INSIDE UGANDA'S ELECTRONIC COURT SYSTEM

By Edward Anyoli

Before Uganda's court system got a much-needed makeover, chaos and corruption often clouded the corridors of justice. Court files would mysteriously disappear, only to resurface after "facilitation". Lawyers and other court users would spend endless hours scrambling from registry to registry, pleading for files to be traced, registered, and finally placed before a judge or magistrate. Justice moved at the pace of influence, not law.

In the past, according to information obtained from court, case files were registered manually in ledger books at court registries. Once a file was opened, charges were endorsed and the case allocated to a particular court or judicial officer. The Judiciary later realised that this manual registration system created opportunities for bribery and collusion between court staff and litigants.

PREVIOUS LOOPHOLES

In some courts, especially at the initial registration stage, new files could be manipulated. For instance, when it came to granting bail, a presiding officer would formally issue a non-cash bail order, yet the money intended for bail would be paid informally to a particular judicial officer or court official.

These practices exposed systemic weaknesses in the manual system and informed the Judiciary's decision to introduce reforms aimed at improving transparency, accountability and integrity in case management.

With the establishment and subsequent launch of the Electronic Court Case Management Information System (ECCMIS) in March 2022, things have changed for the better.

ACCESSIBLE PATH TO JUSTICE

The disorder of old has since been largely tamed. Case files are now digitally tracked, registrations are transparent and opportunities for manipulation have been significantly reduced. What was once a judicial system tainted by missing files and backdoor dealings has been steadily transformed into a more orderly, accountable and accessible path to justice.

For instance, thanks to the ECCMIS, court users can now file cases remotely and even receive judgments directly on their phones.



Pius Bigirimana, the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Judiciary

A Performance Enhancement Tool (PET), a digital monitoring system, has been integrated into the ECCMIS, according to Pius Bigirimana, the Permanent Secretary, the Ministry of Judiciary who is also the Secretary to the Judiciary.

Bigirimana says this integration is aimed at improving efficiency, reducing case backlog and tracking performance within the Judiciary. A case is classified as a backlog if it remains unresolved for more than two years.

He notes that the integrated system allows the Judiciary to identify delays early and take corrective action to improve access to justice.

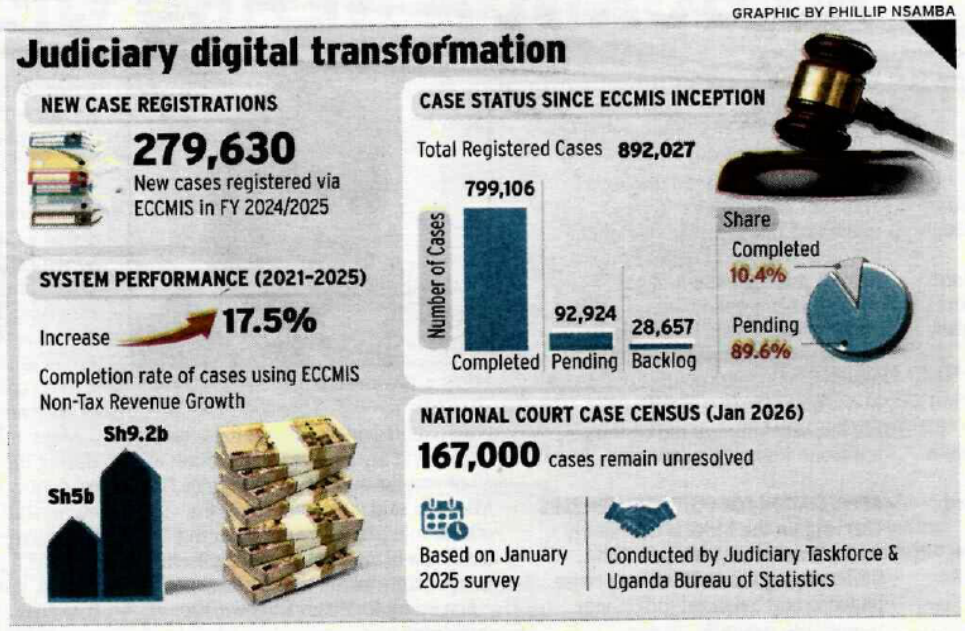
"The Judiciary developed a case weighing scheme for the performance enhancement tool, whose primary goal is to develop a valid measurement of judicial workload in all courts. It takes into consideration variations in complexity among different case types, as well as the differences in non-case related responsibilities of justices, registrars and magistrates," he adds.

According to the Judiciary's Annual Performance Report for the financial year 2024/2025, a total of 279,630 new cases were registered through ECCMIS as part of the ongoing digitalisation of the sector.

The status of implementation of National Resistance Movement (NRM) report for 2021-2025 indicates that the completion of cases using ECCMIS increased at a rate of 17.5% and that using the system increased non-tax revenue collections from sh5b to sh9.2b within the period captured by the report.

A total of 892,027 cases, have been registered in the system since its inception. Of these, 28,657 are backlog cases, 92,924 are currently pending, and 799,106 have been completed through the system.

GRAPHIC BY PHILLIP NSAMBA



EFFICIENCY AND TRANSPARENCY

One beneficiary of the ECCMIS is lawyer John Bosco Mudde, the managing partner at law firm JBMudde Advocates, who uses the system regularly. He says it has brought transparency in the dispensation of justice and has reduced on 'unofficial fees' that used to be paid.

"It has increased courts' revenue because now there are no shortcuts. Whenever you file a case, you have to pay and get an official receipt, which money goes straight to the Government," Mudde said.

In relation to fighting graft, the system significantly reduces physical interaction between lawyers, court clerks' judicial officers and other court users, where money would ordinarily change hands. By eliminating the space for middlemen and informal negotiations, the platform curbs corruption, enhances transparency, and ensures that justice is accessed through due process rather than personal influence.

Additionally, parties no longer have to be physically present in court when a judgment or ruling is being delivered. Mudde says once a judge uploads the decision into the ECCMIS, litigants and their lawyers can access it remotely. According to Mudde, this not only saves time, but also cuts the unnecessary costs associated with repeated travel to court, making the justice process more affordable and accessible, especially for litigants outside major urban centres.

Susan Wakabala, a lawyer at Wakabala & Company Advocates, agrees that the ECCMIS has significantly bridged the gap in accessing timely justice by reducing delays and cutting the costs associated with filing cases.

She says it has streamlined court processes by allowing lawyers and litigants to file documents electronically, track cases in real time and avoid unnecessary physical visits to court, which has not only eased congestion at court registries, but also made justice more accessible, especially for litigants who previously faced financial and logistical barriers.

SAVES PROSECUTORS' TIME

Irene Nakimbugwe, the deputy spokesperson of the Office of Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP), says the ECCMIS has removed bureaucratic barriers, enabling state attorneys to file and ensure that all their documents are on record before hearings begin.

"Unlike in the past when one had to look for a lawyer's server or a court clerk to register a file, the process is now seamless she says.

We pray that the system is rolled out across all circuits of the Judiciary so that people can access justice in real time. It has lowered barriers, allowing us to easily access accused persons through Zoom. Even prisons are now fully integrated and up to date," Nakimbugwe adds.

Zoom is a video conferencing platform that allows users to connect online for video conference meetings, webinars and live chat.

CURRENT INTEGRATION

The Judiciary Annual Performance Report for the financial year 2024/2025, reveals that, the Electronic Court Case Management Information System (ECCMIS) was designed to improve case management efficiency, enhance data security, minimise forgery and facilitate remote access to case information.

It was also created to improve transparency in the management of court, reduce corruption and improve the processing of non-tax revenue.

As of March 2025, a total of 469 staff of the Judiciary from different courts have been trained how to use the system.

The ECCMIS is fully operational at the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal and High Court divisions (Anti-Corruption, Civil, Commercial, and Land), Mengo, Nakawa and Makindye Chief Magistrates Courts, and the Law Development Centre (LDC) Magistrates Court.

Following its launch in Kampala, the system was extended to other regions, including Jinja (Jinja High Court, Kakira and Bugembe Magistrates Courts) and Wakiso (Kira Chief Magistrates Court).

To date, it has been rolled out to 31 court stations nationwide, marking a significant expansion from its pilot phase.

PAYING FOR BAIL USING ECCMIS

Typically, before an arrested person charged with a crime can be granted temporary release by court, they (among other things) have to pay bail money, which acts as a guarantee they will appear for future court hearings. And if the defendant complies with all the bail conditions, that money is returned to them after the case concludes. However, if they do not comply with the terms, the funds are forfeited.

In Uganda, bail money in all courts is paid using the ECCMIS, which is designed to eliminate cash payments made directly to staff or to a would-be corrupt official.

HERE IS HOW IT WORKS

The presiding judicial officer sets the bail amount in court, which is recorded in the ECCMIS.

The court clerk submits the file to the cashier, who generates an assessment form through the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) portal integrated with the ECCMIS.

The applicant (or their surety or advocate) makes the payment using the generated payment registration number (PRN). Supported methods include mobile money, Visa/Mastercard, and Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) bank deposit at authorised banks.

Upon successful payment, a Government of Uganda general receipt is generated into the system, bearing th case number and PRN.

The cashier then confirms the deposit in the ECCMIS, which allows the release of the accused.

To avoid corruption and undue influence, the Judiciary strongly advises against making payments in court corridors or to staff, as these are not refundable and are considered bribes.

INCLUSIVITY

Elisha Bafirawala is the assistant director in charge of litigation services at Uganda's Parliament. As a person living with a disability, Bafirawala says the ECCMIS has eased work within the justice system.

"I used to struggle to go to court to file cases – the inconvenience and burden were enormous," he says.

However, Bafirawala is keen to note that the system has left out people who cannot read, the blind, and those without computer knowledge.

He therefore, calls on the Judiciary to adopt assistive tools and inclusive technologies, such as the Braille.