

policy cultures in Rwanda

Jim Kaketch and Samwel Oando

September 2025

Introduction

Policy cultures in Africa are heavily influenced by a complex interplay of historical legacies, institutional frameworks, governance capacities, and stakeholder interests. Colonial administrative structures established centralized bureaucracies, hierarchical decision-making, and top-down governance models that still persist in many states. In some countries, there have also been notable shifts towards inclusive governance, driven by institutional reforms, democratization, and the active involvement of diverse stakeholders in the policymaking process. This study explored the policy cultures in Rwanda to identify how evidence is integrated into the process, and the barriers and opportunities that may exist for evidence-informed policymaking.

Methods

The research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse policy cultures and evidence use in Rwanda. A comprehensive desk review and stakeholder mapping identified key actors and guided the development of a structured study methodology.

- The study used a survey questionnaire to measure key indicators of policymaking practices, and ethnographic studies and in-depth interviews to gain deeper insights into the complexities of policy development in Rwanda.
- Study participants comprised 332 survey respondents and 34 key informants. Sampling used a blend of probability, purposive, and snowball techniques, to ensure the inclusion of key beneficiary groups.
- The key informant interviews targeted managers, cooperative leaders, and researchers to capture a leadership-oriented perspective.

Key Findings

Factors that Influence policy decisions in Rwanda

The findings show that policymaking in Rwanda is influenced by national strategies and priorities, but political leadership, citizen contribution and international commitments play major roles, as summarized below:

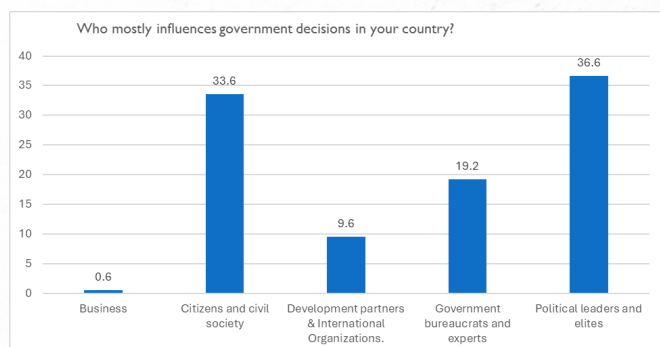


Research Summary

Policy Culture: "shared norms, values, beliefs, and institutional practices that shape how decisions are made, how evidence is interpreted, and whose voices are considered legitimate in the policy arena. It encompasses how decisions are made, who is included, how knowledge is utilized, and what values dominate the policy process"

Political leaders are a key influence on policy decision making: The findings show that policy decisions in Rwanda are shaped by a mix of strategic plans, political leadership, institutional dynamics, and socio-cultural values. National policy frameworks, such as Vision 2050 and the National Strategy for Transformation, guide decision-making so that priorities are aligned to national development strategies. However, the findings also suggest a policy culture where elite-driven decision-making remains dominant. Senior political leaders were reported as playing a dominant role in advancing certain policies - 36.6% of respondents said that political leaders and elites were influential actors in government decision-making (Fig 1).

Fig 1: Key Actors in Government Decision-Making in Rwanda (%)



- Citizens and civil society also contribute to government decision making:** 33.6% of the study respondents reported that citizens and the civil society play an influential role in government decision making, even more than technocrats (19.2%), and development partners (9.6%). In addition, 62.5% of the respondents thought that policy is most often informed by public opinion, compared to research evidence (21%) and experiential knowledge (10.5%). This reflects a commendable shift toward inclusive governance.

- External partners have some influence government decision-making:** Though Rwanda maintains policy sovereignty, donors and global commitments, such as the sustainable development goals (SDGs), play a subtle role in policy decisions, especially through funding priorities and reporting demands. “In areas like health and gender, donor influence is visible, [and] sometimes research plays a supportive role to strengthen a donor-backed policy direction.” (Study Participant)

- Policies are primarily based on successful local experiences:** In Rwanda, successful local experiences inform policy decision-making, suggesting a strong preference for contextual relevance and homegrown solutions. Over half of the respondents (57.4%) said that policies are largely locally adapted and are often shaped by local socio-economic needs, district development plans, and citizen feedback. In this way, cultural values, unity, consensus, and stability shape the process, alongside legal and constitutional compliance.

- Thirty-eight percent of the respondents thought that policy making combines local and international models.

“We always ensure they are contextualized to our governance systems and community realities.”
(Policy researcher)

The role of evidence in shaping dominant policies in Rwanda

In Rwanda, the findings show that evidence supports but rarely drives policy decisions. While it is valued, evidence is used selectively, and often subordinated to political priorities, leadership directives, and donor priorities. The findings further show the following:

- Evidence is most effective when presented in concise, accessible formats (e.g., policy briefs) and delivered through embedded government-led platforms such as Imihigo (performance-based management tool), Sector Working Groups, and Joint Action Development Forum.
- Evidence has more impact on policy decision making when it addresses real-life issues (44.2%), and when it is co-produced with government (30.8%) or is simplified for broader use (24.7%).
- Institutional capacity for research varies, and weak knowledge management undermines consistency. Generally, evidence in Rwanda legitimizes and informs policy but is most influential when politically supported and strategically framed.
- Key barriers to research uptake in policy include lack of funding for research (45.9%), limited citizen consultation (26%) and bureaucratic resistance (22%).

Evidence and other considerations in policy formulation

The results suggest that Rwanda’s policy formulation balances evidence, political vision, institutional capacity, and local governance culture. Respondents consistently suggested that evidence was most effective on policy when it aligned with national strategies and supported political priorities, leadership directives, and budget constraints or meets donor and global priorities.

Rwanda appears to follow a hybrid model of research uptake into policy, where evidence is valued but filtered through political and strategic program lenses.

Participants also highlighted conditions they thought enabled the uptake of research in policy making, which include political timing and feasibility; and centralized structures that support evidence translation and dissemination. Respondents also highlighted factors that hinder consistent use of evidence, which include low analytical capacity, weak coordination among actors producing and using evidence, and lack of incentives to use evidence, especially in sensitive areas such as land or civil society policy.

Embedded systems, such as Imihigo, are increasingly used for policy refinement, and feedback loops from evaluations are increasingly recognized as important tools for policy refinement. Data from these evaluations is routinely used to inform future planning. However, several respondents felt that the use of evidence from such systems is still not institutionalised, and in many cases, the data is considered more as an accountability tool for donors reporting than as learning instruments.

Institutional structures and governance to support uptake of evidence in policymaking

The findings suggest that Rwanda's evolving evidence ecosystem is driven by political commitment, cross-sector collaboration, and the presence of structured advisory platforms. The following are the key institutional factors that support the uptake of research into policy.

- ***Institutional access:*** Rwanda's approach to accessing and using research evidence for decision-making is rooted in a centralized, performance-oriented governance model, guided by strategic frameworks. The structured, centrally coordinated governance system strongly emphasizes national development planning, performance-based management, and evidence-informed policymaking. In addition, government institutions, academia, civil society, and intermediaries such as Utafiti Sera work together in a structured but collaborative manner.
- ***Existence of data collection mechanisms:*** The existence of key agencies, such as the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) and the National Institute of Statistics Rwanda (NISR), supports the regular collection and application of data to inform governance reforms, public programs and policies. Universities and think tanks also contribute research aligned with national priorities, while the civil society brings grassroots voices to the policy process through participatory approaches.
- ***Existence of platforms and mechanisms that connect research to policy:*** Platforms such as Utafiti Sera Houses, serve as platforms to connect research with policy, translating evidence into policy briefs and tools that make evidence actionable. In addition, partnerships that foster collaboration between government ministries, academia, civil society, and development partners also support research uptake. For instance, study participants cited the partnership between the Ministry of Agriculture, the University of Rwanda and research farms to generate evidence on agricultural innovation, food security, and climate resilience.
- ***Inter-agency Collaboration:*** Rwanda's inter-agency collaboration ensures that policymaking is not only aligned to strategy, but that it is also evidence-based,

integrated, and responsive to complex development challenges. Central planning institutions such as the Office of the Prime Minister and MINECOFIN require ministries to align sectoral plans and budgets with national strategies and to present evidence to justify proposed interventions. Inter-agency and inter-ministerial collaboration is provided for through platforms such as Sector Working Groups and Joint Action Development Forums, which also include civil society, and development partners, and are used to share research, data, and evaluations across sectors. Evidence uptake is also enabled through policy dialogues, technical working groups, and sector-wide forums that bring together government, researchers, and donors. At the local level, tools like Imihigo incorporate grassroots evidence into planning.

Challenges and capacity constraints that affect research uptake

- ***Top-down governance system limits flexibility:*** The centralized, top-down governance system in Rwanda supports policy alignment with national goals but it also limits flexibility. Evidence that challenges dominant political narratives or which requires major shifts in policy or budgets is often ignored, regardless of quality. Politically sensitive topics or long-term reforms may also be sidelined due to electoral or strategic concerns.
- ***Bureaucratic inertia:*** Bureaucratic inertia, conservative institutions and mistrust between policymakers and independent researchers (especially civil society and academia) also hinder uptake. Evidence is more likely to be used when it aligns with political priorities or donor expectations, and less so when it exposes governance weaknesses or equity concerns.
- ***Capacity gaps:*** Many policy units lack skills and the capacity to analyze data, to interpret policy and communication. Platforms such as Imihigo and Joint Action Development Forums exist, but are often disconnected from research dissemination mechanisms.
- ***Lack of centralized, user-friendly data systems*** makes it hard for policy decision-makers to access and apply evidence. Additionally, dependence on donors threatens the sustainability of research efforts, with many initiatives losing momentum once external funding ends.

Best practices and strategies to improve policy cultures in Rwanda

The study identified the following best practices that can promote the use of evidence in the policy process in Rwanda:

- ***a. Having platforms that allow local evidence and feedback to inform national decisions:*** MINALOC's approach to decentralization, which embeds citizen participation through mechanisms such as the National Dialogue Council (Umushyikirano),

community assemblies, and Joint Action Development Forums (JADFs), ensures local feedback informs national decisions. The Imihigo performance contract system reinforces data-driven governance by requiring institutions to set measurable targets and report on progress annually, thus fostering a results-based culture across government.

b. Citizen engagement: Asked to suggest how the government and community leaders can engage citizens in making policies, study participants showed strong preference for using village representatives to gather public input (49.3%), followed by townhall meetings (31.6%) and online platforms (18.4%). This suggests a strong preference for grassroots, decentralized engagement through trusted local intermediaries.

c. Structured, data-driven decision-making: Rwanda's health sector offers a strong example of technical working groups and joint reviews helping to integrate real-time frontline feedback to inform policy decisions. For instance, during the COVID-19 crisis, the policy shift to home-based care was based on health worker input and evolving data, demonstrating adaptive, evidence-led policymaking. Policies such as school feeding, agricultural insurance, and adolescent reproductive health, were designed and implemented based on feasibility studies, pilot outcomes, and participatory validation processes.

d. Institutional partnerships, such as Utafiti Sera platforms, can strengthen the evidence ecosystem by fostering ongoing dialogue between researchers and policymakers, enabling co-creation of knowledge and policy solutions.

Leveraging Utafiti Sera Model to facilitate evidence informed policy process

The Utafiti Sera House model creates structured spaces where researchers, policymakers, civil society actors, and practitioners continuously engage on specific policy themes. Unlike ad hoc consultations, Utafiti Sera emphasizes sustained engagement, co-creation of knowledge, and mutual trust. By institutionalizing dialogue, it bridges the gap between knowledge production and policy uptake.

- In Rwanda, Utafiti Sera is widely recognized as a valuable model for bridging research and policymaking. Seventy-seven percent of policymakers covered in this study were aware of it, and 81.7% of study participants considered it as influential in shaping policy. The model facilitates dialogue, strengthens advocacy, and promotes evidence use through forums, policy briefs, and research dissemination.

- There is already local application of the model's principles in justice reforms, while civil society groups report using it to influence local planning and budgets. However, 22.5% of policymakers were unaware of the innovation, highlighting a need for

broader institutional integration and outreach, especially at sub-national levels.

- Utafiti Sera has contributed to tangible policy shifts in Rwanda, especially in justice reform, health, and decentralized planning.

To deepen its impact, respondents recommended having formal partnerships with ministries, embedding evidence-use criteria in public service performance reviews, dedicated funding for research translation and appointing policy advisors as research-policy intermediaries.

Recommendations

This study established that policymaking in Rwanda is centralized, technocratic, and elite-driven, although participation by citizens and civil society is provided for. While evidence is valued, it is mainly used to justify pre-determined decisions, not to initiate change. The study makes the following recommendations to strengthen uptake of research within Rwanda's policy culture:

- **Institutionalize Evidence Use:** Embed mandatory evidence-use protocols (e.g., validation checklists, policy briefs) into all ministries' SOPs to guide policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation.

Integrate Utafiti Sera model into Government: Anchor Utafiti Sera Houses in key ministries through formal partnerships and dedicated budgets to enhance policy access and sustainability.

- **Build Capacity:** Invest in continuous training for government and civil society actors, especially mid-level technocrats—on evidence appraisal, policy analysis, and data communication.

- **Foster Inclusive Policymaking:** Institutionalize citizen and civil society engagement through formal feedback mechanisms and transparent tracking of public input in policy outcomes.

- **Create a National Policy Innovation Hub:** Establish a central hub to coordinate evidence use, host a national research repository, support policy labs, and monitor the impact of research on policy.

This Research Summary was developed by Jim Kaketch and Samwel Oando from PASGR. It was produced in the context of the Utafiti Sera projects under policy cultures study in Africa. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of PASGR, their staff or Board of Directors.

Partnership for African Social & Governance Research (PASGR)

6th Floor, I & M Building, 2nd Ngong Avenue, Upper Hill

P.O. Box 76418-00508, Nairobi, Kenya | Email: research@pasgr.org

Tel: +254 (0)20 2985000 or +254 (0)731 000065

www.pasgr.org