



## Innovating *Imihigo*: a decentralisation and indigenous governance mechanism in Rwanda

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### ABSTRACT

*Imihigo*, Rwanda's flagship performance barometer, is praised for its cultural innovation while being criticised for instrumentalising the regime's international credibility. Both views gloss over several thematic points, including the strategic self-criticism *Imihigo* affords. We triangulate fieldwork data collected from local government actors and non-state agents in four districts with secondary data to analyse the quotidian strategies undergirding the spread of, and governance responses to, *Imihigo*. Our analysis demonstrates three key points. First, the decentralisation reform offers the requisite institutional backdrop for officials to articulate *Imihigo* as a cultural innovation for local governance and regime legitimacy. The state's reasonable support for *Imihigo* incentivises local service delivery, although this is used by the regime to control the local arena. Consequentially, Rwandans' interest in *Imihigo* frames a forum for official criticism. Our study shows a paradoxical use of cultural and modern norms for contemporary governance through a strong state committed to producing results.

### RÉSUMÉ

L'*Imihigo*, le baromètre de performance phare du Rwanda, est loué pour son innovation culturelle tout en étant critiqué pour instrumentaliser la crédibilité internationale du gouvernement. Les deux points de vue passent sous silence plusieurs points thématiques, notamment l'autocritique stratégique que permet l'*Imihigo*. Nous triangulons les données collectées sur le terrain auprès d'acteurs des gouvernements locaux et d'agents non-étatiques dans quatre districts, avec des données secondaires, afin d'analyser les stratégies quotidiennes qui sous-tendent la propagation de l'*Imihigo* et les réponses apportées par la gouvernance à ce phénomène. Notre analyse met en évidence trois points essentiels. Premièrement la réforme de la décentralisation offre le cadre institutionnel nécessaire pour que les fonctionnaires puissent présenter l'*Imihigo* comme une innovation culturelle pour la gouvernance locale et la légitimité du régime en place. Le soutien raisonnable de l'État à l'*Imihigo* encourage la prestation de services locaux, bien que le régime s'en serve pour contrôler la scène locale. En conséquence,

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l'intérêt des Rwandais pour l'*Imihigo* forme un forum pour une critique officielle. Notre étude montre néanmoins une utilisation paradoxale des normes culturelles et modernes pour une gouvernance contemporaine à travers un État fort engagé sur la production de résultats.

## Introduction: challenging transformation in local administration

"All the indicators should be SMART; that is, Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound." (*The New Times* 2013a)

When thirty newly elected district mayors met at the presidential palace, Village Urugwiro, in Kigali on 14 March 2011, they repeated a commitment to serve responsibly for their population's well-being. Convened against the backdrop of rising expectations for local government services, the mayors spoke highly of their meeting with the president but also about how they understood their obligations anew. The local government ministry (MINALOC) reaffirmed its commitment to financially support districts "which were falling behind to enable them to catch up with others" (*The New Times* 2011). This reassurance followed a meeting five years prior, where new mayors were inducted into office and made similar pledges to support the government's performance plans. This 12 March 2006 meeting purportedly saw the rebirth of *Imihigo*, which denotes a vow to excel at a task. Available reports (e.g. Kamatali 2020; MINALOC 2010; Scher and Macaulay 2014) indicate how light-hearted boasting regarding prospective achievements by some mayors inspired President Paul Kagame's intervention. He reasoned that their bold claims had invoked the Rwandan cultural view of public vows and subsequently challenged all mayors to devise realistic district *Imihigo* targets for official evaluation.

A MINALOC task force innovatively crafted the *Imihigo* practice into a performance assessment tool for the first batch of *Imihigo* performance contracts that were publicly signed on 4 April 2006 between the president and the mayors (MINALOC 2010). Since then, *Imihigo* has dominated every facet of Rwanda's public administration. Apart from aiding planning and performance management, *Imihigo* mobilises its cultural "pressure to push mayors to greater levels of achievement" (Scher and Macaulay 2014). The annual *Imihigo* signing ritual between mayors and the president is a spectacular event at which state agents celebrate their novel tool for public policy.<sup>1</sup> As illustrated by the introductory quotation, *Imihigo* has raised the expectations of the local population regarding service delivery and development governance.

Regionally, the *Imihigo* narrative fits Africa's concerted search for local solutions to its public management problems. It particularly squares with ongoing decentralisation programmes that promise local democracy and responsive public services, informed by the integration of cultural and governance ideas to address local needs. While observers find varying degrees of success, interference and disappointment in this regard (see Boone 2003; Eckert 2014; Leonard 1991; Soest 2007; Wunsch 2001), Rwanda's approach is a striking case of success (Hyden 2017; Poteete 2020).<sup>2</sup> Its flagship *Imihigo* system evidences a well-functioning performance mechanism compared with similar indigenous conceptions that exist only on paper.<sup>3</sup> Rwanda's elites seem committed to integrating culture into their contemporary governance systems alongside significant aid flows (Desrosiers and

Swedlund 2019; Gaynor 2014; Keijzer, Klingebiel, and Scholtes 2020). *Imihigo* fits particularly well with international performance-inducing incentives seeking to address public policy gaps in Africa and elsewhere (Andrews and Shah 2005; Fedelino and Smoke 2013; Yanguas and Bukenya 2016).

Unsurprisingly, *Imihigo*'s ambitious goals have spurred two competing views, which are also linked to the polarising and sometimes bitter academic debates on Rwanda's regime vis-à-vis its developmental strategies (see Clark 2021; Fisher 2015; Hintjens 2008; Reyntjens 2004). For regime-leaning advocates with a focus on performance and results (e.g. Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2014; Harrison 2016; Kamuzinzi 2021; Klingebiel et al. 2016; Rwiyereka 2014), *Imihigo* represents a novel management tool that drives efficient public services. Building on the literature on authoritarian decentralisation,<sup>4</sup> authors highly critical of the regime (e.g. Ansoms and Rostagno 2012; Chemouni 2014; Ingelaere 2014; Purdeková 2011) assert that the Rwandan government instrumentally uses *Imihigo* and similar concepts to deliver results and seem internationally credible while blurring criticism of its restricted civic space. They view *Imihigo* as a stepping stone to top-down control within the broader decentralisation framework, which raises doubts over *Imihigo*'s resilience in the long term.

We do not take sides in this polarised debate. Neither do we find the competing views necessarily contradictory, to the extent both camps agree on the efficiency of *Imihigo*-derived results. Importantly, both sides of the debate gloss over key analytical and thematic points. The first such point is a nuanced analysis of the everyday life of *Imihigo*, namely how targets are set, their implementation, and their effects on local government performance and citizen–government relations. Second, state agents repeatedly refer to *Imihigo* as an innovation, despite their ability to impose policies without the need for such justification. Gauged from the mechanism's curious fit with the results-based management concept promoted by international donors, we find the use of *Imihigo*'s innovation narrative compelling as it raises interesting questions on legitimisation that must be analysed *sui generis*. These gaps have informed our choice of conceptual and analytical strategy, not least because we want to ensure Rwanda-based scholars contribute to the literature on contemporary Rwanda.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, our local approach (i.e. examining the quotidian responses to *Imihigo* in governing the district arenas) gives us an overview of national-level politics, which, as Longman (2020, 45) argues, is often difficult and risky to study.

We understand the everyday politics of *Imihigo* – to wit, state officials' narratives and transcripts, and informal actions that defy their authority. An everyday perspective reveals subtle narratives on unity and social cohesion, and silence but also local processes of mobilisation and resistance to official strategies (see Guillaume 2011; Kerkvliet 2009). Indeed, we do not feel that the silences and extended pauses we observed from our interlocutors during the interviews on *Imihigo* indicate they are passive victims of state control. Rather, our everyday perspective helps us to highlight and challenge the agency in their reactions within the broader patterns of unspoken critique, non-conforming tactics, and rebuke of official action among Rwandans (Simpson 2007, 76–78; Uvin 2001, 84). In addition to performance goals frequently espoused in official narratives, *Imihigo*'s accountability goal depends on strengthened civic engagement and popular participation. This, we argue, turns *Imihigo* into a form of grassroots governance mechanism.

We contend that the remit of culturally legitimised *Imihigo* goes beyond incentivising the public administration apparatus. It addresses broader governance questions in contemporary Rwanda by creating an outlet for governance criticism. This is compelling in a socio-political context that hardly brooks open criticism. In addition, blending culture with business-oriented efficiency norms to induce district performance shapes Rwanda's external legitimacy. We note, however, that this enthusiastic claim is tempered by the simultaneous accountability demand on *Imihigo* by the regime and the citizenry.

In what follows, we briefly discuss the officially stated goal for *Imihigo* within decentralisation. We then mobilise our everyday life strategy with the innovation diffusion approach to reflect on the strategic communication of *Imihigo* as a governance innovation in public organisations, potentially to appeal to both local and external constituencies. The remaining sections explore the everyday life of *Imihigo* performance contracts in local governments to show how these incentivise demands for responsive services, popular participation and accountability. Conventionally, these should create a space for debate and public criticism. We explore this emerging forum in light of the widely discussed shortfalls in the space for political expression.

## **Beyond copying: strategic diffusion of culture as innovation in local arenas**

### ***Rwanda's decentralisation and performance-inducing norms***

Rwanda's decentralisation policy, adopted in 2000, offers a useful backdrop to understand the *Imihigo* innovation narrative frequently used in official circles. With legal protections enshrined in Article 6 of Rwanda's constitution, it pursues both efficiency and post-conflict goals. Currently, there are four provinces (*Intara*), the city of Kigali, and thirty districts (*Akerere*), which are divided into sectors (*Umurenge*), cells (*Akagari*), and villages (*Umudugudu*).<sup>6</sup> As part of broader reforms following the 1994 genocide, the government expects decentralisation to empower local communities in determining their priorities, and to deliver responsive services for sustainable development. The district, as the arena of devolved power, sets local development priorities and approves public spending.<sup>7</sup> The sector councils complement districts' efforts by delivering everyday services, while the cell and village structures diffuse government information (MINALOC 2012; MINALOC 2017).

As mentioned, *Imihigo* is currently the organising instrument for districts. Reenacting the pre-colonial logic, district mayors sign *Imihigo* performance contracts in the presence of the president, symbolising their vows to pursue the welfare of their population. Rwandan officials (see MINALOC 2017; Rwanda Governance Board [RGB] 2014) claim to have settled on *Imihigo* performance contracts for the decentralisation programme after they found shortfalls in participatory decision-making and accountability processes. *Imihigo* became the cultural response to address pressing responsive and performance-inducing goals. This is unsurprising since, as some scholars note (Kamuzinzi 2021; Rwiyeruka 2014), public officeholders are fond of repeated references to culture to legitimise and boast about their commitment to implementing public goals.

Despite generating popular and positive attitudes, accounts of *Imihigo's* precolonial origins are sketchy and it is taken for granted.<sup>8</sup> A patchwork of seminal sources, mainly

by Alexis Kagame (1978), points to a practice in which youths were imbued with bravery and other virtues as they socialised into military and public works groups. Kagame's notion of "*hauts faits*" (1978, 191), indicating "great achievement," links quite well with the *Imihigo* logic, which describes the setting of competitive but realistic goals. Building on Kagame's seminal work, Kamatali (2020, 61–62) highlights the military vigils (*inkera z'imihigo*) by the king's army in which they recited their ode (*ikivugo*) and pledged their goals before embarking on warfare. Kamatali (2020) notes other non-military use through "achievement-oriented" public works groups that received rewards for performance but were also sanctioned (often shamed) for failures to reach their *Imihigo* targets.<sup>9</sup>

Given this cultural legitimacy, contemporary *Imihigo* involves a vow by public officials to work assiduously in addressing governance topics including accountability, civic participation and the efficient delivery of public service. As some authors note (e.g. Rwiyereka 2014; Scher and Macaulay 2014), officeholders pledge to achieve set targets and/or remedy earlier shortfalls (discussed below). Importantly, the official narrative promotes *Imihigo* as an innovative, rediscovered cultural tool, whose success derives entirely from its cultural legitimacy (Gatwa 2019; RGB 2014),<sup>10</sup> despite a subtle critique that sees *Imihigo* primarily as a hybrid of traditional and modern modes of governance (see Kamuzinzi 2021).

### **Placing *Imihigo* in the innovation diffusion debate**

How do we explain why *Imihigo* has been successfully adapted when similar tools that are promoted are only half-heartedly implemented or ignored altogether? The organisational literature understands innovation as the strategic creation of value of an idea for popular acceptance and uptake, but answering questions about what passes for innovation and why governments choose it is not straightforward. Given the political support for *Imihigo* as a cultural innovation, a fruitful framework should explicate its perceived novelty but also the underlying interest in *Imihigo's* strategic diffusion (Kastelle and Steen 2011; Rogers 2002).<sup>11</sup> An institutional framework offers a point of departure to explain the strategic diffusion of *Imihigo* as a new idea to augment local government service delivery. For Meyer and Rowan (1991) and DiMaggio and Powell (1991), studying the taken-for-granted aspects of official rhetoric could clarify blurred political intents. It also helps us discuss the official rhetoric of innovation and mundane responses independently of the polarising debate on governance in Rwanda.

Reading *Imihigo* from this standpoint presents several analytical difficulties. First, *Imihigo's* cultural underpinning raises questions regarding existing views on the sources of institutional innovation. Second, the normative pressure for organisations to imitate others – which underlies *Imihigo's* innovation narrative – can undermine efficiency (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1991). Furthermore, public organisations are generally averse to innovation, or they largely focus on the process by which innovation occurs and not on creation (Arundel, Bloch, and Ferguson 2019, 793f; Sørensen and Torfing 2011; Söderström and Melin 2019).

This procedural strand of innovation diffusion provides a conciliatory backdrop to understand *Imihigo's* innovation narrative. Viewed primarily as "a process of communicating an innovative idea," diffusion is argued to succeed via communication commitments of elites (Rogers 1969; 2002, 328; Strang and Meyer 1993; Strang and Soule 1998). Rogers contends that the diffusion process takes hold when implementers and adopters are

socio-economically and demographically stratified. This stratification removes ideological barriers to diffusing the innovation narrative (Rogers 2003). This squares with the Rwandan context and elite commitment to deploying the *Imihigo* narrative in the decentralisation programme. With a largely rural population highly dependent on the state (see Harrison 2016), state agents authoritatively frame and control the innovation narrative and vanquish any political pushback.

Some innovation diffusion scholars highlight a normative tendency for public bureaucracies to intensify their innovation rhetoric when faced with outside pressures and policy uncertainties (Arundel, Bloch, and Ferguson 2019; Kastle and Steen 2011; Sørensen and Torfing 2011). In a sense, the suspension of – and persistent international debates on – Rwanda's foreign aid for allegedly destabilising the DR Congo underlines a normative promotion of *Imihigo* in public and societal arenas (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991, 69–71). Implicitly, aid resources could be rechannelled to support *Imihigo* projects. Thus, *Imihigo*'s innovation narrative offers a backdrop against which to test empirically our argument that state officials' committed communication promotes a public management tool while curating a positive image of their actions.

We use the quotidian aspects of *Imihigo* to shed light on its governance qualities and narratives of innovation. At the same time, we are cognisant of the ongoing challenges of politically correct responses when researching post-genocide Rwanda. Our ethnographic-style institutional research pursues an intricate balance of not being naïve to the normative logic of state agents while we critically reflect on the everyday, practical realities of implementing official initiatives in district and sector arenas. By design, *Imihigo* contracts of the thirty districts mirror national policy goals and are therefore similar. We expect our eight study sites in four districts, namely Gicumbi district (Byumba and Bwisige sectors), Huye district (Ngoma and Kigoma sectors), Karongi district (Bwishyura and Gashari sectors), and Kirehe district (Kigina and Kigarama sectors), to reveal potential implementation differences across Rwanda while revealing hidden transcripts of control and local agency in state-designed interventions.

We conducted in-depth and expert interviews during fieldtrips between 2020 and 2023 with elected councillors, selected bureaucrats at both local and central levels of government (forty-eight interviews) and well-informed expatriates on Rwanda's public policy (three interviews).<sup>12</sup> Given travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, some of the interviews were conducted by telephone or online. We conducted the interviews in English or Kinyarwanda, transcribed them, and analysed the transcripts by grouping similar statements under broader topics. We quote key statements to support and foreground the lived experiences of our participants. We assume that the views of elected officials, who represent the population, are a useful proxy for understanding the everyday reactions of citizens to official initiatives. To broaden this scope, we use newspaper publications that are relevant to citizens' engagement with *Imihigo* implementation and assessment processes.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, our onsite observation and author Jean-Baptiste Ndikubwimana's extensive engagement with *Imihigo* in several Rwandan districts provide a valuable hands-on experience for our analysis. We probe how these observations align with publicly stated accounts, by analysing the content of official government reports and publications of relevant non-state actors, i.e. from development partners and media outlets. These data supplement the interviews and shed light on how expectations align with realities on the ground. In this way, we can assess the officially

promoted attributes and hidden transcripts of the *Imihigo* system and practices at local and central government levels. Before teasing out the inherent logic of the innovation narrative, we first discuss this renewed purpose for *Imihigo* to deliver responsive and accountable local services in Rwanda.

## Everyday life of *Imihigo*: between heritage and local government efficiency

### *Diffusing Imihigo as innovation for decentralised service delivery*

Following the current international interest in the fusion of tradition and innovation (Klingebiel et al. 2019; World Bank 2018), Rwandan officials categorically promote *Imihigo* as a “performance-based innovation” (MINALOC 2012, 6), with multiple overlapping renditions including “homegrown solution” (Bucyensenge 2012; Gatwa 2019), and “community-based innovation” (GIZ 2015, 53). A reasonable assessment is that *Imihigo* serendipitously fit an existing policy goal. MINALOC officials revealed that their concerted efforts to find a culture-based alternative to existing performance approaches simultaneously settled on *Imihigo* as the best fit<sup>14</sup> for reinforcing local government service delivery and to fast-track its developmental goal (GIZ 2015, 98–100; Kamatali 2020, 64; MINALOC 2010).

*Imihigo* contracts are comprehensive and effective at delivering decentralised services. They also *ipso facto* comprise the government’s developmental programme wherein districts and residents choose and implement local projects. *Imihigo* also retains cultural virtues, including target selection, praise (rewards), and shaming (sanctions) for below-par achievements. While the above elements are typical for performance management models, we find *Imihigo*’s planning and progress reporting requirements, that also make claims for political accountability, to be original. Given the central control based on a government-derived guideline, districts start planning immediately after their mayors sign their commitments with the president. To address citizen participation goals, districts are obliged to first communicate their *Imihigo* targets to citizens for their input and support before implementation begins.

In keeping with the outline in Table 1, both local and national officials told us that adopting the targets at each level ensures the cascading of household, sector and district

**Table 1.** Preparatory and adoption processes of district *Imihigo*.

Level	Who prepares?	Who adopts?
Family/ individual	Family/individual	Individual/head of the household
Village	Village Executive Committee	Cell Executive Secretary
Cell	Cell Executive Secretary	Cell Council and Sector Executive Secretary
Sector	Community Development Committee (CDC), Sector Executive Secretary, and Sector Joint Action Development Forum (JADF)	Sector Council and District Executive Committee
District	CDC, JADF and District Executive Committee	District Council and Governor of Province or Mayor of KC; technical support by Quality Assurance Technical Team
Province/ Kigali City (KC)	Governor of province/Mayor of KC and Province Executive Secretary	Province Coordination Committee (governor, donors, mayors, district executive committees), Council for Kigali City; technical support by Quality Assurance Technical Team

Source: Authors’ elaboration of data from MINALOC (2010).

priorities. For example, one of our study districts prioritised the number of latrines constructed as an indicator of sanitation. Using the number of current school latrines as a baseline, it arrived at the targeted units of latrines to construct, with achievements documented in the district's education report. To successfully implement *Imihigo* targets, district staff receive expert advice and technical support from central government agencies. For MINALOC (2010, 6–12), responsiveness is anticipated from the monthly monitoring process, a mid-term evaluation, and a yearly assessment, which assesses and ranks performance according to achieved indicators.

The government's efforts to improve the evaluation system continue. Previously handled by the parastatal agency the Joint Action Development Forum (JADF), the task was outsourced to a non-state policy research institute in 2013 and directed internally again in 2018, to the National Institute of Statistics Rwanda (NISR). But the assessment prerequisite, including the integrity of documented evidence of achievement, and the value of the achievement for local development remain the same. Currently, 40% of a district's performance score comes from government-set performance pillars for *Imihigo* targets while local outcome indicators – annual action plan; citizen satisfaction and participation – determine the remaining 60% (NISR 2020, 10). Under-performing districts received advice to remedy their shortcomings, but if these persisted the district council could use its powers to remove the executives (we revisit this point later).

An intriguing feature about *Imihigo* contracts is the remarkable pace at which they were catapulted into the domestic arena, just a few months after *Imihigo* entered public administration. Household *Imihigo* contracts require families to set time frames to achieve private targets and civic responsibilities, including community work and sanitation practices. Local officials were generally supportive of these contracts. One interviewee told us households' achievements "contribute to the *Imihigo* of the village and are closely monitored by the village committee, which tracks progress in a family *Imihigo* booklet. Household heads have a section where to sign."<sup>15</sup>

Seen from the standpoint of bottom-up planning, the household *Imihigo* cascades into district and national plans (see Table 1). But this requirement could have varying consequences. While some individuals would benefit from *Imihigo* plans supported by official channels, this would invariably strengthen and reproduce citizens' dependence on the state (Harrison 2016). Furthermore, Bucyensenge (2012) has highlighted the seriousness of state officials' promise to follow "each and every family on a daily basis" so the state can "advise and take appropriate measures in case families failed to beat their targets." Following Hasselskog's (2016) views on the contracts as tools for state surveillance, we deduce that households that fail to adhere to this directive conceivably face the political risk of being viewed as opposing the government's vision. Even if there is no actual surveillance and punishment, this risk – real or imagined – may influence people to deliver on their *Imihigo* targets.

Resources for implementing *Imihigo* targets by the administration vary and include districts' own incomes, central government transfers and donor funds. A major non-cash resource for *Imihigo* is community work. Citizens participate in *Umuganda* (i.e. once-a-month community work that occurs nationwide) and help to construct communal infrastructure including roads, schools and health centres. There is also *Ubudehe*, i.e. mutual support in farming and livelihood activities, which contributes to realising community needs that are central to *Imihigo* targets. A handful of elected officials we interviewed



had appropriated the government-supported Vision 2020 *Umurenge* Program (VUP)<sup>16</sup> as their prized contribution to their district targets. One councillor eloquently told us he did so “because VUP payments were officially processed by [his] official employer.”<sup>17</sup> His success contributes nationally to *Imihigo*’s as well as to the councillor’s local standing. Broadly, the interventions constitute the government’s response to persistent poverty.

Ultimately, successful *Imihigo* implementation depended on governmental transfers and external assistance because most districts could not generate local revenue – which accounts for just 19% of their overall expenditure (RGB 2016, 32). The regime’s support for *Imihigo* is undoubtedly enormous. As Table 2 illustrates, districts receive increasing governmental remittances to support their set targets. This budgetary provenance earns praise from Rwanda’s international partners for its fiscal decentralisation commitments (GIZ 2015, 95; Poteete 2020, 16).

Two interesting points for *Imihigo* analysis are its assessment characteristics and the ability of local actors to shape its content. *Imihigo* aligns remarkably with results-based models in international development (Klingebiel et al. 2016; Sabbi 2017; Sabbi and Stroh 2020) and comprises set indicators, an assessment system, and funding from the government and donors. The typical problems of creating evidence exist, about the quality of indicators, evaluators and falsified achievements. A recurring problem is *gute-kinika*, which is the local parlance for actions that circumvent targets (Karuhanga 2018; RBA 2015). But the government’s rapid response to address such complaints seemed sufficient to maintain *Imihigo*’s credibility among Rwanda’s international partners (we revisit this point later).

Consequently, *Imihigo* successfully compels donors to align their activities and funding with district-defined *Imihigo* priorities. A state agent readily emphasised this emergent leverage on recipient–donor relations via

the local NGOs [non-governmental organisations] implementing the international NGOs’ action plans [*Imihigo*] in the sector. The local population [sets] their need such as food sector, we [sector council] submit the proposal to World Vision [International] and they choose their contribution from our action plan.<sup>18</sup>

The World Bank has declared that *Imihigo*’s strong focus on performance shapes its “program-for-results” financing modality.<sup>19</sup> The bank’s agriculture and urbanisation projects “were linked with district and sub-district level *Imihigo*, ensuring a focus on results from the public officials involved in implementation” (World Bank 2018, 56). Donor funds follow the expected link between predetermined targets and fiscal capacity and accountability systems for decentralised local governments (Fedelino and Smoke 2013; Sabbi and Stroh 2020). Compared with current performance-based systems, *Imihigo* is

**Table 2.** State-supported district budget (for *Imihigo*).

Total annual district budget (US\$)						
District	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Gicumbi	12,255,410.93	13,630,060.22	15,086,944.07	15,171,141.53	16,698,187.10	72,841,350.44
Huye	12,866,628.10	14,642,832.94	12,438,499.20	12,316,852.26	14,621,142.82	66,885,955.33
Karongi	12,413,137.97	13,667,174.42	13,134,200.49	14,761,472.54	15,587,427.76	69,563,413.19
Kirehe	11,943,464.87	9,749,770.85	10,840,206.10	11,233,824.17	13,401,533.98	57,168,799.97

Source: Official Gazette No. Special of 30 June 2015–2019, <https://gazettes.africa/gazettes/rw/>. Average exchange rate, 31 December 2019: US\$ 1 = RWF 934.514.

unique in its indirect and more open connection between results and the allocation of rewards. The mechanism strategically combines budgetary support with non-financial rewards of honour or the shaming of reputation. These traditional rewards arguably compensate for the inadequate public funding for implementing and delivering local government services (Kamuzinzi 2021, 110; Klingebiel et al. 2019, 1343).

Among local stakeholders, we find that elected local officials are the only individuals who publicly claim the ability to influence the nationally determined *Imihigo* targets. From our interviews, it became clear that councillors can potentially leverage *Imihigo* targets set for their respective districts. This is true regardless of the specific societal groups they represent and whether the requests made by the local population fell outside the councillors' official obligation. As some of them told us, whenever possible, they make the effort to integrate such requests as their districts and sectors decide on *Imihigo* priorities. One of them bluntly stated: "we ensure that *Imihigo* targets emerging from the cells are included in the [finalised] *Imihigo* targets. I clarify to the cell population the extent of progress on these needs."<sup>20</sup>

Representatives of the Private Sector Federation (PSF) mentioned that they ensure the agreed *Imihigo* targets support local businesses to honour their tax obligation. One of them informed us that while "most *Imihigo* targets address daily needs of the population, we [businesses] commit to specific projects such as building a car park, investment in tea and coffee plantation ... We focus on innovation and encourage the people to save."<sup>21</sup>

Even youth representatives, generally perceived to defer to authority, told us they steer and alter the content of the already determined *Imihigo* targets that concern the needs of the youth. One of them mentioned youth cooperatives, particularly "kitchen garden [backyard farming] and chicken-rearing projects."<sup>22</sup> Representatives of citizens with special needs informed us that they also take the initiative to ensure their district *Imihigo* targets reflect their particular needs. A coordinator of people living with disability mentioned that he "sends the special needs of the members to the sector council [for them to] discuss in relation to the budget and these are adopted as priorities. Most of our targets are accepted."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, representatives of women's groups asserted they adapt *Imihigo* targets to address the concerns in their constituency. One mentioned they adopt the "targets on health insurance and savings groups and mobilise women to join and contribute [to group savings] so they can acquire health insurance."<sup>24</sup> The foregoing reveals the local population's high expectations regarding councillors' ability to reach beyond their formal roles to offer support. Such expectations seem to enhance the councillors' interest in and commitment to influencing set *Imihigo* goals. While there is a measure of agency in their tactics, the councillors may be overstating their purported ability to shape the content of top-down *Imihigo* goals.

### ***Incentivising competition for local transformation***

One expectation in the *Imihigo* innovation narrative is to instil inter-district competition, which is based on a common *Imihigo* preparation guideline drawn up by MINALOC. From an innovation diffusion standpoint, it is normal for districts to adopt targets successfully met by well-performing districts, although such duplication practices often raise concerns about inefficiency (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1991; Rogers 2003). State agents repeatedly and unquestionably project a positive view of imitating

*Imihigo* targets among districts. One MINALOC official unambiguously held that “before the introduction of the *Imihigo* evaluation system, no district had a practical strategy to implement their goals, but this has since changed because no district wants to be seen as lagging behind” (*The New Times* 2013c).

Given officials’ insistence that *Imihigo* targets instigate inter-district competition, we would not expect particular districts to dominate the top of the performance ranking, i.e. the official threshold of 70% or better (NISR 2020, 19). Neither should more districts be stuck at the low end of the ranking as that would suggest missing performance incentives from *Imihigo*. A look at *Imihigo* ranking over several years (Table 3) shows how districts’ performance changes dramatically in the top and bottom sections. Most of the thirty districts oscillate in rank, with just a handful of districts appearing relatively stable. Without discounting that some districts choose targets that are easy to realise, the inbuilt checks could ensure that the frequent shifts in position broadly reflect how *Imihigo* contracts are incentivising most districts to implement responsive programmes. The varying placement of our study districts bears out this trend. Indeed, in the last five assessment sessions, only Huye regularly appeared among the top performers, while Karongi oscillated between the top and bottom sections of the ranking.<sup>25</sup>

Most of these shifts accrue from the top-down, ever-increasing expectations. Sometimes, an average score of eighty-six points out of one hundred fell short of the stringent criteria set by the *Imihigo* assessors. State agents even viewed some achieved targets as failed if they did not realise 100% success (*The New Times* 2012b; *The New Times* 2020). Furthermore, a genuine commitment with modest outcomes due to unpredictable events was hardly taken into account. Some interviewees referenced the intriguing case of Gakenke district, whose mayor resigned because, despite extensive preparation, torrential rains had wiped out their achievements by the time of the evaluation exercise.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the persistent mismatch between *Imihigo* indicators and on-the-ground impact also creates a rare forum for citizens to criticise policies, considering the aforementioned debate about restrictions on Rwanda’s political sphere. *The New Times* (2013b) notes how the public’s curiosity about the evaluation rules triggers debate on how assessors assign “districts higher scores because they could end up indicting themselves” for results that depict poor overall performance.

**Table 3.** Districts’ performance in *Imihigo* assessment.

Yearly <i>Imihigo</i> performance ranking					
Position	2011/2012	2013/2014	2015/2016	2017/2018	2019/2020
<b>Top five performers</b>					
1st	Karongi	Huye	Rwamagana	Rwamagana	Nyaruguru
2nd	Kicukiro	Ngoma	Musanze	Gasabo	Huye
3rd	Kamonyi	Nyanza	Huye	Rulindo	Rwamagana
4th	Kirehe	Kicukiro	Gakenke	Gakenke	Gisagara
5th	Ruhango	Burera	Nyarugenge	Kicukiro	Nyanza
<b>Bottom five performers</b>					
26th	Muhanga	Nyamagabe	Gisagara	Kamonyi	Gakenke
27th	Rubavu	Rusizi	Nyamagabe	Burera	Musanze
28th	Gatsibo	Kamonyi	Ruhango	Nyamagabe	Nyabihu
29th	Nyabihu	Karongi	Rulindo	Ruhango	Karongi
30th	Gicumbi	Gakenke	Rubavu	Nyanza	Rusizi

Source: Adapted from IPAR (2014) and NISR (2018, 2020).

Relatedly, the NISR (2019, 8) suggested that the “service delivery sector *Imihigo*” attains high performance because it focuses on easy-to-accomplish processes instead of “outcomes.” Such remarks ultimately led President Paul Kagame to doubt the numbers reporting on-the-ground progress as “too good to be true.” He instructed the prime minister “to work with the various actors and come up with a new evaluation model that would be more ‘scientific’ and rigorous for future exercises” (*The New Times* 2013b).

In fact, appointing the NISR as the new examiner in 2018 was precipitated by public outcry and allegations of “inaccuracies or contradiction between what the districts reported and what is actually on the ground” (Karuhanga 2018). Evaluators currently interview district officials and conduct spot checks to verify the integrity of evidence and their on-the-ground impact. Given the consistent governmental transfers, officials roundly rebuff calls by persistently fluctuating districts for more financial support. They attribute such failures to ineffective management.

Beyond the performance rankings, the actual practices on the ground were often staggering. As mentioned, a key goal of *Imihigo* is empowering the local population to fast-track development. To achieve this goal, the JADF and district officials include so-called Accountability Day events (*Journée des portes ouvertes*) in their plans, that allow citizens to question official actions. We learned from interviewees that these interventions ideally deepen the collective self-assessment by district actors. This explains why the *Imihigo* evaluation team has a positive view of these activities. To cite two examples from our study districts, Bikorimana’s report on Karongi District’s Accountability Day reveals that citizens “take the opportunity to question district agents about their *Imihigo* task and achievements” (2015, our translation). Some participants, reportedly impressed, even “wished the event could be organized every three months.” Kirehe District’s accountability forum was tactfully dubbed “Public Service Execution Day” to publicise its success. Local officials showcased “their achievements in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), handicraft and farming” and received inputs “to correct shortfalls” (Manishimwe 2020, our translation). Through a similar logic, district officials targeted an even broader audience at their bi-annual “governance clinics” (see MINALOC 2012; RGB 2014).

Such efforts might pass for attempts to amplify citizens’ voice (Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg 2016). Obviously, as our interviews reveal, this top-down requirement takes on window-dressing and business-oriented focus vis-à-vis public service. One councillor told us that despite the JADF’s lead role, “it is mainly PSF members who exhibit what they do.”<sup>27</sup> Both official and popular accounts highlight developmental and governance benefits from *Imihigo* practices (Karuhanga 2018; MINALOC 2012; NISR 2020; *The New Times* 2012b). Some scholarly assessments confirm that *Imihigo*’s gains exist alongside teething challenges including the criticism of public officials and the lack of autonomy to implement decisions. Indeed, *Imihigo*’s pursuit of quantifiable targets limits local agents’ flexibility to go off-script during implementation, despite delivering responsive and developmental outcomes (Chemouni 2014, 250; Scher and Macaulay 2014). The public support and heritage narrative of *Imihigo* offers a strong performance incentive despite the state’s strong presence and limited local autonomy. Booth and Golooba-Mutebi (2014, s177) observe how the inherent pressures of *Imihigo* performance contracts incentivise district officials to implement local and national priorities concurrently.

As a rough indicator of international reception, the World Bank (2018, 55) credits *Imihigo* targets as having underpinned Rwanda’s impressive development gains in

gross domestic product growth, together with a drastic decrease in the poverty rate in 2006 and 2016. Still, several official reports cast doubt on the extent of citizens' participation in *Imihigo*. Some official reports acknowledge only modest impacts of *Imihigo* goals on citizen engagement in local decision-making and participatory budgeting processes (RGB 2016, 2018). Deploying *Imihigo* contracts across all public entities offers a prominent incentive for vertical accountability. But our observation of everyday practices at the district level challenges the official expectations that *Imihigo* will induce popular engagement and responsiveness. We find two competing demands for accountability: whether mayors are accountable to the local population or to the national government. At the *Imihigo* signing ceremony, mayors promise the president to deliver on specific performance targets. They publicly commit to "localise" district *Imihigo* targets that cascade into national development goals.

Ideally, mayors' tenure would be contingent on performance, which would allow the local population to hold them to account should they fail to deliver (see Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg 2016; Lindberg 2013). But district mayors face performance pressures and fatigue from the centre as they attempt to deliver set targets. Local newspapers regularly document mayors' unconscionable resignation from office after adducing "incompatible personal reasons." Other mayors are publicly fired by their respective district councils for failing on their *Imihigo* targets (Ngabonziza 2019; *The New Times* 2021).<sup>28</sup> But such resignations do not bode well for the future employment prospects of mayors. They still face long-term unemployment in the political and professional spheres. A handful of recently replaced mayors revealed their economic frustration and uncertainty in seeking new jobs. Within weeks of leaving office, one of them had ventured into "farming by cultivating [new crop] species. This promises some significant income."<sup>29</sup>

Such district officials bore criticism from several quarters. Some commentators view such resignations as indicative of *Imihigo*'s promise to inflict shame for ineptness, effectively barring such officials from public office. Others criticise the selection system, which represents the governing elites' interests, allowing them to wilfully fire officials under the pretext of malperformance (Ingelaere 2014). For us, the overarching interest of the sackings may be the mayors' inability to contribute to fast-tracking the government's development objectives and attracting international legitimacy.

These examples nevertheless illustrate *Imihigo*-induced success in governance and developmental outcomes. How do we account for this efficiency and success? Some interviewees repeated the banal views on Rwanda's exceptional commitment to public service. One interviewee saw Rwanda as embodying the concept "make it happen, what you promise"<sup>30</sup> whereas another felt "Rwanda definitely knows how to get [things] done."<sup>31</sup>

From an innovation diffusion standpoint, we find two structures embedded that craft the communication strategy behind *Imihigo*'s success. These are the governing Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) party and JADF, which operates in the districts.<sup>32</sup> The RPF's embedding in the countryside through its sustained "liberation narrative," coherent organising skills and pursuit of responsive services (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2014; Chemouni 2014; Purdeková 2011) facilitates the communication of *Imihigo*'s relevance and success.<sup>33</sup> One expert saw the RPF as Rwanda's "thinking organisation," urging all political actors to embrace its political vision including the "consensus to be held accountable regardless of party [affiliation]."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as Hunt (2014, 152–53) points out, the RPF

mobilised “the institutional chaos” following the 1994 genocide to “reconstruct” Rwanda’s political institutions on its own terms. Pointedly, the JADF platform, which is a handmaiden of the RPF’s institutional vision, is used to rally local stakeholders in dialogue on development. The JADF’s primacy in *Imihigo* planning and implementation craftily joins the government’s developmental vision with societal goals.

A corollary of the above political strategy is Rwandan society’s paradoxical reception of the state and its policies. Some scholars (e.g. Clark 2021; Harrison 2016) note how local aspirations of autonomy exist alongside a dependence on the state for local livelihood and well-being. This situation creates a particular local tolerance of government intervention. Following the innovation diffusion argument (Rogers 1969; Strang and Meyer 1993; Strang and Soule 1998), this well-crafted socio-political context offers the institutional backbone to diffuse *Imihigo* innovation in local arenas. State agents articulately present *Imihigo*’s cultural logic as authentically Rwandan. This gains traction with the local population. The innovation narrative then supports it as something novel and culturally legitimate for local administrative goals. In this way, they resolve the inherent contradictions of *Imihigo* as both a cultural and a modern performance-inducing mechanism. The relevance of culture for the official narrative is underscored by Scher and Macaulay’s (2014) observations of state officials, who contend that ordinary Rwandans grasp *Imihigo* better than they grasp talk about performance contracts. Invariably, Rwandans understand their historical experience rooted in *Imihigo* and relate to it more easily than if it were a wholly foreign idea.<sup>35</sup> Given the considerable responsibilities of districts, this cultural legitimacy compensates for their strained financial resources to implement *Imihigo* targets.

### ***Imihigo*’s political remit: between self-promotion and local criticism**

The mundane aspects discussed above also indicate that *Imihigo* practices constitute a public forum for governance criticism, which we explore further here. Perhaps because of the above-discussed development hopes entangled in *Imihigo*, citizens keenly follow the signing of the performance contracts as well as the conclusions of the assessment. The graphic publication of *Imihigo* targets and results in district, sector and cell offices (see Figure 1), and the president’s award ceremony for the top-performing districts,<sup>36</sup> stimulated the public’s interest in, reaction to, and criticism of their districts’ *Imihigo* achievements. The *Imihigo* assessment is perhaps the only platform that indulges governance debates (especially online dialogue), following the release of the *Imihigo* performance table. This is particularly striking given extant criticism of the limited political space in Rwanda. In the following, we use what we cautiously describe as “critical editorials,” which are created by newspaper editors as a forum for citizens to react, while we bear in mind the state’s instrumentalisation of these platforms.

Noting how rare such a forum is, some commentators started by appreciating the “open dialogue and debate about the *Imihigo* indicators” and the authorities’ “willingness to welcome views on how the process can be revised” (*The New Times* 2013a). Others rehash the urgency inherent in *Imihigo* by unreservedly cautioning district officials to work assiduously so the targets can create responsive effects on the population (*The New Times* 2013a). Most often, commentators were highly critical of district officials’ tactics – which, as some of them claimed,

IMIBERHO MYIZA		
I. UBUZIMA	INTEGO	AHO UZAKORERWA
UMUHIGO		UMUHIGO
Kubaka ikigo Nderabuzima kabiri	Ikigo Nderabuzima cya Kibuye igice cya kabiri cyubatswe ku kigereranyo cya 100%	Mu Murenge wa Bwishyura
Kurangiza Gusana ibigo nderabuzima bya Mubuga na Munzanga	Ibigo nderabuzima bya Mubuga na Munzanga	Mu Mirenge ya Mubuga na Murundi
Kugura imbanguriragutabara	Imbanguriragutabara imwe izahabwa ibitaro bya Kibuye	Murenge wa Bwishyura
Gutanga ubwisingane mu kwivuzza	Abaturage bose: 100%	Mu Mirenge yose
Kuboneza urubyaro	Abagore 58% bagejeje igihe cyo kubayara	Mu Mirenge yose
Gupimisha inda inshuro 4 ku bagore batwite	55% by'abagore batwite bazapimisha inda inshuro 4	Mu Mirenge yose
Kwipimisha Hepatite C ku bakuzwe bafite kuva ku myaka 15 kuzamura	80% by'abakuzwe bazipimisha indwara ya Hepatite C	Mu Mirenge yose
Gupima abana bari muni y'imyaka 2 harebwa ko bafite imirire mibi	96% by'abana bose bari muni y'imyaka 2 bazasuzumwa	Mu Mirenge yose
Gupima abakuzwe indwara zitandukara	85% by'abakuzwe bazasuzumwa indwara zitandukara	Mu Mirenge yose
Kubahiriza amabwiriza yo kwirinda COVID 19	Inzego zose nahahirira abantu benshi kuba hari ibikenewe mu kwirinda covid 19 harimo nkubukarabiro...	Mu Mirenge yose
Gupima abana bari muni y'imyaka 2 harebwa ko bagwingiye	85% by'abana bose bari muni y'imyaka 2 bazasuzumwa	Mu Mirenge yose
Kugabanya ikibazo cyo kugwingira mu bana bari muni y'imyaka 2	Ijanisha ry'abana bagwingiye rizava kuri 33.1% rigere kuri 30.16%	Mu Mirenge yose
Gufasha abana bari mu mirire mibi (Umuhondo n'umutuku) kuyivamo	Nibura abana 710 bazakurwa mu mirire mibi	Mu Mirenge yose
Gukangurira abana bari hagati y'imyaka 3 bazitabira ECD	Nibura abana 60% by'abana bagomba kwitabira ECD bazitabira	Mu Mirenge yose



IMIBERHO MYIZA / SOCIAL WELFARE

I. Ubuzima/ Health

Umuhigo	Intego/Goal	Aho umuhigo uzakorerwa/ Coverage or locality
Kubaka ikigo nderabuzima/ construct a health centre	Ikigo nderabuzima cya Kibuye igice cya kabiri cyubatswe ku kigereranyo cya 100%/ construction of the health centre of Kibuye phase two constructed at 100%	Mu murenge wa Bwishyura/ Bwishyura sector
Kurangiza gusana ibigo nderabuzima bya Mubuga na Munzanga/ finish up the rehabilitation of Mubuga and Munzanga Health Centres	ibigo nderabuzima bya Mubuga na Munzanga/ Mubuga and Munzanga Health Centres	Mu mirenge ya Mubuga na Murundi/ Mubuga and Murundi sectors
Kugura imbanguriragutabara/ buy an ambulance	Imbanguriragutabara imwe izahabwa ibitaro bya Kibuye/ one ambulance will be given to Kibuye Hospital	Mu murenge wa Bwishyura/ in Bwishyura sector
Gutanga ubwisingane mu kwivuzza/ provide universal health insurance	Abaturage bose: 100%/ all citizens at 100%	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors
Kuboneza urubyaro/ Family planning	Abagore 58% bagejeje igihe cyo kubayara/ 58% of women in fertility period	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors
Gupimisha inda inshuro 4 ku bagore batwite/ 4 ante-natal visits for pregnant women	55% by'abagore batwite bazapimisha inda inshuro 4 / 55% of pregnant women will have 4 ante-natal visits	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors
Kwipimisha Hepatite C kubakuzwe bafite kuva ku myaka 15/ Hepatitis C screening for all adults more than 15 years old	80% by'abakuzwe bazipimisha indwara ya hepateite C/ 80% of all adults will undergo Hepatitis C screening	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors
Gupima abana bari muni y'imyaka 5 harebwa niba bafite imirire mibi/ malnutrition screening for all children under 5 years	96% by'abana bose bari muni y'imyaka 5 bazasuzumwa/ 96% of all children under 5 will be screened	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors
Gupima abakuzwe indwara zitandukara/ screening the non-communicable diseases in adult people	85% by'abakuzwe bazasuzumwa indwara zitandukara/ 85% of adults will be screened non-communicable diseases	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors

Kubahiriza amabwiriza yo kwirinda Covid-19/ respect rules and regulations to prevent Covid-19 contamination	Inzego zose n'ahahirira abantu benshi kuba hari ibikenewe mu kwirinda covid-19 harimo n'ubukarabiro/ all institutions and public areas must be equipped with materials and infrastructure including hand washing facilities	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors
Gupima abana bari muni y'imyaka 2 harebwa ko bagwingiye/ screening stunting among all children under 2 years old	85% by'abana bose bari muni y'imyaka 2 bazasuzumwa/ 85% of all children under 2 years old will be screened for	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors
Kugabanya ikibazo cyo kugwingira mu bana bari muni y'imyaka 2/ alleviation of stunting problems among children under 2 years old	Ijanisha ry'abana bagwingiye rizava kuri 33.1% rigere kuri 30.16%/ the stunting among children will be alleviated from 33.1% to 30.16%	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors
Gufasha abana bari mu mirire mibi (umuhondo n'umutuku) kuyivamo/ support all malnourished children located in yellow and red colour on the guideline chart to move from that status	Nibura 710 bazakurwa mu mirire mibi / at least 710 will be removed from the status of malnutrition	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors
Gukangurira abana bari hagati y'imyaka 3 gukaga ku myak 3 kwitabira ECD/ mobilization of all children from 3 to 6 years to enroll in ECD	Nibura 60% by'abana bagomba kwitabira ECD bazitabira/ at least 60% of children must enroll in ECD	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors
Guha ubutumwa ababyeyi bafite abana bagomba kwitabira ECD (ubutumwa bugamije kubafasha gukomeza kwita mu mikurire y'abana babo mu ngo) / provide a message related to the health development of their children under age of ECD	Nibura 50% by'ababyeyi bafite abana bagomba kwitabira ECD bazahabwa ubutumwa bwo kubafasha kwita ku bana babo binuze mu buyanama bw'ubuzima/ at least 50% having children at age of ECD will receive a message from community health council related to the development of their children	Mu mirenge yose/ all sectors

Figure 1. Public display of Imihigo performance targets, Kibuye, Karongi District, 16 November 2021. Photographs by the authors.

thrive on lies to achieve performance targets. Now [that] the cat has been let out of the bag, why lie? [They] shut peoples' mouths when central government leaders visit ... to ensure no superior will ever reach their office and interact with subordinates ... [being aware] some subordinates have something to prove. (*The New Times* 2015)

Some residents drew stark contrasts between two Kigali district mayors for their varying performance in the 2012 *Imihigo* evaluation. One commentator bluntly stated:

I hope the Mayor of Gasabo is reading this [ranking]. Visit Gasabo District, any *Umudugudu*, *Akagari*, or *Umurenge* location and see how they work, then tell us whether the leaders understand that the President signs contract on behalf of us, the citizens, who are the voters. (*The New Times* 2012a)

Such reactions square with Rwandans' aspirations for *Imihigo* targets to significantly "respond to the long-term needs of the people" (*The New Times* 2013b). If they are not questioned, national elites support these local reflections in principle, not least because they are expressed in pro-government news outlets, including the Rwanda Broadcasting Agency (RBA) and *The New Times* newspaper.<sup>37</sup> President Kagame's own misgivings about *Imihigo* results and the swift call for stringent evaluation frameworks speak volumes. The president's intervention conveys important information about the districts' *Imihigo* performance and highlights the government's clear focus on fighting incompetence to deliver responsive services. But it also downplays concerns regarding inadequate funds and poor citizen participation in *Imihigo* processes.

It was striking to observe that such criticism was not a privilege of urban dwellers alone. Rural districts relied on popular radio broadcasts by the RBA from Kigali to comment (see RBA 2014, 2015). Without access to popular editorial platforms for political criticism, externally supported frameworks were an alternative. Among others, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) supported digital platform *Isaha y'imihigo* (or *Imihigo Watch App*) offers convenient access to information on *Imihigo* implementation. The app allows citizens to track and monitor their district's progress on their smartphones (GIZ 2015, 2021). In our interactions with district officials they seemed upbeat about "provid[ing] information to [the system]" and keeping the app up to date with "the requisite information."<sup>38</sup> Such officials celebrated *Imihigo's* e-governance innovation because the technology supports not only "*Imihigo* planning, execution, monitoring and evaluating" set targets.<sup>39</sup> Importantly, the technique promises to foster "accountability dialogue" between residents and their local government, bringing to bear our broader conception of governance.<sup>40</sup>

The peculiar design of local political institutions implies that local citizens can turn their criticism of elected local officials in this space into a channel for political expression without risking the wrath of national elites. The current scholarship describes emerging subtle tactics used by residents against official policy. This includes tacit criticism, which is sometimes intentionally glossed over or expressed with the acquiescence of local officials (see e.g. Bisoka and Ansoms 2020; Hahirwa, Orjuela, and Vinthagen 2017; Mullikin et al. 2022). Our study reveals a space for open criticism directly emanating from the formal arena. Even ardent critics would hardly overlook this mechanism as an emerging framework increasing the space for open criticism. Indeed, the JADF's action shows how regular actors can align with the government's vision and use it to craft a space to criticise official actions. Essentially, this is a special type of social accountability



forum framed largely by nationally determined priorities. Using a broader definition of citizen-centred governance (Andrews and Shah 2005; Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg 2016), *Imihigo's* responsive services, participatory engagement and accountability demands may suggest the empowering of the citizenry.

## Conclusion: synthesis and outlook

Our everyday life analysis following the innovation narrative helps us understand *Imihigo's* focus beyond the local arena. In probing Rwanda's governance system, we find *Imihigo's* extended political goals that aim at the international arena. Among the broader political goals are the government's middle-income aspirations in *Vision 2050*, and its poverty reduction strategies for national transformation (MINALOC 2012; NISR 2018, 2020; RGB 2016). *Imihigo* projects seek to realise these aspirations within a relatively short period. Decentralisation offers the best fast-track possibility in both practical and symbolic ways. But it comes with the government's impatience with the slow pace at which decentralised institutions usually produce results. Gaynor's (2014, 551) notion of "a nation in a hurry" aptly reflects this sense of urgency for Rwanda. Based on officials' reasoning (NISR 2020; RGB 2016), specific *Imihigo*-driven projects offer the clearest prospect yet of the government's long-term commitment to achieving its middle-income aspiration.

Additionally, experts and state officials severally mentioned a commitment to promote tradition-based local innovations. In one expert's recollection, *Imihigo* was just an "abstract contract of the responsibility to deliver" that strategically "materialised into a brand of homegrown solution."<sup>41</sup> Some officials informed us of their frequent invitations across Africa to deliver "lectures on the innovative homegrown solutions."<sup>42</sup> They would present at those forums "at least the philosophy of *Imihigo*" to reinvigorate other societies to "search for their own *Imihigo*."<sup>43</sup> In doing so, they boost *Imihigo's* global appeal. We also find this image-managing commitment illustrative in the activities of two devoted agencies, namely the RGB and the Rwanda Cooperation Initiative. The RGB derives "new generations" of homegrown solutions and preserves and patents<sup>44</sup> them against unauthorised use, while the Rwanda Cooperation Initiative "markets them to the world."<sup>45</sup> Compellingly, African delegations from Senegal and Ivory Coast have visited Rwanda to learn from *Imihigo* performance contracts for responsive governance in their countries (RGB 2017, 2021). *Imihigo* indicators offer Rwandan agents a lever of legitimacy to counter what they feel are "false reports" on Rwanda's governance. One official has commented that they currently generate their own data "so that they can actually compare their own findings and we are doing all we can to circulate this as widely as possible" (Shyaka 2015, 11).

References to traditional *Imihigo* as an element of legitimisation seem to pay off in several ways. Rwandan officials present *Imihigo's* efficiency and development assistance in a compatible fashion. By highlighting *Imihigo's* performance-based attributes, they appeal to international counterparts but also succeed in bringing different development actors and varying interests into important dialogue. This chimes with Klingebiel et al.'s (2016, 87) enthusiasm that development cooperation partners would adopt "certain pre-defined *Imihigo* targets" and even create additional targets. The World Bank (2018, 52–56), for its part, has praised Rwanda's fusing of tradition with modernity and cascading *Imihigo* performance contracts in all public agencies. The timing of *Imihigo* in the public

sector – it was introduced in the terminal phase of budget support in 2012 – is even more curious. Just when aid flow appeared uncertain, *Imihigo* contracts spread across all sectors of public service. For one expert, the consequent aid based on “delivery of targets was effectively a new form of budget support.”<sup>46</sup>

We perceive these reactions as a strategic response to changing aid debates and policies. Our encounters with state agencies including MINALOC and the RGB showed they could not be prouder of influencing their international partners’ policy reasoning. In one expert’s assessment, “Rwandan officials and [agencies] demonstrated a positive feeling that international partners would fit their cooperation goals into a [Global] South initiative.”<sup>47</sup> This feeling potentially enhances donors’ view of the government’s commitment to its own development interventions. Possibly, the clever adoption of *Imihigo* by donors and recipients is not benign; it could be a nominal institutional logic responding to the increasing accountability scrutiny of current development aid.

Our analysis joining the quotidian aspects of *Imihigo* and its innovation narratives across Rwanda’s local governments highlights a well-balanced system of local and national checks integrated in a centralised system that also focuses on particular action plans. Additionally, it shows the strength of political actors to communicatively frame the congruence between politics and culture to encourage acceptance and commitment to a public project, while concealing inherent political aims. Given Rwanda’s authoritarian style of governance (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2014; Harrison 2016), it is very striking that state agents would take the extra step to systematically institutionalise and sell a cultural practice as innovation in a popular fashion when it could just force the changes through. Ostensibly, Rwandan elites strategically blend culture with international management norms to project *Imihigo*’s novelty for public management.

Importantly, our contribution challenges key ideas on regimes’ preferences for innovation. We have shown that despite pressures to imitate, *Imihigo*’s innovation diffusion occurs alongside efficiency commitments by both state and district officials. Clearly demonstrated, however, is the consequential governance forum for articulating local concerns in a tightly controlled local political arena. Our research strategy offered additional insights into the way councillors act in and adapt to the system.

The space for critical debate presented here is far from the Habermasian-type *Öffentlichkeit* public sphere. But it is a burgeoning forum that may compensate for the missing space for open debates in Rwanda. Viewed in light of the literature on decentralisation and authoritarianism (see Curato and Fossati 2020; Morgenbesser 2020), *Imihigo* is a means to demonstrate a commitment to accountability by the authoritarian government and insulate it from criticism. Put bluntly, *Imihigo* should help the regime to blame local administrators for their shortcomings. The empirical evidence reveals *Imihigo*’s efficiency, participatory frameworks and competitiveness regarding local service delivery. This raises the question of whether a commitment to development depends on the political system at all. Rwanda’s success with public sector programmes occurs against the backdrop of strong leadership, top-down demands, elite commitment and the willingness to follow up at the local level. These factors are markedly missing in most developing countries (Yanguas and Bukenya 2016). *Imihigo* sets rules on how to deal with top-down demands and sells them at the local level, where the possibility to adapt is much higher.

Unsurprisingly, *Imihigo* appeals to donors, who seem to associate it with some value for expending aid resources. While Rwanda's *Imihigo* innovation narrative appears to strategically turn domestic policy pressures into international legitimacy, other aspects need to be nuanced. The prospect of *Imihigo*'s inbuilt accountability looks murkier, given district officials' upwards accountability to the government vis-à-vis the local population's ability to hold local officials to account. Again, *Imihigo*'s efficiency and success within a restricted political space reveal several intriguing aspects of Rwanda's socio-political reality. This includes *Imihigo*'s self-criticism outlets, wherein the governing elites are both initiators and participants. On balance, our analysis reveals an interpenetration of state and society. The government seeks local control with *Imihigo* while being modestly kept in check by the mechanism. In our view, the rebuke of sub-national officials by the local population appears to be a watered-down antithesis of the governing elites. Whether citizens can similarly hold the governing elites accountable remains an open question.

## Notes

1. The president suspended the signing and award ceremony in 2019 until more challenging performance targets were included (*The New Times* 2019).
2. An added aim of Rwanda's culturally oriented governance innovation is to dismantle the clientelist politics that partly facilitated the 1994 genocide (Wagner 1998; Mamdani 2001).
3. Kiswahili-derived *Baraza* in Uganda and South Africa's *Izimbizo* are two prominent examples (Kyohairwe 2014; Shava and Mubangizi 2019).
4. As elsewhere, critics of decentralisation in Africa highlight its use by authoritarian regimes to deliver services while preserving the status quo (Boone 2003; Riedl and Dickovick 2014).
5. Only recently have Rwanda-based academics been deemed credible contributors to Rwanda's academic debate (see Ndahinda 2022).
6. The existing 11 provinces and 106 districts were reorganised into 4 provinces, 30 districts, 416 sectors, 2,148 cells and 14,837 villages.
7. The council's decisions are enacted by the Executive Committee – composed of the mayor and two vice mayors – which is selected and held accountable by the District Council. See Articles 2–4 of Law No. 87/2013 on the functioning of decentralised entities (RoR 2013).
8. Some interviewees made passing references to the previous regimes' indifference to Rwanda's cultural past for contemporary governance.
9. These included groupings such as the *abakera-mihigo* and the *imbugira-mihigo* (Kamatali 2020, 61–62).
10. This logic applies to other homegrown initiatives that are driving Rwanda's socio-economic transformation (Gatwa 2019).
11. *Imihigo*'s popularity underscores that a narrative is sufficient to sell an idea as new.
12. This is part of a larger comparative research project focusing on the local context of decentralisation in Africa. The research was ethically cleared by the University of Bayreuth, Germany where Matthew Sabbi previously worked. The fieldwork was approved following stringent evaluation and by the RGB, which is responsible for studies on local government.
13. We are aware that these newspapers lean closely to the official transcript. However, their sheer monopoly means they have the widest coverage of citizen reactions to local public policy. We use the information reflexively.
14. State officials were envisaging accountability and a performance-oriented system when *Imihigo* turned up to them as the perfect match (Scher and Macaulay 2014).
15. Interview, councillor, Gicumbi District, 7 March 2023.
16. This social protection package offers direct support to disabled citizens, while others receive payment for public works. A credit component supports micro businesses.
17. Interview, councillor, Kirehe District, 8 December 2021.

18. Interview, district official, Huye, 29 October 2021.
19. This enhances Rwanda's requirement for donors to self-assess their activities through its donor performance assessment framework (Keijzer, Klingebiel, and Scholtes 2020, 40).
20. Interview, councillor, Huye District, 18 March 2023.
21. Interview, councillor, Karongi District, 23 March 2023.
22. Interview, councillor, Gicumbi District, 11 March 2023.
23. Interview, councillor, Kirehe District, 15 March 2023.
24. Interview, councillor, Huye District, 18 March 2023.
25. Population sizes are similar across Rwandan districts: Gicumbi – 395,606; Huye – 328,398; Karongi – 331,808; Kirehe – 340,368.
26. The mayor claimed they had rehabilitated “feeder roads and terraces but the evaluation team came after rain had washed away everything” (*The East African* 2016).
27. Interview, councillor, Karongi District, 26 March 2023.
28. Notably, the executive secretary, who wields real control over the local budget and serves as secretary to the executive committee, continues in their civil servant role.
29. Interview, former mayor, location anonymised, 29 November 2021.
30. Expert interview (telephone), professional Rwandan, 24 May 2021.
31. Expert interview (Skype), professional expatriate, 28 May 2021.
32. The RPF remains the only functioning political party in Rwanda, and district officials are members by default.
33. Critics believe *Imihigo's* success derives from the popularity of the RPF party (Purdeková 2011).
34. Expert interview (telephone), professional expatriate, 5 June 2021.
35. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this added clarification.
36. See the awards event of 2017 at <https://www.paulkagame.com/imihigo-is-about-transforming-the-lives-of-every-citizen/>
37. We are not unaware of the government's instrumentalisation of these outlets for its credibility. Residents would be wary of espousing critical views given the potential threat of convictions for so-called humiliation of public officials (see Al Jazeera 2021; HRW 2022). But it would be cynical to ignore threats posed by an uncontrolled public forum.
38. Expert interview (telephone), local official, Southern Province, 23 April 2022.
39. Expert interview (telephone), local official, Eastern Province, 23 April 2022.
40. This emerged from the radio debates of the network *pour la Participation Citoyenne* (Initiative for Citizens' Participation) and financially supported by Germany's GIZ. This platform is very new and the actual uptake by residents remains to be seen. Given Rwanda's wider internet coverage, the concern is mostly about access to smartphones.
41. Expert interview (Zoom), professional expatriate, 11 June 2021.
42. Expert interview, professional Rwandan, Kigali, 10 December 2020.
43. Expert interview (telephone), professional Rwandan, 24 May 2021.
44. Internationally protected homegrown solutions include *Abunzi*, *Imihigo* and *Umushyikirano*.
45. Expert interview, professional Rwandan, Kigali, 13 December 2021.
46. Expert interview (Zoom), professional expatriate, 11 June 2021.
47. Expert interview (Zoom), professional expatriate, 11 June 2021.

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