

ONLINE ACCESS TO JUSTICE:

HOW RWANDA
USES DIGITAL
TOOLS TO
MITIGATE
COVID-19
CHALLENGES

How Synergy eCase helps Rwanda deliver justice during Covid-19

September 2021



The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the urgency of transforming justice systems and delivering public services online. Having begun the journey of digital transformation of court cases more than five years ago, the justice sector of Rwanda no longer relies on manual, paper-based case processes. The Judiciary's use of an online case management solution has kept the courts, as well as other agencies, functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic and has supported the goal of making the justice system more accessible and efficient. Find out how digitization has enabled the courts in Rwanda to minimize disruption and accelerate the dispensing of justice during the lockdown and beyond.

Rwanda entered full lockdown on March 16, 2020 after the first case of COVID-19 was identified in the country. Restrictions were in place until May 31, 2020 during which all institutions, including the Judiciary, were prohibited from opening to the public and had to find innovative ways to sustain service delivery. Because the Judiciary of Rwanda had invested in the Rwanda Integrated Electronic Case Management System (IECMS), adapting to the new reality was significantly streamlined. The IECMS served as the backbone for facilitating case filing and follow-up, including case registration, adjudication, and judgment execution, as well as new features for online auctioning.



CASE FILING, FOLLOW-UP, AND REGISTRATION

During the total lockdown, litigants continued to file and follow up on claims and cases online through the IECMS. Over 14,637 cases were filed in court during the total lockdown from March 16 – May 31, as compared with the first months of 2020 (pre-lockdown from January 1 – March 15) when the total number of filed cases was around 21,015.

The court registrars also continued to register cases online through the IECMS, mostly working from home. Over 13,660 cases were registered in court during the total lockdown while around 20,618 cases were registered in the equivalent period immediately before the lockdown as depicted in the table below.

TABLE 1

Comparison of submitted and registered cases in the period before the lockdown and during the lockdown.

MAIN CATEGORY	1 JANUARY 15 MARCH	16 MARCH 31 MAY	1 JANUARY 15 MARCH	16 MARCH 31 MAY
	Pre-lockdown Submitted Cases	During Lockdown Submitted Cases	Pre-lockdown Submitted Cases	During Lockdown Submitted Cases
Administrative Cases	141	79	134	82
Civil	5223	1495	4722	1442
Commercial Cases	979	464	1001	371
Criminal	13789	11900	13921	11125
Economic Crimes	398	324	385	301
Genocide and Related Crimes	182	243	168	205
Social Cases	300	130	285	132
Special	3	2	2	2
TOTAL	21015	14637	20618	13660

From the table above that compares submitted cases before the lockdown (21,015) with cases submitted during the lockdown (14,637), we see only a **30%** decrease while registered cases before the lockdown (20,618) compared with cases registered during the lockdown (13,660) there is only a **33.7%** decrease. This reduction is attributed to the effects of the lockdown including limited business and social activity.

In total, submitted cases increased by **1.7%** from 96,428 in 2019 to 98,022 cases in 2020. It has been noted that 98,524 cases were registered or rejected in 2020 as compared to 99,005 cases in 2019, resulting in only a **0.5%** reduction. Also, there is no difference in the percentage of cases registered in comparison with the pending cases in both 2019 and 2020. Although the total pending cases were high in both years with only **0.5%** difference, registered or rejected cases in both years were also high at **95.8%** of the pending cases.

As shown in the statistics below no major changes were observed in terms of case filing, follow-up, and registration despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

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“The IECMS was handy in ensuring continued service delivery and access to justice. Everything pertaining to court continued with limited physical contact to reduce the spread of Covid. For example, communication between the court and litigants occurred through an online helpdesk, which would have previously necessitated coming to court. Without the IECMS, during the total lockdown, we would have had a period of total shutdown of all court operations.”

HARRISON MUTABAZI

Inspector of Courts and Judicial Spokesperson.



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TABLE 2

Comparison between, pending, submitted and registered between 2019 and 2020.

	2019	2020	CHANGE %	
PENDING AT START OF THE YEAR	6,842	5,053	-26%	↓
SUBMITTED CASES	96,428	98,022	1.7%	↑
TOTAL PENDING CASES	103,270	102,753	-0.5 %	↓
REGISTERED/REJECTED CASES	99,005	98,524	-0.5 %	↓

Furthermore, the IECMS facilitated other sector institutions to continue operating during the total lockdown. The Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB) received 14,227 complaints while the National Public Prosecution Authority (NPPA) received 10,510 complaints and processed 10,501 complaints. This ensured that even during the lockdown, citizens had access to justice and their complaints were addressed.

Litigants were able to follow up their cases remotely through the online platform, receiving email and SMS notifications about the status of their case. They were informed of the next stages in the case when admissibility decisions had been made or were asked to provide additional information required for the case proceedings.

CASE ADJUDICATION

Although from March to May 2020, the country was in total lockdown, the right to justice remained unwavering. Article 130 of the civil procedure gives authority to the courts to hear cases using electronic means. The Judiciary of Rwanda leveraged the existing IECMS capabilities and video conferencing facilities and applications to hear urgent cases, especially provisional detention or provisional release cases.

This approach started in the capital, because Kigali had a greater number of urgent cases and court staff were better prepared with the necessary video conferencing equipment. However, it soon spread to other provinces.

There were 2,064 cases from different courts in the country that were judged and pronounced during the total lockdown. In 2020-2021, 74,513 cases were judged compared to cases judged in 2019 - 2020 (76,349) which resulted in only a 2% reduction.

The IECMS functionalities allow litigants to submit final documents online. Hearing minutes and other proceeding documents are uploaded together with the parties' remotely declared oral confirmation of agreement as a replacement for a physical signature. In most courts, judges, and registrars use electronic signatures to sign other court documents.

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“The IECMS helped us to receive and respond to different requests from litigants online, I am able to assign cases to judges online and they access all case documents in the system to conduct hearings, pronounce and submit judgment copies within the system. On top of that, I am able to keep track of all court activities through automatically updated dashboards that facilitate me to make appropriate decisions.”

REGIS RUKUNDAKUVUGA
President of Court of Appeal



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ONLINE AUCTIONING AND JUDGMENT EXECUTION

Shortly after the total lockdown, the Rwandan courts and Ministry of Justice implemented an online auctioning and judgment execution solution using the IECMS. This helped expedite case execution while minimizing human interaction to limit the spread of COVID-19. With this, litigants can pay judgment copy fees online, request and acquire execution stamps from the court, then proceed to bailiff assignment, online auction (when applicable), and final execution. On average 2,022 cases are stamped for execution per month.



“The IECMS helped us to reduce physical contact and eliminated middlemen during an auction, who at times created chaos. We can now work from anywhere and bidders can submit their bids irrespective of where they are. For example, now that we are observing measures to remain in one district, bidders can still bid on a property in another district online. The IECMS eliminated the need for paper usage and exchange especially while notifying bidders and litigants, which could have increased the spread of COVID-19”.

ME NDAYOBOTSE SILAS
Professional Court Bailiff,
Professional Bailiffs Association



SURGE IN ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

There was a surge in the use of the IECMS before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The statistics below shows that the number of new users increased by **113%** from 38,693 in 2019 to 82,423 in 2020.

AUDIENCE	JAN 1, 2020 DEC 31, 2020	JAN 1, 2019 DEC 31, 2019	% CHANGE
USERS	93,326 (100.00%)	50,119 (100.00%)	86.21% 93,326 vs 50,119
NEW USERS	82,423 (100.00%)	38,693 (100.00%)	113.02% 82,423 vs 38,693

PANDEMIC LESSONS

As the pandemic has displayed, well-conceived justice information systems are not just operational tools that improve institutional efficiency. In times of extraordinary events, these systems enable law enforcement and judicial administrators to continue delivering justice services when they would otherwise be forced to stop or severely limit public access.

Technology was not a panacea for responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it substantially reduced the negative impact and proved to be an essential tool in the government's response. The Rwandan government's foresight and vision of achieving user-friendly justice for both the public and its administrators, which began in 2004, has paid off immensely. This determination to constantly enhance the service delivery model will only serve to promote the growing public demand for access to justice. Building on this knowledge and experience, the Judiciary of Rwanda is actively pursuing enhancements, including a project of integrating the IECMS with a video conferencing application to enable a seamless user experience for online hearings within the IECMS.

As demonstrated by the above results recorded by the Judiciary of Rwanda, Virtual engagement is the best approach to ensure continued service delivery despite external shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic. The Judiciary can and should lead the way in adopting innovative ways to respond to new challenges. Case management systems and similar technologies can demonstrably facilitate improved access to justice while maintaining the delivery of timely and quality justice.



Synergy International Systems, Inc. is a global technology and consulting company that empowers organizations and governments to become more data-driven in achieving their impact. Since 1997, we have worked in more than 80 countries to help organizations and governments improve information management, decision making, service delivery, and organizational effectiveness.

We work in a variety of domains, including monitoring and evaluation, public sector financial management, development effectiveness, and digital justice.

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