

What the new Rwanda Governance Scorecard asks of public-service reform

A public service can be available on paper and still be difficult to complete in ordinary life. That gap is rarely visible in a launch announcement. It appears when someone has filled in a form but cannot tell whether it was received, when a request moves between offices, or when a person with limited mobility discovers that the route to a service is more complicated than the service itself.

Rwanda's latest Governance Scorecard gives this everyday problem unusual urgency. As Rwanda Dispatch reported on October 23, the service-delivery category scored 68.48 percent in the 13th scorecard, down from 71.73 percent in the previous edition. Security and public order, by contrast, scored 90.15 percent. Different categories measure different things; they should not be made into a simplistic league table. Still, the divergence is an invitation to ask a useful question: what would it take for a citizen to experience public services with the same confidence that a favourable national indicator is meant to express?

The answer begins by changing how a service is evaluated. Institutions understandably track transactions completed, platforms launched, offices equipped, and average processing times. Those measures matter. But the experience of the person attempting to use the service can disappear inside the totals. A system may report that an application was successfully filed even when the applicant does not know what happens next.

From digital availability to completed tasks

The scorecard reported that satisfaction with digitally delivered services stood at 60.98 percent, while a wider category covering services provided by public institutions, businesses, and nongovernmental organisations stood at 77.83 percent. The categories are not interchangeable, and the lower figure should not be treated as a verdict on every digital service. It does, however, suggest that making a task digital is not enough to make it reliably usable.

A digital public service should be tested from the citizen's first question to the citizen's last needed answer. Can the person identify the right service? Is the fee clear before the process begins? Can a mistake be corrected without starting again? Does the applicant receive a useful status update? If a form is rejected, does the explanation show exactly what must change?

Those questions may sound modest beside the language of national digital transformation. But a transformation that genuinely serves the public has to survive such practical tests. A brilliant payment interface is not much help when the remaining document must be collected through an inaccessible office. A fast application is not a good experience when the applicant spends days trying to discover why it stalled.

The person who does not fit the default user

Many systems are designed around a user who has steady connectivity, a suitable phone, confidence with written instructions, the time to return, and the ability to visit an office if something fails. Real people do not always meet those assumptions. The parent managing work and care, the older resident who relies on assistance, the person with a disability, and the applicant who understands spoken instructions better than a dense written form may encounter a system differently.

It would be irresponsible to invent a story about a particular Rwandan citizen to illustrate this concern. The challenges are familiar across countries, but the exact barriers in Rwanda should be established by listening to Rwandan users themselves. That is why access testing should include people whose experiences complicate the picture—not only those who completed the process without help.

One practical improvement would be to test major services with diverse users before and after each revision. A second would be to publish a simple account of why applications fail or require repeat visits, without exposing personal information. A third would be to create a clear, accountable way to correct mistakes. These are not alternatives to digital investment. They are ways to ensure that investment does what it was intended to do.

Trust grows when a mistake can be repaired

Citizens do not necessarily demand that institutions be incapable of error. They need to know that an error can be recognised, explained, and fixed without making the person carry the entire burden. In that sense, accountability is part of service design. It is not merely a matter for an annual report or a department that intervenes after a complaint becomes public.

The new scorecard gives policy leaders a starting point, not a complete diagnosis. Rwanda Dispatch also reported lower satisfaction in areas including agricultural

services and land, environment, and settlement services. The next essential task is to understand what accounts for those scores in specific settings. Is the underlying service delayed? Are eligibility rules confusing? Is information inconsistent between offices? Are transport costs an obstacle? Different problems need different solutions.

It would be easy to use a disappointing number as a headline and leave the argument there. It would be equally easy to dismiss criticism by pointing to impressive gains elsewhere. Neither approach helps the person trying to complete an essential task on an ordinary Tuesday.

The Rwanda Governance Board's scorecard is valuable precisely because it creates an opportunity to ask harder questions in public. Its greatest contribution will not be a memorable ranking. It will be the improvements that citizens can feel, especially in the services where the experience is least satisfactory.

For every major service, officials could report not only how many requests entered the system but how many people completed their actual goal, how many needed extra assistance, and whether complaints were resolved. The measures need to be designed with privacy safeguards and made comprehensible to the public. That would turn technical performance into a more direct picture of service.

Public trust is built in a hundred small encounters. It grows when a person receives a clear answer, when a rule is applied fairly, when a deadline is explained honestly, and when help is available without humiliation. Those are not minor details. For the citizen standing at the last difficult step, they are the service itself.