

## Policy Paper

### Advancing access to Justice in Uganda: Virtual and online platforms for dispute resolution spaces.

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You cannot speak of enabling access to justice, if justice service locations are inaccessible and unreachable to those most in need of dispute resolution. A recent study showed that although engagement with formal courts in Uganda has increased since 2015, with more Ugandans feeling confident that they can bring disputes to court and receive a fair resolution, accessibility to the courts remains a significant challenge (Adjadeh et al 2024, Afrobarometer 2024). Factors underscoring this challenge include geographical distance and infrastructure, high monetary and time costs, lack of legal awareness on the law and related processes, as well as case backlog associated delays among others (Kyohairwe, et al 2025, Kabaseke et al, 2021).

While the Government has built more justice centers with a criminal justice agency within a radius of 12 kms (GoU, 2017), many Ugandans still travel long distance more especially from rural areas to access courts (GoU, 2022). Over 70% of Ugandans live in rural areas, yet courts are predominantly located in urban areas (Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, 2022). Only a small proportion of rural residents can reach a magistrate's court within a 5 km radius in Uganda, with distances and travel cost discouraging many Ugandans to pursue legal redress (Kakuru et al, 2024). While police is one of the nearest places where Ugandans seek justice when they face a legal problem, participants in a recent study conducted in northern Uganda indicated that the nearest police stations where they would be interested in reporting their cases were too far (Hil, 2024).

Local Council Courts have also been used to deliver justice to community members. These courts provide the form of reconciliation, compensation, restitution, apology, fine, declaration or any other recourse deemed appropriate by law and social norms (Hil, 2021). Local council courts are, however, also faced with various challenges that impede their efficiency in serving their communities. A community member may easily access an Lc1's office and file a complaint, (Kyohairwe, et al 2025), but it is harder for the same person to have a case presented before court of law either because the court processes are complex for the ordinary citizen seeking justice or there are few legal aid players to assist the court users in understanding the complex court system (Kabaseke et al, 2021).

Uganda also faces the challenge of having many communities located in remote, hard-to-reach areas. This creates significant obstacles for the residents to access justice. For instance, the Equal Opportunity Commission report of 2024 indicated that community members in Buvuma Islands travel long distances to access formal courts, with all the 52 Islands of Buvuma only having one magistrate court that seats once a week. The distance to access this one court could in most cases deter witnesses from adequately attending cases and giving testimony to aid in serving the ends of justice. Other islands face similar challenges. The challenge is not, however, unique to only islands, Mayuge district,

for example has only 4 Magisterial Courts serving a population of over 500,000 people. Such ratios often result in pillage of cases and create delays in resolving even the otherwise simpler cases. With such long distances, community members are faced with high costs in terms of both time and money to access justice. For instance, most community members will have to use public transport, which is often slow, unreliable and unaffordable for most community members, making long journeys difficult. Having high costs of attending court and following up on cases in court may heavily impact on the capacity of the litigants and witnesses to participate and show up at court. This often results in low attendance, delays in case resolution and miscarriage of justice. There is an urgent need for a rethought approach to finding a compatible solution.

Advances in information and communication technologies offer vast opportunities that can be leveraged in the access to justice space to enhance efficiency and access to judicial justice and alternative dispute resolution. A successful justice system must include as a standard of the justice system procedures that allow for physical and hybrid hearings, as a measure of procedural fairness and equal treatment for all participants regardless of physical or virtual presence for both rural and self-represented litigants as well. Many developing countries have embarked on the journey for diversifying justice system to improve access to justice with varying levels of success (Poshai et al, 2023)

### **Existing Policy Framework: Uganda's Virtual Court system**

Uganda's judiciary has developed a structured but evolving framework for virtual court proceedings, moving from initial pilots to a comprehensive legal system. The initial but progressive goals have been to reduce case backlog, lower litigation costs, ensure business continuity (especially in circumstances such as during pandemics, promote witness protection, and enhance overall efficiency of courts.

The foundation was laid with the Judicature (Visual-Audio Link) Rules, 2016 (SI 26), which provided evidence to be given via video link under specific circumstances such as when witness is abroad, security reasons, health of witnesses. This was bolstered by the Guidelines for Online Hearings (2020) issued by the Chief Justice in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which expanded the use of online tools for judgments, rulings, and applications like bail. The most significant development is the Judicature (Electronic Filing, Service and Virtual Proceedings) Rules, 2025 (SI 21). This new statutory instrument effectively replaced the 2016 Rules and created a holistic "e-justice" system which governs Electronic Filing (E-filing), Electronic Service, Virtual Hearings, and Electronic Execution.

The system is supported by video conferencing facilities, notably in courts and prisons (e.g., Buganda Road Court to Luzira Prison), often with development partner support like UNDP. It is utilised for bail applications, mention hearings, delivery of judgments, and increasingly for full trials. A party must apply to the court for approval to use a virtual link (using a prescribed form). The judiciary's ICT department is central to scheduling hearings, sending secure access links/credentials, and recording proceedings to create an official transcript. In effect one can submit court documents through an Electronic Court Case Management Information System (ECCMIS), summons and documents to parties via email, instant messaging, or other approved digital means, conduct full trials or applications

via video conferencing, teleconferencing, and engage in the execution of court decrees, including public auctions.

There is a need for building this policy framework from one that is only targeted to specific circumstances such as when witness is abroad, security reasons, health of witnesses\_to include access to a wider part of the population, as well as developing standard operating procedures to ensure procedural fairness and equal treatment for all participants including self-represented litigants and rural populations and expanded digital literacy support. Justice must leave no one behind, and it must be for everyone regardless of circumstances.

## **Proposed Solution**

There is a need to have a strategic shift from applying an isolated virtual court session to a fully integrated Virtual Justice Ecosystem. This ecosystem would leverage technology not to replace traditional justice but to extend its reach and efficiency, focusing on two options: 1) Tech-enabled Justice Points and 2) Democratized Access through Personal Device Integration

### **Option 1: Tech-Enabled Justice Points**

The Ministry of Justice should establish technology-enabled justice points. Every community has common convergence points or service delivery points that unite them regardless of creed, or backgrounds such as local government offices, libraries, religious centers, market offices, among others. Communities instinctively trust these spaces, and they are comfortable with transactions and any dealings therein. This makes them best suited as justice points.

Establishment of the tech-enabled hubs involves formally recognizing Justice Hubs in community spaces by equipping them with a single, reliable technology setup (computer, large screen, good internet connection, webcam). These hubs are not courts in themselves but access points. These can be manned by a community liaison officer such as a paralegal, a specially trained court clerk, or a local government official to manage the hub.

In practice, parties from the surrounding community would gather at the hub on a scheduled court day. The judicial officer presides over the session from a main court in a nearby town or city via a stable video conference feed displayed on the large screen. The liaison officer facilitates the local logistics, maintains order, and handles physical document presentation if needed.

It drastically reduces the judiciary's need to transport officials and infrastructure while providing a familiar and accessible location for litigants. Summarized below are expected challenges and ways to address them.

<b>Anticipated challenge</b>	<b>Proposed solutions</b>
Costs of infrastructure set up	<b>Phased Roll-Out:</b> Prioritize hubs in areas with the worst physical access to courts. Use modular, scalable tech solutions.

	<b>Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):</b> Partner with tech companies for CSR-funded hubs or equipment. UNDP's existing support, as shown, is a model to scale.
Community Buy in and awareness	<b>Clear Protocols:</b> Define rules for electronic submission of evidence (e.g., photos/videos of physical evidence taken and uploaded via the hub's system). <b>Mandatory Training &amp; Support:</b> Provide continuous, hands-on training for judicial officers, lawyers, and court staff on using the systems. <b>Demonstrate Benefits by</b> showcasing success stories and data on how virtual tools have reduced backlog and saved time in pilot areas.
Security & Privacy	<b>Liaison Officer Training</b> Train hub officers on basic cybersecurity and the importance of confidentiality. <b>Secure Platforms:</b> Mandate the use of the judiciary's secure, approved platforms (not consumer apps like Zoom for sensitive cases) with encrypted channels.

## Policy Option 2: Democratized Access through Personal Device Integration

Although the Electronic Court Case Management Information System (ECCMIS) and the use of the Judicature (Visual-Audio Link) is currently operational, the System and the use of the Judicature (Visual-Audio Link) is a closed system that is largely unknown, and inaccessible to many court users to the everyday court user. As of early 2026, ECCMIS is operational in only 18 Phase 1 court stations, primarily in and around Kampala, with a phased national rollout still pending. (judiciary, 2025) (Judicature (Electronic Filing, Service and Virtual Proceedings) Rules, 2025).

Uganda's communications regulator reports there are 19.0 million smartphones in use. Based on a population estimate of 47.2 million (UN, 2025), this indicates a penetration rate of approximately 40%, underscores the opportunity for ECCMIS-like mobile application that can be accessible on all major mobile platforms. While ECCMIS has basic mobile features, a dedicated application could significantly enhance access and usability for the public and legal professionals. Currently, sentiment from the ECCMIS users is that it is laggy, prone to failures to perform and execute actions and limited to a web version (The Independent, 2022). A dedicated mobile application would function by providing a simplified, secure portal to the full court system.

Upon verified login, a litigant could use their smartphone camera to scan, and upload required court documents directly into their case file. Furthermore, the app could integrate with Uganda's ubiquitous

mobile money platforms (used by 35.6 million subscribers) to allow for the instant, one-tap payment of filing fees, fines, or bail, with a digital receipt automatically stored within the app, case database in ECCMIS and linked to the case. Documents such as witness testimony (including experts domestically and abroad), valuable immovable evidence would be presented to court. Witnesses would be able to attend court thereby reducing the number of adjournments that are prevalent due to absence of witnesses, without incurring travel costs or losing workdays, simply by joining a secure video link from their phones (Rossner et al, 2021). Litigants, especially in civil matters in common disputes such as debt recovery, landlord-tenant disputes could join preliminary hearings and mediations virtually, reducing the default rates caused by mobility and cost constraints. Furthermore, Court dates, hearing links, and served documents (pleadings, rulings) could be received directly on phones via app notifications, email, SMS or secure messaging platforms, mitigating the problem of parties being unaware of proceedings and would enable planning in a timely manner. Studies on court digitization in developing countries show that well-designed e-court and case-management platforms reduce backlogs, increase transparency, and improve access, especially when they include remote access, e-filing, and online payments. Kenya's Huduma and Rwanda's Irembo platforms demonstrate that mobile and web access can extend legal services beyond urban centers, though gaps in device access, network coverage, and digital literacy persist. (Baratov et al, 2025; Poshai et al, 2023). In addition to this, Cloud-native legal apps achieve high usability and engagement when built with user-centered design and iterative testing (Qausar et al, 2023)

Summarized below are expected challenges and ways to address them.

Anticipated challenges	Proposed solutions
Costs of infrastructure set up	<b>Zero-Rated Platforms</b> where the government can partner with telecom companies to zero-rate the official ECCMIS website and app, so users don't incur data costs in utilising it.
Community buy-in and awareness	<b>Clear Protocols:</b> Define rules for electronic submission of evidence (e.g., photos/videos of physical evidence taken and uploaded via the hub's system). <b>Mandatory Training &amp; Support:</b> Provide continuous, hands-on training for judicial officers, lawyers, and court staff on using the systems. <b>Demonstrate Benefits by</b> showcasing success stories and data on how virtual tools have reduced backlog and saved time in pilot areas.

## Conclusion

Establishing appropriate policy frameworks (including procedural, legal and regulatory frameworks) that make online and remote legal support, dispute resolution and related modalities feasible, while ensuring the protection of fundamental rights and access to justice for the most vulnerable and those who will be facing the starkest effects of the economic crisis is critical. Digital tools and communication technologies present an unlimited, yet barely tapped mechanism through which access to justice can be significantly improved. Through internet enabled legal consultation platforms, virtual court hearings on TV screens and digital interfaces, there is an opportunity for accessing justice in remote areas.

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