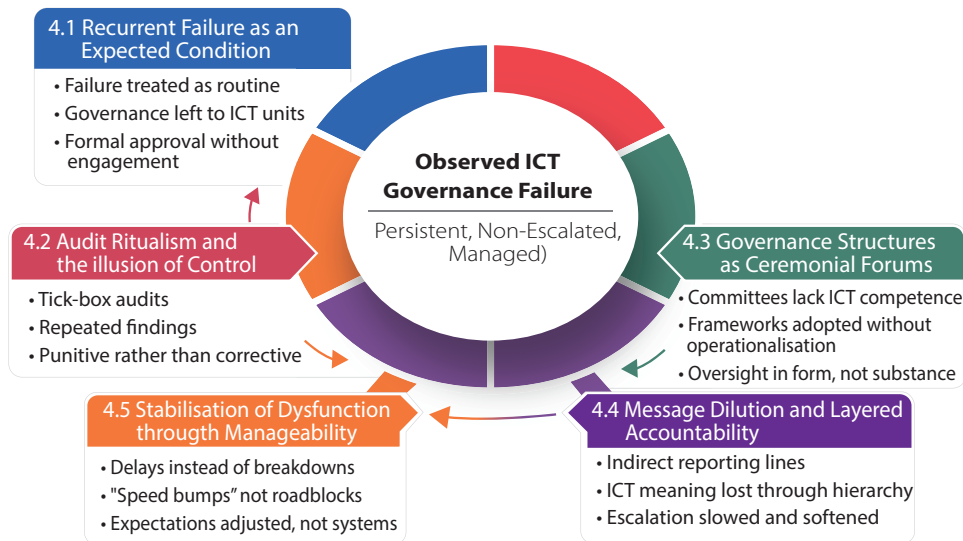
The study adopts an interpretivist qualitative approach, treating participants' accounts as situated interpretations of organizational life rather than objective representations of governance effectiveness. Interview transcripts were examined iteratively, with particular emphasis placed on temporal cues, narrative patterns, and recurring descriptions of "how things tend to be", rather than isolated incidents or critical events. This interpretive reading allowed for the identification of patterns through which governance failure is rendered predictable, manageable, and ultimately taken for granted within organizational routines.

Importantly, this methodological focus is bounded. The analysis does not seek to reassess the effectiveness of specific governance frameworks, nor does it re-evaluate the conditions under which governance generates value. Instead, the emphasis is on how persistent deficiencies in government ICT arrangements are accommodated in the normal workings of the system, how accountability procedures remain in effect despite the absence of resolution, and how the various bodies involved adapt their expectations and objectives to enduring limitations. Accordingly, persistent ICT governance failure within a highly regulated public-sector environment is examined through the lens of organizational adaptation and normalization processes.

## 4. Findings— Normalization of ICT Governance Failure

To provide an overview of the empirical patterns identified across the findings, Figure 1 summarizes the recurrent practices through which ICT governance failure is experienced, managed, and stabilized within public-sector organizations. The figure is

Fig. 1. Empirical patterns underpinning the normalization of ICT governance failure



Source: prepared by the authors.

intended as an orienting device, illustrating how these patterns coexist rather than unfold sequentially.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the findings reveal a set of recurring and interconnected patterns through which ICT governance failure is absorbed into routine organizational practice. Across the cases, failure is not treated as an exceptional event requiring escalation or structural correction, but as a manageable condition accommodated within existing governance arrangements. The five patterns do not operate independently or in a linear sequence; rather, they coexist and reinforce one another, shaping how governance shortcomings are interpreted, responded to, and ultimately stabilized over time. The practical manifestation of each pattern is outlined below, with direct quotes from the interviews illustrating how normalization occurs in everyday circumstances.

#### ***Recurrent Failure as an Expected Condition***

Interview accounts indicate that ICT governance challenges are experienced as persistent and largely unmanaged at the executive level. Rather than triggering escalation or structural correction, governance responsibility is frequently delegated to ICT units, which are expected to manage these issues in isolation.

“Due to executive management’s lack of IT knowledge, the IT section is generally left to wade through the morass of IT governance unaided.”

In some cases, formal approval mechanisms exist without substantive strategic engagement. One participant noted that ICT matters receive approval while remaining excluded from executive deliberation:

“IT is still not represented at EXCO, but there is support from EXCO and the board because they always approve the IT requests.”

Together, these accounts suggest that governance failure is not treated as exceptional, but as an expected condition managed within existing organizational arrangements.

Overall, these accounts indicate that governance failure is not framed as an anomaly requiring escalation, but as a predictable condition embedded within routine executive–ICT relations. By relegating governance responsibility to ICT units while maintaining formal approval structures, organizations effectively absorb failure into existing accountability arrangements. This enables continuity of operations without triggering structural correction, reinforcing failure as an expected and managed state rather than a governance breakdown.

#### ***Audit Ritualism and the Illusion of Control***

Audit processes were frequently described as procedural and repetitive, with limited corrective impact. Participants characterized audits as compliance-driven exercises that consume significant organizational effort while allowing the same issues to persist.

“In my view, <AGSA auditing> is a tick-box exercise.”

Another participant described the burden and consequences of audit engagement: “It is a tick-box, and the amount of time and effort that goes into answering audit requests is huge... any deviation results in an audit finding.”

Audits were also described as punitive rather than developmental: “Audit findings are not there to assist; they are used as a tool to punish units.”

These accounts indicate that audit compliance becomes a ritualized activity, reinforcing the appearance of control without resolving underlying governance deficiencies.

### ***Governance Structures as Ceremonial Forums***

Formal governance structures, including ICT steering committees and frameworks, were frequently described as existing in form rather than in function. According to many participants, these forums failed to fulfil their intended role because they lacked sufficient understanding of technical issues and the authority to make decisions.

“Currently, the ICT Steering Committees are a tick-box because most members do not understand ICT and cannot provide critical oversight.”

Framework adoption was also described as superficial:

“Frameworks are adopted without SOPs or a thorough understanding of what is required.”

Although governance structures appear to fulfil the formal expectations of their roles, they frequently have little substantive impact on ICT governance practice.

### ***Message Dilution and Layered Accountability***

Participants also described how ICT governance concerns are diluted as they move through organizational hierarchies, limiting escalation and accountability.

“When the ICT message goes to the CEO, it has to go via different persons, like CIO, and the DG, and they don’t understand ICT; thus, the conversation gets muddled by the time it reaches the CEO. Direct CIO to CEO is needed.”

This layered routing of governance messages contributes to the absorption of governance failure into routine communication processes rather than its resolution.

### ***Stabilization of Dysfunction through Manageability***

Governance failure appears to persist in part because it remains manageable within existing procedural constraints.

Participants described governance controls as creating delay and friction rather than complete breakdown.

“Introduce delays and lots of red tape.”

“PFMA SCM processes hamper IT to respond quickly.”

“Not roadblocks, but rather speed bumps to IS service delivery.”

These descriptions suggest that governance failure is tolerated because it does not halt operations entirely. Instead, organizations adjust expectations and pace, allowing dysfunction to stabilize as part of everyday practice.

## **5. Discussion**

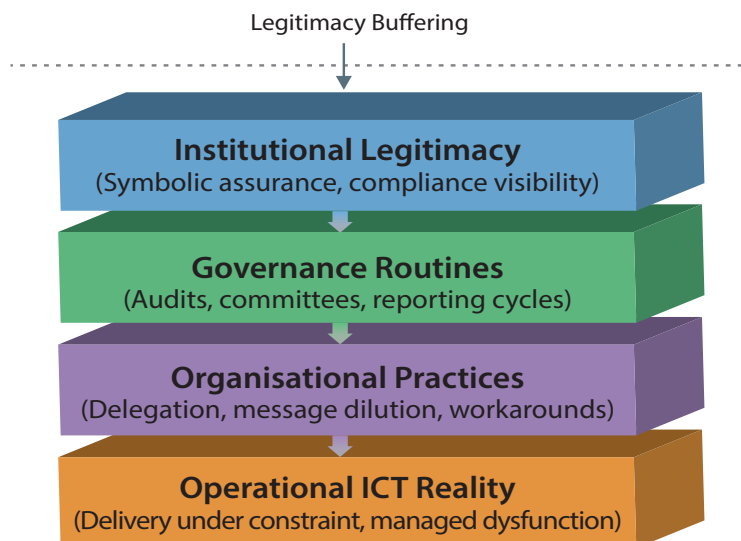
To synthesize the empirical findings at an institutional level, Figure 2 presents an analytical model illustrating how ICT governance failure becomes stabilized and normalized over time. The figure moves beyond descriptive patterns to explain how everyday governance practices collectively reproduce failure as a predictable organizational condition.

As depicted in Figure 2, ICT governance failure is not sustained by the absence of governance arrangements, but by their layered enactment across institutional domains. Mechanisms such as audit committees and reporting procedures provide a buffer between operational IT and executive management. This buffering allows organizational inefficiencies to be identified and addressed before they escalate into crisis requiring major restructuring. These routines help to maintain institutional credibility by signaling that rules are being upheld, even though the systems in place for oversight are not closely tied to the operational decision-making processes. Through this layered buffering, governance failure becomes normalized as a stable and acceptable condition within organizational life.

### **5.1. Governance Failure as an Institutionalized Outcome**

The findings indicate that ICT governance failure in South Africa’s public sector should not be understood as an episodic

Fig. 2. Layered institutional mechanisms normalizing ICT governance failure



Source: prepared by the authors.

breakdown or a temporary deviation from an otherwise functional system. As a result of established organizational procedures, failure is often entrenched as a norm—a regular occurrence that is anticipated and accepted by staff during their daily activities. Rather than triggering escalation or structural correction, governance shortcomings are repeatedly accommodated through existing accountability arrangements, committee structures, and audit cycles. Governance is regarded as stable rather than collapsing because its shortcomings has become routine. The authors' observation closely resemble the work of [Meyer, Rowan, 1977], who argued that formal governance mechanisms are used by institutions to achieve legitimacy even though they are not actually implemented in day-to-day activities.

According to extensive audit histories, ICT control weaknesses consistently occur and continue to recur despite the implementation of measures to address them, including assurance processes, monitoring committees, and action plans [Consolidated general report., 2022]. In many cases, as earlier research has shown through analysis of Auditor-General reports, a strong ICT governance culture is not present even in organizations that continually produce compliance artifacts [Latchu, 2022; Latchu, Singh, 2024b]. Under a normalization lens, these recurring findings are not simply unresolved problems; they represent governance conditions that have become expected and managed within institutional life.

Importantly, the findings show that executive–ICT relations play a central role in stabilizing this condition. While many organizations retain formal oversight of their ICT functions, the manner in which this oversight is exercised often does not result in significant change to existing power structures. Many ICT projects still have their approval processed through conventional channels that do not lead to any alteration in organizational culture. This is consistent with evidence that governance effectiveness depends on senior-management-level integration and aligned organizational elements, rather than documented frameworks alone [Masilela, Nel, 2021]. Previous research has described similar situations as instances of “symbolic compliance,” referring to practices in which formal rules and regulations do not meaningfully affect how operational decisions are made within an organization [Latchu, Singh, 2024a]. Governance failure, in this sense, becomes absorbed into organizational normality, enabling continuity across leadership changes and administrative cycles. Prior studies demonstrate that CIO reporting lines and executive inclusion are critical for effective IT–business alignment [Ayat, Farajkhah, 2014]; the findings of this study show how the routine absence of such arrangements contributes to the normalization of governance failure rather than its correction.

Seen this way, the persistence of ICT governance failure across administrations is not paradoxical. It is the outcome of institutional procedures that prioritize stability, the maintenance of procedure, and risk avoidance over disruption and structural change. Failure endures precisely because it is manageable, predictable, and compatible with existing governance rituals.

## 5.2. Why Governance Reform Often Fails to Disrupt Failure

The persistence of normalized governance failure also helps explain successive reform efforts repeatedly fail to bring about genuine change in settings where similar patterns of compliance-driven governance and delayed escalation have been observed at the regional level [Latchu, Singh, 2025a]. Rather than disrupting dysfunctional arrangements, new governance frameworks are typically layered onto existing routines, reinforcing compliance density without altering behaviour. The findings show that reforms are absorbed into established governance cycles—committee meetings, audit responses, and reporting templates—where they are enacted ceremonially rather than transformationally. As [Brunsson, 2002] describes through the concept of organized hypocrisy, reforms often function as signals of responsiveness, while decoupled practices preserve organizational continuity, allowing governance failure to persist beneath an appearance of change. While meta-analytic evidence confirms the importance of top management support for IS success [Hwang, 2019], the present findings demonstrate how formal support can coexist with limited substantive engagement, producing ritualized rather than transformative governance.

This pattern is evident in the repeated introduction of ICT governance instruments such as the *CGICTPF*, *King IV* principles, and Treasury-driven controls, which are formally adopted but unevenly enacted [Corporate governance., 2012; Ferguson, 2019; Phahlane, 2023]. Past studies drawing on Zondo Commission evidence also indicate that governance reforms introduced to address state capture led to increased procedural control, alongside heightened risk aversion and bureaucratic inertia [Latchu, Singh, 2024a]. Under conditions of limited capacity and weak executive ownership, reform initiatives are interpreted through existing institutional logics rather than reshaping them.

The findings further demonstrate that audit-led reform plays a particularly ambivalent role. While the primary aim of audits is the rectification of corporate governance weaknesses, audits can also foster reliance on ritualistic compliance. Public entities often focus on satisfying auditor requirements rather than addressing the root causes of identified issues. [Latchu, 2022; Latchu, Singh, 2024b]. As a result, reforms may be accepted and incorporated into existing systems without producing significant changes to underlying arrangements. This conclusion aligns with the broader view that audits frequently operate as rituals that create an appearance of control while substantive problems remain unresolved [Power, 1997].

The key factor in the persistence of failure is not merely the resistance to reform, but institutional adaptation. In constrained environments, governance actors and GITO develop survival strategies: they make do with limited resources, negotiate regulatory requirements, and manage expectations in order to keep ICT systems operational. While these practices sustain delivery, they also reduce pressure for systemic correction. As a result, reform initiatives are accommodated rather than contested, reinforcing the normalization of failure rather than interrupting it.

### 5.3. Contribution to ICT Governance Theory

This study extends ICT governance scholarship by moving beyond dominant explanatory frames that treat failure primarily as a function of framework absence, design weakness, or maturity shortfall. While such approaches remain valuable, they are insufficient to explain why governance failure persists in environments where frameworks are present, oversight is active, and compliance is routinely demonstrated.

By conceptualizing governance failure as socially produced and institutionally maintained, this research shifts the focus from a lack of governance to the dynamics of governance in practice. In bureaucratic context, organizational failure occurs as a result of normalized, day-to-day procedures, including the delegation of tasks, audits, committee meetings, and accountability processes. The continuation of existing structures within institutions reflects decoupling, whereby an organization's formal structure does not necessarily correspond to its actual practices [Meyer, Rowan, 1977].

The conventional process-maturity approach can be understood to stall once process-based practices are reduced to ritual. In this scenario, models based on COBIT and those relying on ISO standards fail to account for how organizations that appear stable and mature may nevertheless experience stagnation when processes lose their substantive relevance. The findings show that governance systems can mature procedurally while stagnating substantively, producing increasingly sophisticated compliance architectures that coexist with persistent failure. In doing so, the study complements prior work on symbolic governance and decoupling [Latchu, 2022; Latchu, Singh, 2024a] by explaining how such conditions persist rather than dissolve.

By foregrounding normalization, the study contributes a distinct analytical lens to ICT governance research—one that explains persistence without defaulting to explanations of incompetence, neglect, or resistance. Governance failure, in this account, is not merely the absence of effectiveness; it is an institutional outcome actively maintained through organizational routines. This insight provides a foundation for rethinking how ICT governance failure is diagnosed and addressed, shifting attention from the proliferation of frameworks toward the institutional conditions that stabilize dysfunctional governance outcomes.

## 6. Implications

### 6.1. Theoretical Implications

This study makes several contributions to ICT governance theory by reframing how governance failure is conceptualized and explained in highly regulated public-sector environments.

First, the findings challenge dominant deficit-oriented explanations of ICT governance failure that treat breakdowns as episodic, temporary, or correctable through improved framework design, maturity progression, or tighter compliance. Governance failure is instead understood as an institutional process that produces and sustains itself through regular organizational activity. By demonstrating how governance shortcomings are repeatedly accommodated

within existing accountability structures, audit cycles, and committee arrangements, the study shifts analytical attention away from isolated failure events toward the normalization of failure as a governance condition. Through this reframing, institutional theory is extended by showing how high levels of regulation and risk aversion encourage governance systems to prioritize stability over effectiveness as their core organizing principle.

By drawing on institutional decoupling theory, this study examines how and to what extent ICT governance arrangements are coupled to—and decoupled from—institutional rules and pressures. Institutional theory predicts that organizations increase formal structures to secure legitimacy while simultaneously reducing practical efficacy; this research shows how such decoupling occurs in practice, through four concrete means: delegation, audit responses, committee meetings, and accountability procedures. In doing so, it demonstrates that decoupling is not a passive condition but an actively maintained governance arrangement, reproduced through recurrent organizational action.

This paper also advances understanding of the role of enactment in governance by demonstrating how enactment can function as a stabilizing influence rather than as a corrective response to perceived organizational failure. Prior governance-as-practice perspectives often assume that closer attention to practice will surface misalignments and enable improvement. This study complicates that assumption by showing how everyday enactment can normalize dysfunction, absorb reform initiatives, and sustain ineffective governance arrangements over time. Enactment, in this account, does not necessarily resolve governance failure; it can also embed and protect it.

Finally, the study challenges linear, maturity-based models of ICT governance—particularly those inspired by COBIT and ISO standards—that assume increased formalization and procedural sophistication will lead to substantive improvement. The findings demonstrate that governance systems can mature procedurally while stagnating substantively, producing increasingly elaborate compliance architectures that coexist with persistent failure. Governance reform efforts often appear to reach a plateau despite the proliferation of checklists, monitoring mechanisms, and audit processes.

Taken together, these insights transform understanding of ICT governance into a socially and institutionally maintained process that evolves over time. This perspective opens new avenues for theorizing stability, reform, and the continued use of ICT within government institutions.

### 6.2. Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study caution against reflexive, framework-centric responses to ICT governance failure and highlight the limitations of audit-led reform as a primary corrective mechanism.

First, the findings warn against the pervasive “more governance” reflex that characterizes many public-sector reform efforts. When governance failure is interpreted primarily as a deficit of frameworks, policies, or controls,

organizations respond by layering additional instruments onto existing arrangements. This study shows that such responses often increase compliance density without altering underlying practices, reinforcing procedural conformity while leaving governance outcomes unchanged. Given the inbuilt propensity of governance failures to persist, caution is required when assuming that further regulations or structures will actually prevent these entrenched problems.

Second, the research reveals that the structural reform efforts face significant inherent constraints, particularly where auditing is used as the primary instrument of reform. While thorough auditing is widely regarded as essential for ensuring accountability, organizations subjected to persistent and intensive audit scrutiny may adopt a superficial compliance orientation. In such cases, the primary objective shifts from identifying and rectifying weaknesses to minimizing exposure under audit. Over time, organizations may become accustomed to recurring deficiencies, coming to view them as normal and therefore acceptable. This process renders weaknesses predictable, manageable, and readily accommodated. Audit bodies should not relinquish their oversight role; rather, they must recognize that audits alone cannot generate substantive change without sustained commitment from executive leadership and other critical organizational actors.

Third, the findings underscore the importance of executive engagement and governance ownership beyond formal approval structures. By transferring responsibility for ICT governance to technical personnel, senior management can maintain a favorable public image while avoiding substantive accountability for ICT governance decisions. This implies that genuinely enhancing the effectiveness of ICT governance requires more than formal policy compliance; it demands ongoing high-level managerial engagement in governance deliberation, prioritization, and decision-making processes.

Importantly, this study does not propose a prescriptive reform roadmap or a set of best-practice interventions. That omission is deliberate. Given the institutionalized nature of governance failure identified here, prescriptive solutions risk reproducing the very dynamics they seek to resolve. Instead, the practical implications offered are diagnostic and cautionary, aimed at reshaping how governance failure is understood before solutions are advanced. The design of reform strategies capable of disrupting normalized governance failure is addressed in a complementary analysis and is therefore not developed here.

## Conclusion

This article set out to explain why ICT governance failure in South Africa's public sector persists despite the proliferation of governance frameworks, oversight mechanisms, and repeated reform initiatives. Rather than treating failure as an episodic breakdown or a temporary deviation from otherwise functional governance systems, the analysis reconceptualized failure as a normalized and institutionalized outcome, sustained through everyday governance routines and organizational practices.

Comparative studies demonstrate that ICT-enabled governance reform can yield significant transformation under enabling institutional conditions [Latchu, Singh, 2025c]. The present paper explains why such outcomes remain elusive in the South African public sector, where governance failure has become institutionalized rather than episodic.

The findings show that the stabilization of governance failure is achieved in a set of mutually reinforcing mechanisms, including the routinization of accountability through committee structure and audit cycles, the ritualized implementation of reform via the formal adoption of governance instruments, and the delegation of governance responsibility to technical units, which shields executive leadership from substantive involvement. The combination of these mechanisms allows organizations to maintain procedural legitimacy while largely leaving underlying governance practices unchanged. In this way, failure persists not despite governance arrangements, but because of how those arrangements are enacted in practice. Although project governance research links top management support to improved performance outcomes [Fareed, Su, 2022], this study explains why similar governance arrangements fail to disrupt entrenched dysfunction in highly institutionalized public-sector settings.

While prior work demonstrates that corporate governance can enhance ICT outcomes under certain enabling conditions [Latchu, Singh, 2025b], the present study explains why such benefits often fail to materialize in highly institutionalized public-sector environments.

By foregrounding normalization, the study contributes a distinct explanatory lens to ICT governance scholarship—one that shifts attention from governance deficits and framework design toward governance dynamics and institutional reproduction. This perspective helps explain why successive reform efforts often fail to disrupt entrenched governance failures, and why procedural maturation can coexist with substantive stagnation. Importantly, the findings suggest that governance failure endures precisely because it is predictable, manageable, and compatible with existing organizational rituals and risk-avoidance strategies.

The scope of this article is deliberately analytical rather than prescriptive. While the research identifies fundamental structural conditions that enable recurrent ICT governance failures, it does not propose new policy measures to remedy these conditions. This boundary is intentional: without first understanding how governance failure is normalized and sustained, prescriptive solutions risk being absorbed into the very routines they seek to transform.

Viewed in this light, the article contributes to a broader research program concerned with understanding and addressing persistent governance failure in highly regulated public-sector environments. By clarifying the mechanisms through which failure is institutionalized, it provides a necessary foundation for subsequent analyses that engage with the design of governance interventions capable of disrupting normalized failure conditions, without duplicating or pre-empting those efforts here.

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