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From Promise to Progress: Imihigo Framework and People-Centred Governance in Rwanda



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From Promise to Progress: Imihigo Framework and People-Centred Governance in Rwanda



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines the contribution of the Imihigo performance framework to people-centred governance in Rwanda. It explores how Imihigo influences accountability, citizen participation, service delivery, institutional coordination, and broader governance outcomes, while identifying implementation challenges that affect its effectiveness.

Methodology: The study adopted a qualitative case study design grounded in descriptive, interpretivist, and explanatory orientations. Data were collected through 43 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) involving central and local government officials, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, and private sector actors. Documentary review complemented interviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and interpret findings in relation to governance and public administration theories.

Findings: Findings indicate that Imihigo has significantly strengthened accountability by linking performance to measurable targets and enhancing results-based management. It has improved service delivery outcomes in infrastructure, health, and education, and strengthened vertical coordination between central and local government. However, citizen participation remains largely procedural rather than substantive, limiting downward accountability. Horizontal coordination across sectors is uneven, and there is an overemphasis on quantifiable outputs at the expense of qualitative outcomes. Additionally, challenges persist in inclusive participation, gender mainstreaming, resource alignment, and adaptive performance monitoring.

Contribution to Theory, Policy, and Practice: The study contributes to theory by extending New Public Management and participatory governance perspectives through an African indigenous governance lens. It demonstrates how culturally grounded performance systems can enhance accountability while also revealing weaknesses between efficiency and inclusiveness. For policy, it highlights the need to strengthen downward accountability, cross-sector coordination, and citizen feedback mechanisms within Imihigo. In practice, it recommends enhancing participatory monitoring, integrating qualitative indicators, and improving inclusive engagement to ensure that Imihigo more effectively supports people-centred governance and sustainable development outcomes.

Keywords: *Imihigo; People-centred governance; Performance management; Accountability; Rwanda public sector.*

INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized that *Imihigo* has had a significant impact on Rwanda's national transformation agenda. In particular, it is credited with accelerating development progress through targeted interventions that promote citizen-centred outcomes and strengthen accountable governance. The term *Imihigo* literally refers to “performance contracts” and represents a performance management and accountability tool implemented by the Government of Rwanda since 2006. It was introduced to accelerate the implementation of national development priorities and enhance public service delivery in an accountable manner (Kamatali, 2020; Sabbi & Ndikubwimana, 2024). *Imihigo* is also classified among Rwanda's Home-Grown Solutions, reflecting its foundation in indigenous cultural traditions and values (Murasi & Auriacombe, 2022). Historically, it referred to a practice whereby individuals made public commitments to the king to achieve specific targets and subsequently reported on their accomplishments.

Over time, *Imihigo* has become highly institutionalized and now functions as a formal mechanism through which public institutions at both central and local government levels set annual performance targets aligned with national priorities (Murasi & Auriacombe, 2022). At the end of each performance cycle, evaluations are conducted to assess the extent of target achievement and identify implementation challenges. These evaluation results are used to reward high-performing institutions while providing recommendations for improvement to underperforming ones (Sabbi & Ndikubwimana, 2024). In cases of persistent underperformance, leadership changes may be undertaken to safeguard efficiency and strengthen accountability in service delivery.

Consequently, *Imihigo* has evolved into a comprehensive performance management framework that compels public leaders to deliver on clearly defined commitments. Initially applied at the district level, it has since been scaled up across all public institutions to enhance overall governance performance. *Imihigo* aligns closely with global models of results-based management in international development (Sabbi & Stroh, 2020). It incorporates performance indicators, structured assessment systems, and funding mechanisms supported by both government and development partners. Results-based management emphasizes three levels of results—outputs (short-term), outcomes (medium-term), and impacts (long-term) (Binnendijk, 2000; Bongs, 2019). In this regard, *Imihigo* serves as a key governance instrument for strengthening planning, implementation, monitoring, and accountability in public service delivery.

Furthermore, *Imihigo* promotes a people-centred governance approach by encouraging responsive and inclusive service delivery that reflects citizens' needs. While some studies highlight mixed outcomes including successes, implementation challenges, and external constraints (Boone, 2003; Eckert, 2014) Rwanda is widely regarded as a notable case of successful performance-based governance reform (Hyden, 2017; Poteete, 2020). Compared to other indigenous governance initiatives that often remain symbolic or weakly implemented, *Imihigo* stands out due to its strong institutionalization and effective enforcement mechanisms (Sabbi & Ndikubwimana, 2024). Since its introduction in 2006, it has contributed significantly

to the achievement of national development targets and improvements in citizens' living conditions.

Through *Imihigo*, the Government of Rwanda has deliberately integrated cultural traditions into modern governance systems to promote self-reliance, while still leveraging external development support where necessary (Desrosiers & Swedlund, 2019; Keijzer et al., 2020). This hybrid approach has enhanced efficiency and effectiveness in public service delivery and strengthened the implementation of programs that generate socio-economic value. In addition, *Imihigo* has strengthened collaboration among citizens, local leaders, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders in identifying and prioritizing development needs at the grassroots level. This participatory approach ensures that performance targets reflect community aspirations and local development challenges. Moreover, *Imihigo* promotes a sense of competition among districts, enhances performance discipline, and reinforces accountability among public officials. Finally, *Imihigo* is also recognized as a key enabler of complementary development interventions, including performance-based financing mechanisms, which further strengthen results-oriented governance in Rwanda (Ndayishimiye et al., 2025).

Problem statement

The notion of *Imihigo* originates from Rwanda's cultural traditions, dating back to the pre-colonial period, where it reflected the practice of setting individual performance goals and ensuring their effective execution (Habamenshi et al., 2019). In the post-genocide era, Rwanda faced extensive socio-economic challenges that required substantial resources to address. However, given the scarcity of such resources, alternative approaches had to be devised. This context prompted a return to indigenous knowledge systems, leading to the revitalization of traditional practices as part of broader governance and development strategies.

As a result, Home-Grown Solutions (HGS) were reintroduced in 2006 to complement existing policy frameworks and support the implementation of Rwanda's socio-economic transformation agenda, including long-term development visions such as Vision 2020 and, subsequently, Vision 2050 (Jonathan, 2018). Since their reintroduction, HGS have been institutionalized across government institutions and have contributed to the achievement of development outcomes, including progress toward the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), poverty reduction, and improved well-being among Rwandans. Rwanda's development success has been strongly associated with the modernization and institutionalization of traditional *Imihigo*, which has enhanced focus, efficiency, and accountability in the utilization of limited resources, ultimately contributing to improved living standards (Odi, 2012). Despite the widespread recognition of its impact, there remains a relative scarcity of systematic empirical research examining the specific contribution of *Imihigo* to national transformation outcomes. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to critically examine the contribution of *Imihigo* to Rwanda's national transformation, with particular attention to its role in shaping governance performance and development outcomes.

Objectives of the study

- To describe the process of IMIHIGO and its institutionalisation in Rwanda's Public Sector
- To examine the role of IMIHIGO in Rwanda's progress across different sectors
- To highlight challenges that still face IMIHIGO implementation

LITERATURE REVIEW

Imihigo plays a significant role in fostering a governance system that prioritizes accountability, community engagement, and measurable progress. It reflects a hybrid model that blends traditional values with modern public management practices, aimed at building a cohesive, resilient, and development-oriented society. As a performance management system, *Imihigo* encompasses goal setting, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes adopted by both local and central government institutions in Rwanda (Iyer & Abegaz, 2019; Baikirize & Muyobokeye, 2020).

The *Imihigo* framework requires leaders and their institutions to set clear and measurable annual targets and commit to achieving them. These targets are transparently evaluated at the end of each performance cycle, and underperformance is subject to accountability measures (Iyer & Abegaz, 2019). One of the key strengths of *Imihigo* lies in its promotion of ownership, collaboration, and active participation among citizens and development partners (Urusaro, 2021). The process of setting *Imihigo* involves citizens, local leaders, and stakeholders working collaboratively to define priorities and implement agreed-upon targets (Munyaneza, 2019). The Institute of Policy Analysis and Research Rwanda (2020) emphasizes that this participatory approach strengthens relationships between government, citizens, and development partners in shaping the country's development trajectory.

Furthermore, *Imihigo* integrates citizen voice through tools such as Citizen Report Cards (CRC), which contribute 10% to the overall performance evaluation. Specifically, 5% reflects citizen satisfaction with participation, while another 5% captures satisfaction with service delivery by local government entities. CRCs serve as an important accountability mechanism through which citizens assess governance practices and public service quality (Bule & Ndung'u, 2020). They also empower citizens by providing a platform to express their views and influence governance outcomes (Bule & Ndung'u, 2020).

Imihigo Institutionalisation

The institutionalization of *Imihigo* within Rwanda's governance system is closely linked to the decentralization reforms introduced in 2000. These reforms aimed to devolve decision-making authority to lower administrative levels, thereby enhancing local governance capacity and responsiveness to citizen needs (Kamanzi & Niyonzima, 2021). Such reforms have been instrumental in strengthening governance structures and building institutional capacity at local levels, ensuring improved accountability, transparency, and service delivery. *Imihigo* was integrated as a core component of this decentralized framework, establishing a structured system in which local leaders from district to village levels—are held accountable

through explicit performance contracts aligned with national development priorities (Ndagijimana, 2022; World Bank, 2018). This system enhances local ownership, as authorities are responsible not only for setting targets but also for mobilizing communities to achieve them.

The *Imihigo* approach complements Rwanda's broader performance-based governance model, which emphasizes measurable outcomes and accountability across the public sector (Klingebiel & Golooba-Mutebi, 2016; National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2020). It also facilitates alignment between local development priorities and overarching national frameworks such as Vision 2020, Vision 2050, and successive National Strategies for Transformation, thereby ensuring coherence in planning and implementation. As a result, *Imihigo* has contributed to enhanced efficiency and stronger alignment between local and national development objectives (Klingebiel & Golooba-Mutebi, 2016; NISR, 2020). It has also accelerated the realization of national development ambitions and strengthened the social contract between citizens and the state (NISR, 2018).

More broadly, *Imihigo* exemplifies Africa's pursuit of home-grown solutions to complex public management challenges. It resonates with decentralization efforts aimed at fostering local democracy and responsive service delivery, informed by the integration of cultural practices into modern governance systems (Kamuzinzi, 2016; Sabbi & Ndikubwimana, 2024). Rwanda's experience is often cited as a notable success in performance-based governance reform (Hyden, 2017; Poteete, 2020). Moreover, *Imihigo* demonstrates how traditional practices can be effectively integrated into contemporary governance systems to generate tangible socio-economic benefits (Sabbi & Ndikubwimana, 2019; Klingebiel & Scholtes, 2020). It also aligns with international performance management approaches used globally to address public policy and implementation gaps (Yanguas & Bukenya, 2016).

Institutional Design and Implementation Processes of Imihigo

The institutional design of *Imihigo* operationalizes performance contracts through hierarchical administrative structures, beginning at the community (*isibo*) level and progressing through cells, sectors, and districts. This reflects a bottom-up planning approach embedded within Rwanda's decentralization framework, whereby local priorities are consolidated into higher-level performance agreements aligned with national strategies (Ibrahim, 2022; Republic of Rwanda, 2025). Consultative processes involving local councils, citizens, and development partners provide platforms for articulating community needs, setting priorities, and identifying implementation challenges (Ibrahim, 2022). This ensures that district-level *Imihigo* reflects local demand while remaining aligned with strategic national frameworks such as Vision 2050 and the National Strategy for Transformation (Ibrahim, 2022; Republic of Rwanda, 2025). Effective implementation of *Imihigo* requires strong managerial and technical capacities among public officials responsible for contract design, execution, and reporting. However, studies highlight capacity constraints including limited technical expertise and institutional resources as key barriers to effective performance management (Ingabire & Ruvuna, 2024; Modeste, 2024). Ensuring clarity of contract scope, resource availability, and robust monitoring systems remains critical for achieving performance targets (Republic of Rwanda, 2025; International Monetary Fund, 2015).

Despite notable progress, challenges persist in aligning local plans with realistic budgets and managing competing priorities across sectors and administrative levels (Ministry of Local Government, 2025; NISR, 2025). These constraints highlight the need for stronger integration between planning, budgeting, and performance monitoring systems. Nonetheless, *Imihigo* continues to evolve as a central pillar of Rwanda's decentralized governance system, reinforcing accountability and enhancing public service delivery (Ibrahim, 2022; Republic of Rwanda, 2025).

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework provides a systematic representation of the key constructs within a study and the relationships hypothesized to exist among them. It outlines the sequence of actions guiding the research process and offers direction for the formulation of research questions, hypotheses, and analytical strategies (Dag & Andreas, 2022; Miles et al., 2014). More broadly, a conceptual framework serves as an interpretive lens that situates the study within established theoretical and empirical scholarship, clarifying how core variables are defined, operationalized, and interrelated (Jabareen, 2009; Maxwell, 2013).

In this study, the conceptual framework delineates the relationship between the *Imihigo* performance framework and people-centred governance in Rwanda. Drawing on performance management and governance literature, the framework posits that the design, implementation, and monitoring mechanisms of *Imihigo* shape the extent to which governance processes are participatory, accountable, and responsive to citizens' needs (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Sabbi, 2024). Conceptualizing *Imihigo* as an institutionalized performance contract system, and people-centred governance as an outcome manifested through citizen engagement, transparency, and service responsiveness, establishes a structured linkage between performance management mechanisms and governance outcomes.

This relationship provides a clear analytical foundation for examining whether and how the *Imihigo* framework contributes to strengthening citizen-oriented governance practices in Rwanda.

Conceptual Framework of the study

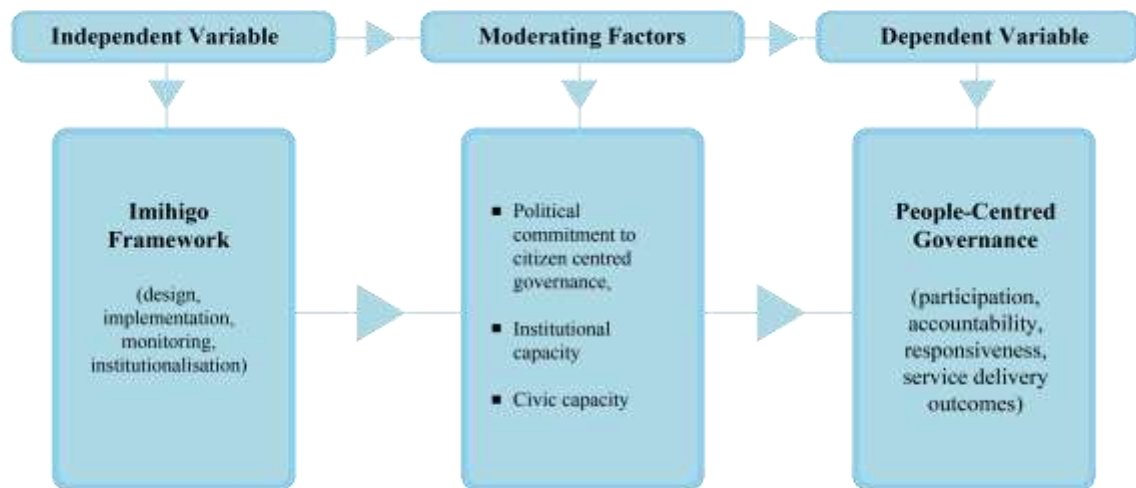


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Researcher (2026)

The conceptual framework showing contextual moderating conditions that shape the strength and effectiveness of the relationship between Imihigo and governance outcomes. These moderating factors include institutional capacity, political commitment to citizen-centred governance, and civic agency. Institutional capacity refers to the administrative, technical, and resource capabilities of implementing institutions. Political commitment denotes leadership orientation toward participatory and downward accountability practices. Civic capacity captures the ability and willingness of citizens to engage with governance processes.

Research questions

Main Research Question

- How does the Imihigo performance framework influence the promotion of people-centred governance in Rwanda?

Specific Research Questions

RQ1: How has Imihigo been institutionalised within Rwanda's public sector, and how does this institutionalisation shape governance practices?

RQ2: In what ways does Imihigo contribute to sectoral performance, accountability, and responsiveness to citizens?

RQ3: What implementation challenges limit the effectiveness of Imihigo in promoting people-centred governance?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study Design

The study is grounded in both descriptive and interpretivist–explanatory research orientations, which together provide a comprehensive framework for examining the impact of *Imihigo* on governance outcomes. The descriptive orientation seeks to generate a detailed, context-rich account of governance performance as shaped by institutional practices, leadership decisions, and citizen interactions. In qualitative research, description plays a central role in documenting phenomena within their natural settings, enabling the researcher to capture processes, experiences, and outcomes in a holistic manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within a case study design, this orientation facilitates an in-depth portrayal of how *Imihigo* operates across different institutional contexts, offering insights into patterns of implementation and lived experiences. As noted by Yin (2018), case studies are particularly appropriate for producing rich descriptions of contemporary phenomena embedded in real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly distinguishable.

Complementing this, the study adopts an interpretivist orientation, which assumes that social reality is socially constructed through human interactions, meanings, and experiences. From this perspective, governance performance is not treated as purely objective but is shaped by how actors such as leaders, public officials, and citizens interpret and engage with institutional processes like *Imihigo*. Interpretivism emphasizes understanding these subjective meanings and the contexts in which they are produced (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This orientation is particularly relevant to the study as it enables an exploration of how different stakeholders perceive the effectiveness, challenges, and outcomes of *Imihigo*, thereby generating deeper insights into its practical implications.

In addition to description and interpretation, the study incorporates an explanatory dimension aimed at understanding why and how specific governance outcomes occur. Explanatory inquiry moves beyond surface-level description to identify underlying mechanisms, relationships, and contextual conditions that shape observed results. According to Yin (2018), explanatory case studies are especially useful for investigating causal relationships in complex social phenomena where multiple variables interact. In this study, the explanatory orientation is applied to uncover the mechanisms through which *Imihigo* influences governance performance, particularly under varying institutional, political, and socio-economic conditions.

Through the integration of descriptive, interpretivist, and explanatory orientations, the study achieves both depth and analytical rigor. The descriptive component provides a rich, detailed account of the phenomenon, while the interpretivist–explanatory dimension enables a deeper understanding of meanings, processes, and causal pathways. Together, these orientations allow the study not only to present a comprehensive and contextually grounded account of the impact of *Imihigo*, but also to generate analytical insights into the underlying dynamics that shape governance outcomes.

Target Population

The study targeted representatives from central and local government institutions, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, and private sector actors. The determination of sample adequacy was guided by the principle of data saturation, which ensures both depth within stakeholder categories and diversity of perspectives relevant to the implementation of *Imihigo* and people-centred governance in Rwanda (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Sampling Approach

The study adopted a purposive sampling strategy, which is commonly used in qualitative research to select information-rich participants with direct experience in the design, implementation, and oversight of *Imihigo*. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to deliberately include diverse governance actors such as central and local government officials, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, and private sector representatives who possess in-depth knowledge of people-centred governance processes. This approach ensures that participants are selected based on their relevance to the research objectives rather than statistical representation (Patton, 2015).

Sample Size Determination

The study conducted approximately 43 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) across different stakeholder categories. The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes, categories, or insights emerge from additional interviews (Guest et al., 2006). This approach is widely accepted in qualitative research as a criterion for determining adequate sample size, particularly in exploratory and interpretive studies.

The distribution of the sample is shown in the table below:

Table 1: Sample distribution

Respondents Category	Number
Central government officials	12
Local government officials (district/sector level)	12
CSO leaders	7
Faith-Based Organisation leaders	7
Private sector actors	5
Total	43

Source: Researcher (2026)

Given the heterogeneous nature of stakeholders within governance systems, a slightly larger sample of 43 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) was deemed necessary to ensure both depth within stakeholder groups and breadth across institutional perspectives. The study ensured the credibility of the data through data saturation across and within stakeholder groups, triangulation of KIIs with policy documents and official reports, inclusion of diverse stakeholders to minimize bias, and systematic thematic analysis of qualitative data.

These strategies are consistent with established qualitative validity and trustworthiness criteria, which emphasize credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research design (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tracy, 2010). Together, these approaches strengthened the robustness and reliability of the study findings.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected primarily through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with purposively selected stakeholders who have direct experience with the design, implementation, and oversight of *Imihigo* in Rwanda. These included central and local government officials, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, and private sector actors, ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives on people-centred governance. A semi-structured interview guide was used to allow flexibility while maintaining consistency across interviews. Data collection sessions were conducted either face-to-face or virtually, depending on participant accessibility. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with detailed note-taking to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data. In addition, relevant policy documents, institutional reports, and *Imihigo* performance records were reviewed to support triangulation and enhance the robustness of the analysis.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to systematically examine qualitative data collected through Key Informant Interviews, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed to ensure familiarity with the data. A combination of deductive coding guided by the study objectives (e.g., accountability, participation, and service delivery) and inductive coding, derived directly from the data, was used to generate initial codes. These codes were subsequently organized into broader themes reflecting key governance dimensions, including *Imihigo* institutionalization, accountability, citizen engagement, service delivery improvement, institutional coordination, and implementation challenges.

The identified themes were refined, reviewed, and interpreted in relation to the research objectives and existing literature in governance studies. Comparative analysis across stakeholder groups enabled the study to generate explanatory insights into how *Imihigo* influences people-centred governance in Rwanda. To ensure methodological rigor, the analysis applied multiple strategies, including triangulation with documentary sources, consistent coding procedures, and systematic linking of interpretations to participant responses, in line with qualitative quality standards (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tracy, 2010).

FINDINGS

This chapter presents and analyses the findings on the impact of Imihigo in promoting people-centred governance in Rwanda. Drawing on qualitative data collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with representatives from government institutions, civil society organizations, faith-based groups, and the private sector, the chapter explores how Imihigo influences governance practices and development outcomes. The analysis is guided by a thematic approach, allowing for the identification of key patterns and relationships across stakeholder perspectives.

The chapter examines the contribution of Imihigo across several interrelated dimensions, including accountability, citizen participation, service delivery, institutional coordination, social cohesion, gender equality, responsible citizenship, efficient resource utilization, and performance monitoring and evaluation. These empirical findings are interpreted in light of relevant theoretical frameworks from Public Administration and Governance Studies, particularly New Public Management and participatory governance perspectives. Through this integrated analysis, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the strengths and limitations of Imihigo as a mechanism for advancing people-centred governance in Rwanda.

Strengthening Accountability through Imihigo

The findings indicate that *Imihigo* has significantly institutionalized a culture of accountability by linking leadership performance to clearly defined and measurable targets. Respondents consistently emphasized that regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms have strengthened accountability among public officials. Through continuous performance assessment, leaders are subjected to sustained scrutiny, which in turn increases pressure to deliver tangible results. The study further reveals that citizen-centred monitoring instruments, such as the Rwanda Governance Scorecard and Citizen Report Cards, play a critical role in enhancing accountability and promoting evidence-based decision-making. Respondents perceived notable improvements in institutional accountability following the integration of these tools into the *Imihigo* evaluation framework. This observation aligns with global governance perspectives that emphasize the importance of feedback mechanisms in fostering transparency, responsiveness, and improved performance (United Nations High-Level Political Forum, 2023). These findings are consistent with the principles of results-based management embedded in New Public Management reforms (Apaza, 2026; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Siddiquee, 2024).

However, the study also identifies a persistent limitation: accountability remains predominantly upward-oriented, with strong emphasis on compliance with central government directives rather than downward accountability to citizens. This imbalance constrains the full realization of people-centred governance and limits opportunities for deeper citizen engagement in accountability processes.

Imihigo as a Catalyst for Participatory and Adaptive Governance in Rwanda

The study finds that *Imihigo* incorporates formalized mechanisms for citizen participation, particularly within local-level planning processes. The findings indicate that *Imihigo* operates as a dynamic instrument of adaptive governance by systematically integrating citizen feedback into planning, implementation, and performance evaluation cycles. Empirical evidence suggests that *Imihigo* has evolved beyond its original conception as a performance contract into a participatory governance innovation embedded within Rwanda's administrative culture. This observation aligns with recent scholarship, which argues that *Imihigo* has become a culturally grounded governance practice in which accountability extends beyond the achievement of predefined targets to include responsiveness to citizen priorities (Sabbi & Ndikubwimana, 2024). Respondents emphasized that local government officials are increasingly assessed not only on performance outputs but also on the quality and consistency of their engagement with community feedback through structured and reflective processes.

The findings further demonstrate that iterative feedback loops embedded within *Imihigo* significantly contribute to organizational learning and institutional innovation. Notably, 79% of respondents reported that institutions adjust their plans based on citizen feedback and performance evaluations. This adaptive approach enables public institutions to refine strategies, improve service delivery outcomes, and strengthen public trust. These results align with broader theoretical perspectives on adaptive governance, which emphasize continuous learning, feedback integration, and institutional flexibility as key drivers of resilient governance systems (United Nations, 2023; Sabbi & Ndikubwimana, 2024). However, a more critical examination reveals important limitations in the depth and quality of citizen participation. While local government officials and civil society actors confirmed that citizens are involved in planning processes, civil society respondents noted that participation is largely confined to consultative stages, with limited feedback provided on how citizen inputs influence final decisions and priorities. This suggests that participation remains predominantly procedural rather than substantive, indicating a gap between formal institutional design and practical implementation. Such findings highlight partial misalignment with participatory governance theory, which emphasizes that meaningful participation requires not only inclusion but also genuine influence over decision-making processes (Huang & Macharis, 2025; van de Wetering & Groenleer, 2024).

Overall, the findings suggest that while *Imihigo* has made significant progress in institutionalizing participatory and adaptive governance practices, its transformative potential remains constrained by limited citizen influence in decision-making. Strengthening the feedback-to-decision nexus is therefore essential for shifting from symbolic participation toward more substantive, citizen-empowered governance.

Service Delivery Improvements

A dominant finding is that *Imihigo* has significantly improved service delivery outcomes across infrastructure, health, and education sectors. Respondents attributed these improvements to the strong emphasis on measurable targets and performance-based evaluation

of leaders. These results demonstrate that *Imihigo* enhances efficiency and prioritization of development outcomes, consistent with New Public Management theory (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Siddiquee, 2024). However, respondents also raised concerns regarding an overemphasis on quantifiable outputs at the expense of qualitative outcomes and citizen experience. This reflects a broader governance tension between efficiency and responsiveness in public service delivery (Cinar & Simms, 2024; Sofyani & Fahlevi, 2023).

Institutional Coordination and Policy Alignment

Findings indicate that *Imihigo* has strengthened vertical coordination between central and local government by aligning national priorities with district-level implementation targets. This has enhanced policy coherence and reduced fragmentation in development planning. These findings are consistent with OECD (2023) and Righettini and Lizzi (2022), who emphasize the importance of coordinated governance systems. However, horizontal coordination across sectors remains uneven, limiting integrated service delivery. Inter-agency collaboration is often inconsistent and insufficiently institutionalized.

Social Cohesion

Imihigo fosters social cohesion by promoting shared responsibility, collective action, and a unified sense of purpose in local development planning. Through participatory structures such as community assemblies, citizens and local leaders are encouraged to identify common priorities and collaborate toward development targets. This contributes to strengthening trust, solidarity, and shared community ownership of development outcomes. However, the findings indicate that inclusiveness in participation remains uneven across stakeholder groups. Youth and persons with disabilities report limited meaningful involvement in decision-making processes. This weakens ownership of development outcomes and limits the extent to which *Imihigo* enhances deep social cohesion at the grassroots level (Purdekova, 2015; Chemouni, 2014).

Gender Equality

Imihigo has contributed to advancing gender equality through the integration of gender-responsive indicators into performance contracts at both central and local government levels. These indicators require public institutions to prioritize women's participation in leadership, access to services, and socio-economic empowerment. This aligns with Rwanda's broader commitment to gender mainstreaming in governance and development planning (Government of Rwanda, 2021; UN Women, 2023). However, the findings suggest that implementation is often compliance-oriented rather than transformative. In many cases, gender-related targets are pursued primarily to meet reporting requirements rather than to address structural inequalities. As a result, while numerical representation has improved, deeper gender equality outcomes remain limited in practice.

Responsible Citizenship

Imihigo promotes responsible citizenship by encouraging citizens to participate in local development processes, engage in community activities, and contribute to accountability

mechanisms. Through structured engagement platforms, citizens are expected to actively support development priorities and monitor service delivery outcomes. However, the findings reveal that participation is often procedural rather than empowered. Citizens are frequently involved in consultations but have limited influence over final decisions. This suggests that while *Imihigo* strengthens civic awareness, it does not always translate into meaningful and sustained civic empowerment (World Bank, 2020; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012).

Efficient Resource Utilization

Findings show that *Imihigo* improves efficiency in resource utilization by aligning planning and budgeting processes with clearly defined performance targets. This reduces duplication, improves prioritization, and ensures that public resources are directed toward measurable development outcomes. However, the study also identifies a limitation: the strong emphasis on measurable indicators may encourage institutions to prioritize short-term, easily quantifiable outputs over long-term transformative investments. This creates a risk of underinvestment in complex development areas essential for sustainable outcomes (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Micheli & Pavlov, 2020).

Performance Monitoring and Evaluation

Imihigo strengthens accountability through structured monitoring and evaluation systems that track progress against predefined targets. Regular performance reviews enhance transparency and ensure institutions remain focused on achieving planned results. These mechanisms align with results-based management approaches that emphasize continuous performance tracking and accountability for outcomes (Kusek & Rist, 2004; Mackay, 2007). However, findings indicate that excessive focus on targets may reduce flexibility and responsiveness to emerging citizen needs. In some cases, institutions prioritize compliance with indicators over adaptation to local contexts, highlighting the need to balance performance measurement with adaptive governance practices.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Imihigo has significantly strengthened governance and development in Rwanda by promoting accountability, improving service delivery, aligning policies, and ensuring efficient use of public resources, while also fostering social cohesion and responsible citizenship. However, its contribution to people-centred governance is limited by a focus on upward accountability than on citizen accountability, procedural participation, weak cross-sector coordination, and an overemphasis on measurable targets over qualitative outcomes. To enhance its impact, there is a need to strengthen meaningful citizen engagement, improve collaboration across sectors, and adopt more balanced performance frameworks that capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of development.

Recommendations

- Promote meaningful and inclusive citizen participation by involving communities in co-creating Imihigo targets and strengthening civic education through platforms such as Joint Action Development Forum.
- Improve service delivery and responsiveness by integrating Citizen Report Card data and emphasizing quality outcomes alongside measurable targets.
- Strengthen cross-sector coordination through enhanced collaboration mechanisms, joint planning, and shared performance targets at the local level.
- Advance inclusion and equity by deepening gender mainstreaming, actively involving people with special need, and strengthening platforms for inclusive dialogue.
- Enhance accountability and sustainability through promotion of community-led monitoring, adopting long-term planning approaches, and implementing participatory and adaptive monitoring and evaluation systems.

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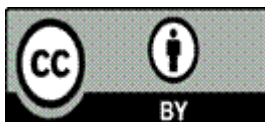
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