



Josephine Mukesha

Director General
National Identification Agency
Rwanda

To apply an all-of-government solution

Josephine Mukesha took a novel approach to reforming Rwanda's civil registration system: start with information technology.

"Nothing is impossible," says Josephine Mukesha, Director General of the National Identification Agency (NIDA) in Rwanda. "There's always a solution."

Mukesha is in the solution business, having led the modernization of Rwanda's civil registration systems since she joined NIDA as Director of Information Technology (IT) in charge of Database and Applications in 2008, the year the Rwandan government launched a program to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS). The goal: establish an interoperable and comprehensive CRVS system, one that would ensure legal identity for all, good governance, and evidence-based decision making for sustainable development.

Reforming the system

Mukesha obtained a Bachelor of Science in communication networks at Tshwane University of Technology in South Africa and a master's degree in Information Technology at Carnegie Mellon University Africa in Rwanda.

As Director of IT, she was responsible for designing and maintaining the Population Register platform. Because part of NIDA's mandate was to modernize

civil registration, "it was a natural process for me to move from the population registry to CRVS," she says.

Rwanda introduced a web-based vital events registration system in 2015 throughout the country's health facilities. A 2016 assessment of Rwanda's civil registration system identified several gaps to achieving universal registration, including the lack of integration of the country's main databases.

In 2017, Rwanda developed a five-year strategic plan to develop a single integrated identity and civil registration management information system with interoperable capabilities to link the national centralized and integrated CRVS system, the National Population Registry, and the Health Information Management System — among other databases — to ensure all institutions with a stake in civil registration would receive the same data without having to do multiple data entry. NIDA and the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda worked together to do so.

The new system was launched on 10 August 2020, on Africa Civil Registration Day. A key feature of the system is assigning a unique identification number



to each registered child, allowing for **direct and real-time integration of births and deaths to the national population registration system.**

A different perspective

Unlike CRVS leaders in many countries who often have legal or administrative backgrounds, Mukesha's approach to this challenge was "a bit different from the classic," she says. "I take another view on how things are done. What I came to discover when I was working in CRVS, was that whenever you would come with an innovative idea, they would say 'it's impossible, the law doesn't allow it.' I think that nothing is impossible. As an IT person, I wanted to see how to use technology to achieve more," she says, adding that the Rwandan political leadership was very supportive.

Among the challenges she faced was coordinating the various stakeholders, being flexible to meet their needs and wishes while balancing costs and time constraints, and trying to find the middle way that satisfied everybody. The COVID-19 pandemic also presented hurdles as the new system was launched soon after the lockdown in Rwanda. "We had to reengineer how we had planned the deployment," she says. The containment measures particularly affected the training of new civil registrars and outreach to communities. "We're thinking outside the box about how to reach them," she says. Instead of holding townhall meetings with communities, for example, they turned to videos, inserting jingles in popular radio shows, and website banners, among other means.

Mukesha attributes the project's success to several factors. First, the leadership and support from the highest levels. "It is part of our national strategy for transformation to provide 100 percent of services for citizens online." The support and commitment of stakeholders has also been vital.

She considers that the collaboration with numerous government ministries, agencies, development partners, and private sector stakeholders "is not only an achievement for NIDA, but for all Rwanda. It's the entire ecosystem that culminated into this system being deployed."

"There is always a solution, but not a 'one size fits all'."

Her next challenge is to digitize legacy documents. "We are thinking about how to do it because it's a very voluminous task. We're looking forward to learning from others who have done it."

A holistic outlook

For Mukesha, empathy is the greatest leadership quality, thinking about how everyone in the ecosystem will benefit. "The citizens, service providers, data managers, CRVS local level officers all the way to the top management, how are they going to see themselves in the changes to the systems?" Her management style is conducive to finding answers to that question. "I start our discussions by asking, 'if time and money were not issues, how would you do it? And we take it from there.'"

To other countries facing similar challenges, she considers that they first have to understand the real problems from all angles. "There is no one solution that works everywhere," she says. They need to contextualize the solution to their own situation. "Like our system," she notes, "when we started, we were looking at customizing an existing civil registration system, but we then found that the work would be harder than developing a system from scratch. It was developed by Rwandans."

"Nothing is impossible," she concludes. "There is always a solution, but not a 'one size fits all'. You have to contextualize the issue and find something that can work, not only for one day, but for a long time." ■

Learn more about CRVS in Rwanda:

Read the [country profile](#) or the [technical brief on CRVS in Rwanda during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).