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Public Real Estate Management Practices and Challenges in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Governments own properties and infrastructure to fulfil their primary goal of service delivery. However, problems exist as this goal outweighs that of making profits, yet finances are needed for maintenance and upkeep. The research investigated public real estate management practices, the extent to which the practices are implemented, and the challenges affecting public real estate management in Zimbabwe. A quantitative research approach was adopted, which involved distributing questionnaires to government officers and executives responsible for public real estate management in Bulawayo. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics to compute mean scores (MSs) and frequencies. The results suggest that the most frequently implemented practices are asset registration and record keeping, rent collection, periodic/regular reporting, financial analysis, and leasing property to private organisations. Furthermore, the primary challenges encountered in public real estate management include inadequate financing, lengthy budget approval processes, a lack of effective information technology systems and skills, poor communication as well as high cost of building materials. The results highlight the need to design interventions that ensure that public sector real property is maintained adequately, promoting a proactive approach to management, and also integrating technology into public sector real property management. This will help improve the population's welfare and living standards while unlocking the potential of the property values of all government properties to regenerate income even from non-core real estate.

Keywords: Government, Property, Management, Practices, Zimbabwe

■1.0 INTRODUCTION

Public real estate refers to land, buildings, and infrastructure owned, used, and controlled by the state and local government units. It is considered an integral part of national wealth by generating a wide range of economic activities that create and provide common public goods (Cohen et al., 2023). In most countries, the government owns, uses, and controls a significant share of the real estate stock. Governments own properties and infrastructure to fulfil their primary goal of service delivery. This comprises delivering public and social services for the present generation and reserving properties for future generations. Prigozhin (2019) noted that the government's strategic goal is to improve the welfare and living standards of the population. As highlighted in previous studies, the public sector's main reason for existence is service provision to members of the public (White, 2011), unlike the private sector, which exists for financial gain and profits (Vermiglio, 2011). However, there is a tension between financial efficiency and service-delivery goals. This is amplified by the perception that public real estate is a common, and sometimes even a free, good (Gross & Źróbek, 2013).

In Zimbabwe, the government owns a substantial portfolio of real estate, which it uses as a conduit to provide diverse services through several ministries. The Ministry of Local Government and Public Works is responsible for managing the government real estate, providing office accommodation, housing, and social amenities infrastructure (Government of Zimbabwe, 2022). Lu (2017) states that capital assets maintain government operations and provide public services.

However, public sector real estate witnesses loss, waste, misuse, obsolescence, and failure (Lu, 2017). Emerging evidence shows that public real estate is not strategically managed in several countries, and the return on investment from these assets does not match the capital investment. According to Kaganova and Amoils (2020), government buildings and infrastructure are associated with enormous expenditure responsibilities, which can financially strain the public purse. Underinvestment in operations and maintenance (O&M) may result in premature decline of asset condition and an increase in future repair and replacement costs. This calls for applying an effective management strategy to help the government reduce operating costs, enhance efficiency, and improve service delivery to citizens. According to Lu (2017), effective management systems ensure that capital assets are inventoried according to accounting standards, function at lower cost, and are regularly maintained to avoid safety issues and failures. During a related study, Gross and Źróbek (2013) stressed the need for the public sector to manage its resources efficiently, not only because they are limited but also because they are important to achieving public purposes. In the United States of America (USA), public real estate management gained prominence in the 1990s (Cohen et al., 2023) to enhance efficiency through introducing a strategic public real estate procedure management system, securing rental income, strategic portfolio development, reducing the amount of space managed, identifying the need for public real estate, and reducing the cost of property

maintenance. Muczyński (2015) defines real estate management as involving making decisions and taking actions necessary to maintain the real estate in good condition while ensuring it aligns with its intended purpose, making justifiable investments in real estate to achieve the owners' technical, economic, social, and environmental goals. Kaganova and Amoils (2020) highlight that some notable changes were recorded in public asset management driven by austerity measures, an increased focus on performance management, technology and business operations, and the environmental sustainability agenda.

To improve public real estate management, it is important to examine the management practices and challenges in this sector. While existing studies provide a foundation, contextual differences between countries call for localised and context-specific research to develop effective interventions. This study investigates the management practices and challenges affecting public real estate management in Zimbabwe, providing insights that can inform targeted interventions to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in this sector.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Public Real Estate Management Practices

In most countries, the public sector owns the largest share of real estate assets. In Poland, Rymarzak and Trojanowski (2013) assert that the public sector owns one of the largest real estate resources in the country. Public sector real property can be classified as either core or non-core (Gahr et al., 2017). According to Gahr et al. (2017), core assets are essential to accomplish the government's service delivery mission, primarily operational functions. These include government-use properties (offices, warehouses, police stations, and firehouses) and social-use properties (school buildings, health service facilities, parks and recreation facilities, and public housing). On the other hand, non-core assets are sites and buildings, which can include former core assets that have been surplus or underutilised and are considered excess to the government's mission. The possession of such diverse, valuable, but capital-intensive property requires that changes in its environment and their trends be followed and future effects of present-day actions (decisions) be projected, such that risk mitigation measures can be put in place, if need be. Thus, public real estate management is a branch of state asset management that focuses on acquiring, using, and disposing of land and buildings. Unlike private real estate management, which seeks to maximise returns from real estate investments, PREM seeks to provide an appropriate quantity of properties for public goods and services, support local economic development, and generate revenue from alternative sources (Muczyński, 2015). It involves making and implementing decisions regarding the acquisition, utilisation, and disposal of government-owned assets to minimise asset utilisation costs and effectively accomplish government objectives (European Commission, 2018).

In Zimbabwe, public real estate is divided into state-owned and local authority-owned properties. Accordingly, public real estate management occurs at two levels: state and local authorities. The Government of Zimbabwe owns land, buildings, and infrastructure, which it uses to deliver public services. The state and its subsidiaries utilise some of this portfolio, while the others are leased to private entities for varying periods. In Bulawayo, the government leases recreational spaces at the Khumalo Hockey Stadium to private entities, while it utilises office space at the Mhlahlandlela Government Office Complex. The other notable government buildings in Bulawayo are the High Court, Customs House, Tredgold Buildings, Post Office, National Museums, and the Art Gallery. The size of real estate assets owned by the public sector calls for mechanisms to ensure that assets are managed efficiently and in line with public interest. In line with the aforesaid, Trojanek (2015) calls for reforms in public real estate management to rationalise maintenance costs of the stock and to increase management effectiveness of the stock. Cohen et al. (2023) argue that applying modern strategic planning methods, including the acquisition of new assets, maintenance and renewal of existing assets, and leasing and sale of vacant/excess assets, can enhance efficiency.

In most countries public real estate management is greatly influenced by legislation, policies, and institutions. In Zimbabwe public real estate management is guided by the Public Finance Management Act (Chapter 22:19), Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Act (Chapter 22:23), State Property Disposal Regulation, the State Property Acquisition Regulation, Government Property Management (2018), the Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15), and the Urban State Lands Manual.

An effective management strategy is required if public real estate is to contribute meaningfully to the national development agenda of an upper-middle-income economy by 2030. PREM focuses on generating returns to society, income from the lease of certain state-owned properties, and the disposal of assets not involved in any economic activity (Cohen et al., 2023). The property management strategy entails complex duties, such as preparing budgets and financial reports, conducting market research, and implementing corporate social responsibility tasks (Muczynski, 2023). In a study involving three frameworks of public real estate management, Lu (2017) identified common elements in PREM: a management information system, legal and regulatory framework, financial and accounting report, performance evaluation, and portfolio management. Individual components include incentives for better management, auditing and transparency, acquisition, rental, use, sales of assets, technology mechanisms, and strategic review. Lu (2017) summarises the management practices as involving purchase, construction, leasing, and inventorying. This aligns with the real estate lifecycle, which comprises three phases: conception/supply, use/operation, and recovery (Muczyński, 2015). This framework gives a holistic understanding of public real estate management practices during the property's lifecycle. As highlighted by Giglio et al. (2018), adopting a whole-life approach makes PREM effective, allowing for balancing risks, costs, and opportunities in relation to the desired performance of the assets. Life cycle management ensures that public sector assets are protected and maintained to make economic and social contributions (Giglio et al., 2018).

During conception, the main focus is on acquiring existing property, development, or reconstruction, including evaluation of such decisions and financing options (Muczyński, 2015). The main practices during utilisation include letting, regular maintenance, modernisation, refurbishment, valuation, portfolio review, financial auditing, and asset reporting. During the recovery period, the main management activity is asset disposal by sale, redistribution, or demolition (Lu, 2017). In line with public accountability requirements, monitoring and control are important to ensure compliance with laws, the effectiveness of policies and procedures, performance measurement, and financial accountability (Lu, 2017).

Table 1 shows a summary of the selected management practices for the purposes of this research paper and the different references from which they were adopted.

Table 1 Public real estate management practices

Code	Management Practices	References
PR01	Asset registration and keeping the register of public property	White (2011), Dionisijev & Roje (2021)
PR02	Rent collection	Ogutu (2013), Hickman (2019)
PR03	Building and equipment maintenance	Zailan (2001), Breesam & Jawad (2021)
PR04	Leasing and renewal of leases	Coleman et al. (2012), Maletswa & Boshoff (2015)
PR05	Financial analysis and reporting	Lu (2017), Lipczynska (2024)
PR06	Property inspections	Maletswa & Boshoff (2015), Lu (2011)
PR07	Handling of rent arrears	Maletswa & Boshoff (2015), Bassett & Pisano (2022)
PR08	Reviewing rentals	Bassett and Pisano (2022), Maletswa & Boshoff (2015)
PR09	Periodic/regular reporting	Redmayne (2021), Lu (2011), Bassett & Pisano (2022)
PR10	Grievance management	Isa et al. (2023), Wang & Wu (2020)
PR11	Benchmarking of rentals	Triantafillou (2007), Cole (2011)
PR12	Space management	Said (2023), Lah et al. (2015)
PR13	Acquisition and purchase of property	Lu (2017), Cohen et al. (2023)
PR14	Property investment	Mukori (2013), Özogul & Tasan-Kok (2020)
PR15	Disposal of excess property/space/facilities	Cock & French (2001), Kaganova (2006)

2.2 Challenges in Public Real Estate Management

Despite being a considerable part of public wealth, public assets are often neither audited nor given as much attention as they deserve, financially. Notably, there is a growing concern that public real estate is inefficiently managed in several countries. Thus, public entities managing public real estate have several areas to improve to enhance the effective and efficient use of public real estate.

The main challenge affecting PREM is the underinvestment in maintenance, which often results in premature deterioration of an asset and a subsequent rise in costs for future repairs and replacements (Cohen et al. 2023). According to White (2011), PREM is affected by the absence of data about the actual size and composition of the real estate portfolio and its worth. The problem is amplified by the lack of access to detailed information about the inventory of assets owned by their governments and what it's worth, weak institutional coordination, and difficulties measuring non-financial returns, such as quantifying the social value of public lands (Lizundia et al., 2015). A study conducted by Abdullah et al. (2011) in Malaysia determined that there are five main management issues in government-owned property assets, namely lack of proper property unit/department within a ministry, lack of proper strategies, lack of proper management procedure, lack of information technology (IT) usage, and lack of expertise. The European Commission (2018) identified the lack of a central policy framework, fragmented management of state-owned assets, economic inefficiencies linked to public property, lack of information needed for managing large sets of properties, and lack of transparency and accountability as the reasons driving reform of public asset management regimes in several countries.

Corruption is a major challenge in managing public real estate, often perpetuated across generations. In Zimbabwe, the issue is evident, with the country consistently scoring poorly on corruption indices. The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) shows that Zimbabwe is ranked 158 out of 180 countries (Matendere, 2025), highlighting the need for improvement. Corruption can lead to neglect or underutilisation of assets, poor record keeping, and political interference, ultimately hindering efficient public asset management.

Table 2 shows the different challenges faced in public real estate management and where they were taken from.

Table 2 Challenges in the management of public real estate

Code	Challenges	References
CH01	Inadequate financing	Giglio et al. (2018), Babych et al. (2021)
CH02	Lengthy budget approval processes	Zweni et al. (2022), Ordu & Thomas (2023)
CH03	A lack of effective IT systems and skills	Zanfei & Seri (2016), Masilela & Nel (2021)
CH04	Poor communication	Fredriksson & Pallas (2018), Sesay (2023)
CH05	High cost of building materials	Onyejiaka (2019), Alabi (2021)
CH06	Outdated statutory instruments/legal instruments	Lizundia et al. (2015), Madziva et al. (2023)
CH07	A persistent shortage of data	Lizundia et al. (2015), Kawashita et al. (2022)
CH08	Insufficient human resources	Muronda (2023), Idowu (2023)
CH09	A disconnect between accounting and asset management	Ngwira & Manase (2015), European Commission (2018)
CH10	Poor financial analysis	Kaganova & McKellar (2006), Mashabela & Thusi (2024)
CH11	Inadequate information for managing property portfolios	European Commission (2018), Kawashita et al. (2022)
CH12	Lack of transparency and accountability	Abdullah et al. (2011), Amalia (2023)
CH13	Insufficient coordination in addressing property maintenance issues	Abdullah et al. (2011), Ensafi & Thabet (2021)
CH14	Lack of expertise	Curristine et al. (2007), Ngwira & Manase (2015)

Table 2 (continued)

Code	Challenges	References
CH15	Inadequate management procedures	Abdullah et al. (2011), Thusi (2023)
CH16	Failure to conduct performance reviews of portfolios	Kaganova & McKellar (2006), Andrews et al. (2006)
CH17	The absence of a designated section within the Ministry	Abdullah et al. (2011)
CH18	The lack of a central policy framework	European Commission (2018), Ngwira & Manase (2015)
CH19	Insufficient transparency in the use of properties	European Commission (2018), Kaganova (2010)
CH20	The absence of benchmarks	Kaupa et al. (2020), Nwaogu et al. (2022)
CH21	Inadequate strategies for managing real estate	European Commission (2018), Ngwira & Manase (2015)
CH22	Political interference	Sithole (2013), Matamanda et al. (2024)
CH23	Fragmented management of public property assets	European Commission (2018), Kaganova & Amoils (2020)

■3.0 METHODOLOGY

An exploratory quantitative research approach was adopted for the study, which involved the distribution of structured questionnaires to government officers and executives managing government offices and recreational properties in Bulawayo. As the second largest city in Zimbabwe, Bulawayo hosts many public buildings. Nonetheless, there is an observable decline in the condition of some of the public buildings within these provinces. From a research literature perspective, there is limited or no research on the subject matter in Bulawayo precisely and in Zimbabwe in general. Against this background, this paper bridges the gap. The experiences from Bulawayo could shed light relative to public sector property management in Zimbabwe and the interventions required to enhance the physical and economic life of public properties, thereby improving quality of service delivery as a whole. It will pave the way for other researchers. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) highlight that quantitative research generally answers questions about relationships among measured variables to explain, predict, and control phenomena.

3.1 Population and Sampling

The study population comprised property managers of government offices and recreational properties in Bulawayo. In addition to the government's use, private tenants lease these properties for varying durations, ranging from occasional to long-term. The respondents were selected through purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling relies on the researchers' judgement and the purpose of the study when selecting study participants. Purposive sampling strategies intentionally select specific cases to include in the final research sample based on the belief that, given the research objectives, certain types of individuals may possess distinct and important perspectives on the issues under investigation, thus necessitating their inclusion in the sample (Campbell et al. 2020). The study targeted government officers and executives who perform public real estate management functions from the Ministries of Local Government and Public Works and Housing and Social Amenities. Given the small population estimated at approximately 36, a census was adopted wherein questionnaires were distributed to all potential respondents, including those in management.

3.2 Questionnaire Design and Administration

The questionnaire comprised two sections. In Section A, the study sought to collect respondents' demographic details such as gender, experience, qualification, and designation. Section B collected respondents' perceptions of selected property management practices and challenges in managing public sector real property. The challenges and management practices included in the questionnaire were developed based on a review of related literature on public property management (Table 2) and an assessment of management practices (Table 1) related to the topic under study. A five-point Likert scale was employed, where 1 = minor / not important and 5 = major / very important to enable respondents to assess the significance and implementation of specific practices and determine the impact of selected challenges on effective public sector real property management.

Three experienced professionals in the property field, one from academia and two from industry, reviewed the survey before its distribution. This expert review evaluated the relevance of the questions, the appropriateness of the included variables, and the clarity of the wording. In a previous related study, Lu (2017) used two capital asset managers to review the questionnaire before distribution and then revised it in language and structure. The revised questionnaire was distributed to selected property managers of government offices and recreational facilities through the drop-off-and-pick method. The questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter outlining the study's objectives and informing participants of their rights to participate voluntarily. The study provided respondents with one month to complete the questionnaire. Two weeks after distributing the survey, reminders were sent.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed using SPSS to compute descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and measure central tendency in the form of mean scores (MS). This allowed for the ranking of the variables/factors. The results were interpreted based on previous studies as follows: '> 1.80 ≤ 2.60 (minor to near minor), MSs >2.60 ≤ 3.40 (near minor to moderate/moderate extent), MSs > 3.40 ≤ 4.20' (moderate to near major/near major extent), and MSs > 4.20 ≤ 5.00' (near major to major/major extent) (Smallwood, 2020). A midpoint of 3.00, calculated as (1+2+3+4+5)/5), was used to identify significant variables per Ikediashi et al. (2012).

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Thirty-six (36) questionnaires were distributed, and 21 were returned, representing a 58.3% response rate. Since the returned questionnaires had been fully completed, they were all included in the analysis. Given the small sample size, the results can be considered indicative, and caution is required when applying the results to other regions. Nonetheless, the small sample is common in built environment research, where approximately 20 to 30% response rates are considered normal. In a related study in Malaysia, Abdullah et al. (2011) invited 26 government officers with responsibilities to manage real estate assets, and only 12 (46.2%) ministry officers agreed to participate in the study. The diverse backgrounds and experiences of the respondents are important considerations relative to the quality of responses and reliability of the research findings.

Regarding educational background, 47.6% of the personnel managing public sector real property are Diploma holders, 42.9% are Honours degree holders, and 14.3% are Master's degree holders. With regard to age distribution, the results show that the industry is composed of vibrant, energetic public real estate managers under 40 years old (71.4%) and seasoned and experienced personnel over 40 years old (28.6%).

4.2 Public Real Estate Management Practices in Zimbabwe

Table 3 Level of importance and implementation of selected PREM management practices

Code	Management Practices	Level of Importance		Extent of Implementation	
		MS	Rank	MS	Rank
PR01	Asset registration and keeping the register of public property	4.88	1	4.43	1
PR02	Rent collection	4.70	2	4.32	2
PR03	Building and equipment maintenance	4.50	3	3.28	9
PR04	Leasing and renewal of leases	4.46	4	3.92	5
PR05	Financial analysis and reporting	4.43	5	4.13	4
PR06	Property inspections	4.40	6	3.68	6
PR07	Handling of rent arrears	4.35	7	3.64	7
PR08	Reviewing rentals	4.05	8	3.35	8
PR09	Periodic/regular reporting	3.93	9	4.17	3
PR10	Grievance management	3.88	10	3.11	11
PR11	Benchmarking of rentals	3.65	11	2.81	13
PR12	Space management	3.62	12	2.58	15
PR13	Acquisition and purchase of property	3.56	13	2.92	12
PR14	Property investment	3.54	14	2.64	14
PR15	Disposal of excess property/space/facilities	3.28	15	3.20	10

Table 3 shows the extent to which selected property management practices are considered important in public real estate management in terms of percentage responses to a scale of 1 (not important) and 5 (very important) and an MS ranging between 1.00 and 5.00, the midpoint score being 3.00.

Notably, all the practices have MSs greater than the midpoint score of 3.00, which indicates that respondents deem the management practices to be very important, as opposed to not important. The results show that management practices ranked 1 to 7 have MSs > 4.20 ≤ 5.00, which indicates that respondents deem the management practices to be more than important to very important / very important for public real estate management. The management practices in the cluster include asset registration and record keeping, rent collection, maintenance of buildings and equipment, leasing and renewal of leases, financial analysis, property inspections, and handling rent arrears.

The factors ranked 9 to 14 have MSs > 3.40 ≤ 4.20, which indicates that the respondents deem that the management practices are moderately important to important/important in the management of recreational and office properties in the public sector. The management practices in this cluster include grievance management, property investment, space management, reviewing rentals, and acquiring property. Disposal of excess property has MS > 2.60 ≤ 3.40, suggesting that respondents deem its application to be between a near minor to a moderate extent.

In terms of implementation, Table 3 shows that 12/15 (75%) of the management practices have MSs greater than the midpoint score of 3.00, which suggests that the practices are implemented to a major rather than a minor extent. The results, as presented in Table 3, show asset registration and record-keeping have MSs > 4.20 ≤ 5.00, which suggests that respondents perceive that these aspects are implemented between a near major to a major/major extent. The level of implementation is consistent with the level of importance assigned to these two functions. The need for up-to-date and precise information regarding public real estate is critical to support decision-making. Equally, collecting rent timely is important to measure the efficiency/performance of leased public real estate.

Five practices have MSs > 3.40 ≤ 4.20, suggesting they are deemed to be implemented between a moderate to a near major / near major extent. The practices in this cluster include collecting rent, periodic/regular reporting, financial and account reporting, leasing and renewal of leases, property inspections, and handling rent arrears. Notably, 6/16 (37.5%) of the practices had MSs > 2.60 ≤ 3.40, suggesting that these practices are implemented between a minor to a moderate/moderate extent. The practices in this cluster are maintenance of buildings and equipment, reviewing rentals, disposal of excess space, grievance management, benchmarking rentals, and property acquisitions.

Notably, 4/16 (25%) management practices have MSs less than the midpoint score, suggesting that property acquisition, benchmarking of rentals, investment, and space management are inadequately practiced. This is consistent with the below-market rent on government-owned properties and limited space (re)configuration to meet the changing space demands. This may result in the government holding on to excess space that ends up being an expense on their part rather than just disposing of them to acquire economically viable investments, probably because their main objective is not financial but social delivery of services and amenities.

The research findings as presented in Table 3 indicate that there is a gap between the level of importance and the extent of implementation of public real estate management practices. While all selected management practices are deemed important, their implementation falls short, while some practices deemed less important are prioritised ahead of those deemed critical. For example, periodic reporting is at rank 9/15 when it comes to importance but is mostly implemented, hence ranking third, whilst building and equipment maintenance is deemed very important, ranking 3/15, but when it comes to implementation, it was ranked at number 9. This implies that less important practices receive more attention. However, what is remarkable is that some of the most important practices remain up there even when it comes to implementation, that is, practices 1, 2, and then 4-8. The discrepancies may be attributed to challenges such as differing goals, inadequate financing, and bureaucratic delays, which can lead to inefficient public asset management.

4.3 Challenges in Public Real Estate Management in Zimbabwe

Table 4 shows the challenges in public real estate management in Zimbabwe in terms of percentage responses to a scale of 1 (not at all) and 5 (major) and a Mean Score ranging between 1.00 and 5.00, with a midpoint score of 3.00.

Notably, 14/23 (60.9%) of the challenges have MSs above 3.00, which suggests that respondents deem the challenges to have a major as opposed to minor effect on public real estate management in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

The results show that seven challenges have MSs > 3.40 ≤ 4.20, suggesting that respondents perceive these challenges to affect public real estate management between a moderate to a near major / near major extent. The challenges in this cluster include inadequate financing, lengthy budget approval processes, lack of effective IT systems and skills, poor communication, high cost of building materials, outdated statutory instruments, and a persistent shortage of data.

The factors ranked 8 to 20 have MSs > 2.60 ≤ 340, suggesting that respondents perceive them to have a minor to moderate/moderate effect on public real estate management. Some factors in this cluster include insufficient human resources, a disconnect between accounting and asset management, poor financial analysis, inadequate information for managing property portfolios, lack of transparency and accountability, and insufficient coordination in addressing property maintenance issues.

Three factors, namely, inadequate strategies for managing real estate, political interference, and fragmented management of public property assets, have MSs > 1.80 ≤ 2.60, which indicates that respondents perceive these factors to affect public real estate management between a minor to a near minor / minor extent. Notably, despite being reported in the literature, these factors have had minor or no effect in Zimbabwe.

Table 4 Challenges in the public real estate management

Code	Challenges	MS	Rank
CH01	Inadequate financing	4.18	1
CH02	Lengthy budget approval processes	3.94	2
CH03	A lack of effective IT systems and skills	3.75	3
CH04	Poor communication	3.64	4
CH05	High cost of building materials	3.60	5
CH06	Outdated statutory instruments/legal instruments	3.60	5
CH07	A persistent shortage of data	3.53	7
CH08	Insufficient human resources	3.38	8
CH09	A disconnect between accounting and asset management	3.22	9
CH10	Poor financial analysis	3.21	10
CH11	Inadequate information for managing property portfolios	3.10	11
CH12	Lack of transparency and accountability	3.08	12
CH13	Insufficient coordination in addressing property maintenance issues	3.03	13
CH14	Lack of expertise	3.00	14
CH15	Inadequate management procedures	2.92	15
CH16	Failure to conduct performance reviews of portfolios	2.88	16
CH17	The absence of a designated section within the Ministry	2.86	17
CH18	The lack of a central policy framework	2.76	18
CH19	Insufficient transparency in the use of properties	2.74	19
CH20	The absence of benchmarks	2.65	20
CH21	Inadequate strategies for managing real estate	2.57	21
CH22	Political interference	2.46	22
CH23	Fragmented management of public property assets	2.26	23

■5.0 DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study results suggest that there are several functions and activities perceived to be important in public real estate management practice. The main functions include asset registration and record keeping, rent collection, maintenance of buildings and equipment, and leasing real property. The most frequently applied public real estate management practices are asset registration and record keeping, rent collection, periodic/regular reporting, financial analysis and reporting, and leasing property. Although the thrust of PREM is not profit-oriented, there is a need to collect rental income, which is important to ensure the generation of cash flows, which can be ploughed back into the upkeep of the property. These functions correspond to those identified by Abdullah et al. (2011) in Malaysia. Although most practices are applied between a moderate to a major/major extent, benchmarking of rentals, space management, property acquisition, and property investment are marginally applied in public real estate management practice. Based on the extent of application of these practices, it can be concluded that the PREM in Zimbabwe primarily focuses on operational issues during the utilisation phase of the building life cycle while giving limited focus on acquisition and property investment. The results support Cohen et al.'s (2023) findings, highlighting the dominance of the traditional narrow approach adopted for real estate management, which focuses mainly on the passive execution of routine tasks, which include rent collection, covering operational expenses, maintaining the property, and managing contractual and legal issues during the building's usage. However, the focus on operational property management limits the potential of the entire real estate portfolio (Wojewnik-Filipkowska et al., 2015). This approach often burdens the government by keeping properties beyond their physical life spans, often deplorable due to inadequate maintenance. Lack of space management can lead to inefficient space use and an increase in vacant units, which presents challenges due to necessary maintenance expenditures. Optimising available space is considered the most critical factor in ensuring the efficiency of PREM (Cohen et al. 2023).

The study identified several challenges affecting the management of public real estate in Zimbabwe. The main challenges include inadequate financing, lengthy budget approval processes, a lack of effective IT systems and skills, poor communication, and the high cost of building materials. Inadequate financing and lengthy budget approval processes adversely affect the planning and maintenance of public real estate assets. This is further aggravated by the high cost of building materials in Zimbabwe, where most materials are imported. The lack of IT skills results in record-keeping still being paper-based, making updates challenging and often leading to improper property accounting. The findings align with previous research indicating that public real estate management is affected by several factors. These include limited use of ICTs in PREM (Rymarzak & Trojanowski, 2012; Wojewnik-Filipkowska et al., 2015), budget constraints (Gross & Źróbek, 2019), management by inadequately experienced and non-expert staff, fragmented organisational structures, and lack of an effective informational management system (Abdullah et al., 2011). Cohen et al. (2023) concluded that public real estate is often inefficiently managed in many countries. In Zimbabwe, the challenging macroeconomic environment exacerbates the difficulties in financing the maintenance of public real property. Budgets are quickly eroded due to the economy's volatile inflationary trends. However, the findings of this study contrast with previous studies concerning the impact of political interference in PREM, as identified in Lithuania (Gross & Źróbek, 2019). Additionally, it differs from earlier studies highlighting the absence of a dedicated unit within the government for PREM (Rymarzak & Trojanowski, 2012).

■6.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research aimed to investigate public real estate management practices, the extent of their implementation, and the challenges affecting public real estate management in Zimbabwe. The practices considered most important in public real estate management are asset registration and maintaining a public property register, collecting rent, maintaining buildings and equipment, leasing and renewing leases, and conducting financial analysis and reporting.

The findings indicate that public real estate management practices are not applied uniformly; rather, some are implemented to a major extent while others are marginally applied. The most frequently adopted practices are asset registration and maintaining a public property register, rent collection, regular and periodic reporting, financial analysis and reporting, and real estate leasing. However, benchmarking of rentals, space management, property acquisition and purchase, and property investment are marginally applied.

The primary challenges in public real estate management are inadequate financing, lengthy budget approval processes, a lack of effective IT systems and skills, poor communication, and the high cost of building materials. The results underscore the need for a strategic public real estate management approach. Specifically, there is a need to focus on asset life-cycle property acquisition and disposal and policy reforms that streamline bureaucratic processes for budget approval, explore alternative funding models for building maintenance and skilling, and enhance skills related to the application of ICT in public real estate management. This aligns with the increasing use of IT in building management and records management—adoption of digital asset registers—as well as energy and water efficiency.

Future studies could investigate the strategies to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in public real estate management, including leveraging technologies to streamline processes and improve transparency and decision-making.

The study is based on a relatively small sample drawn from one city in Zimbabwe, suggesting that the results are indicative. This suggests that caution should be exercised when generalising the findings to other regions.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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