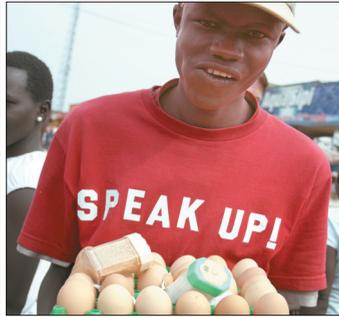




In the public eye

Citizens' views on access to information



1. Introduction

In 1913, a US judge commented that “sunlight is the best disinfectant”. Indeed, transparency and access to information can be a quick way to prevent and expose corruption and mismanagement. But access to Government-held information is useful for much more than shining a light on wrong-doing. When citizens are aware of the basis for decision-making in government, they are better placed to assess government performance and contribute their own ideas and experiences. So, is critical Government-held information available and accessible to citizens in Tanzania?

Tanzania was one of the earliest member countries in the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a global initiative to increase transparency and citizen participation in government. One of the core tenets of the OGP is the idea of co-responsibility – government and citizens partnering to develop solutions to the country’s challenges. To this end, the government has committed, as part of its second OGP Action Plan, to enacting a Freedom of Information law that makes it easier for citizens to request and receive information held by their government. President Kikwete made this commitment at an international summit in October 2013. The Access to Information bill was presented to Parliament for first reading in March 2015.

Tanzania is heading towards a constitutional referendum and general election later in 2015. In this context, access to public information takes on a unique and critical significance. Will citizens be able to get the information they need so as to assess the performance of their leaders and to make informed decisions about the future?

This brief reports on citizens’ experiences and opinions on the theme of access to information. It presents data from a nationally-representative, high-frequency mobile phone survey, *Sauti za Wananchi*. A total of 1,330 respondents on Mainland Tanzania

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were contacted between 23 March and 10 April 2015. This was the 31st round of *Sauti za Wananchi* – for information on previous rounds (including data, questionnaires, and briefs), visit www.twaweza.org/sauti.

The key findings are:

- A large majority of citizens, 84%, support the passage of the Access to Information Bill
- About 80% support the idea that citizens should have access to information held by public authorities and that access to information can reduce corruption
- The most important feature of the bill for citizens is that public officials should be punished for failing to comply with the law, 47% support this.
- Few citizens request information from service providers. When they do so, such requests are mostly fulfilled.

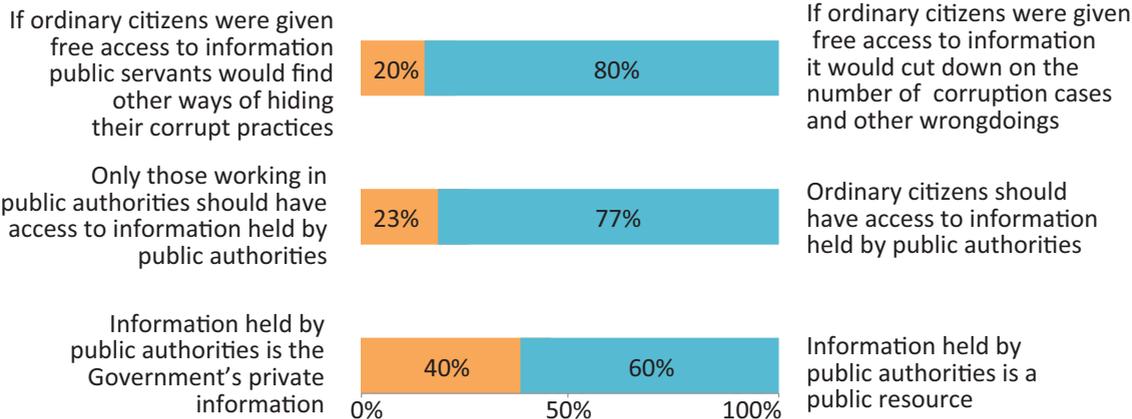
2. Six facts about access to information in Tanzania

Fact 1: Most citizens believe they should have access to government information

A strong majority (around 80%) agree with the statements that access to information could act as a limit to corruption, and that citizens should have access to this information (Figure 1). Although people were divided on whether government information could be defined as a “public resource” –this is essentially an abstract, philosophical question – almost everyone agrees that, regardless of how we defined information, access to it was critical.

Agreement does not vary significantly across different groups. The only statistically significant differences we found were: men are more likely to agree with “Information held by public authorities is a public resource”, and people who have completed Standard 7 are more likely to agree with the statement that “Ordinary citizens should have access to information held by public authorities” (data not shown but available on request).

Figure 1: Which statement do you agree with more?



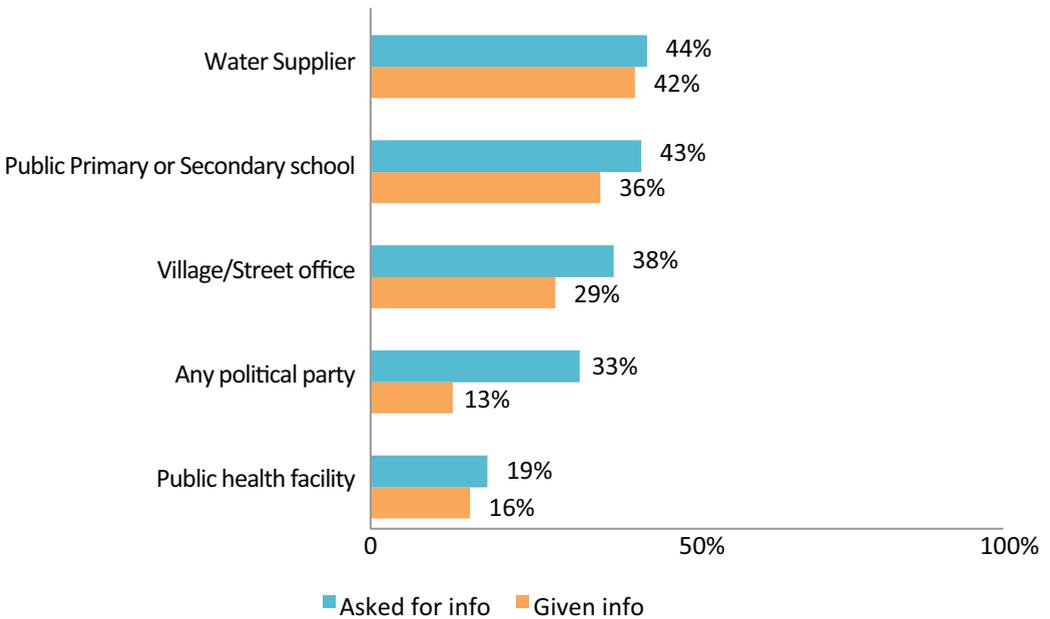
Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey- Round 31 (March-April 2015)

Fact 2: Most citizens who report asking for information say they received it

Most citizens did not ask for information from government offices during their last visit.

However, when citizens did ask for information, they usually received it (Figure 2). Citizens report that water suppliers in particular answer almost all information requests. We did not ask about what type of information they requested. The one facility type that was most reluctant to provide information was the political party office: fewer than half of those who asked for information from a political party office received it (or, 13% out of 33%; Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Did you ask for information during your last visit to the following facilities
Did you receive it?**

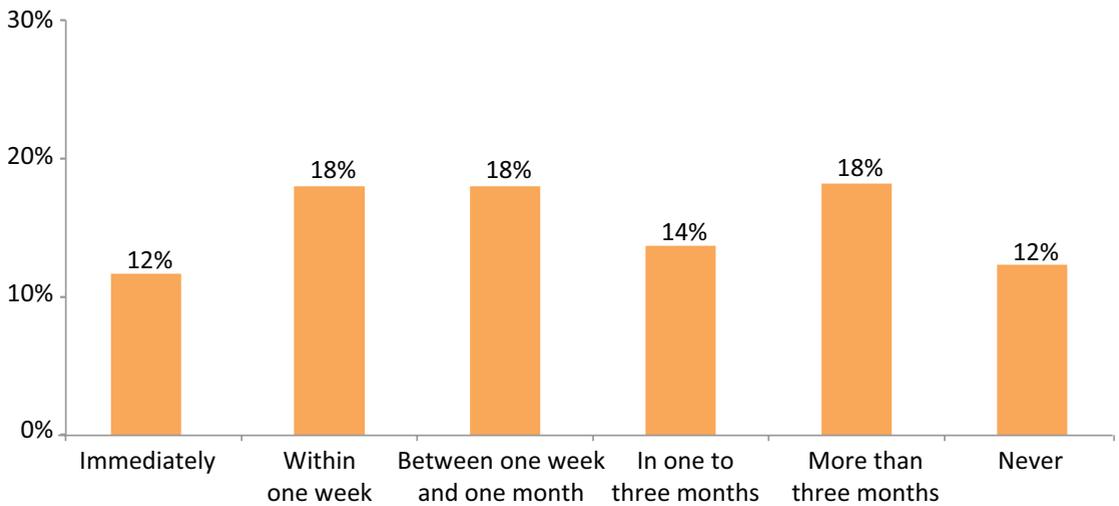


Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey - Round 31 (March-April 2015)

Fact 3: Citizens don't know when to expect information requests to be fulfilled

A substantial minority of people – 12% - believe that they will “never” see the information they have asked for from a government office (Figure 3). That said: an equal number – 12% - think they will receive it immediately. And the rest are evenly split (Figure 3). The lack of a specific law governing these requests may contribute to citizens’ lack of clarity about what to expect.

Figure 3: If you presented an information request to a Government office, how long do you think it would take to receive a response?



Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Mobile Phone Survey- Round 31 (March-April 2015).
“Don’t know” and non-responses excluded.

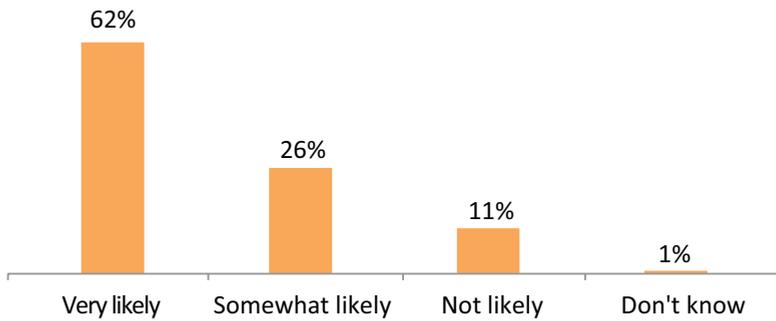
Fact 4: Six out of ten citizens would report wrongdoing if they saw it

Whistleblowing – or, exposing corruption or wrongdoing – can play a major role in bringing about a free and fair society. Yet it can be a risky activity for the whistleblower. Those whose misdeeds are exposed can often be more powerful and well-connected than those who blow the whistle.

Nine out of ten citizens said it was very or somewhat likely that they would personally report wrongdoing or corruption (Figure 4). However this may be the result of a social desirability bias – everyone wants to believe they would report wrongdoing.

It is therefore more interesting to ask the people who say they are not likely to report any wrongdoing, why they would not do so. Of those who said they would not report wrongdoing, one out of four claimed that it would be dangerous (data not shown in graph; this is equivalent to 4% of the total population).

Figure 4: Sometimes ordinary citizens have information of corruption or wrongdoing. If you had such information, how likely do you think it is that you would report it ?



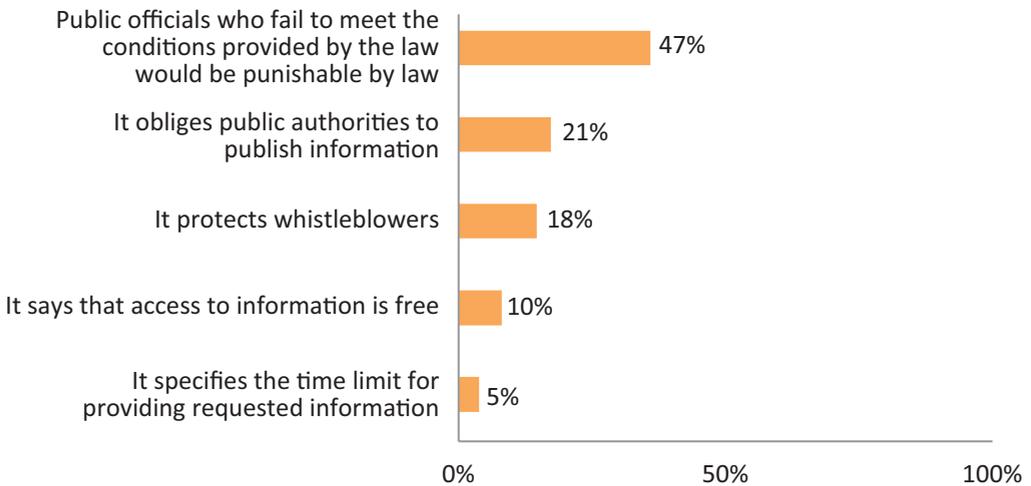
Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Mobile Phone Survey - Round 31 (March-April 2015)

Fact 5: Citizens want public officials to be punished for failing to provide information as required by law

We provided respondents with a list of five possible features of an Access to Information Bill, and asked them to identify which was the most important for them.

By far, the most popular item was that public officials who fail to meet conditions provided by law should be prosecuted – 47% of citizens listed this as “most important” (Figure 5). No other items had such strong support. This indicates that citizens are hungry for accountability from public officials.

Figure 5: Which of the five possible features of a Freedom of Information¹ Bill is the most important to you?



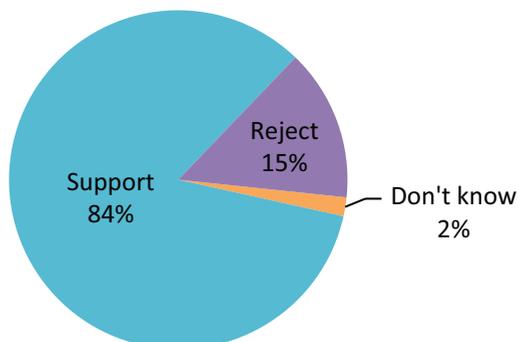
Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Mobile Phone Survey- Round 31 (March-April 2015)

¹ The current bill being considered by the government is known as the Access to Information bill. However, during surveying, it was referred to as the Freedom of Information bill.

Fact 6: There is very strong support for an Access to Information Bill

A strong majority of citizens (84%) support an Access to Information Bill (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Would recommend Parliament support the bill or reject such a bill?



Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Mobile Phone Survey- Round 30 (February-March 2015)

When told that the bill would require public officials to periodically release information to the public, the most popular option for disseminating this information is the radio (data not shown). Indeed, when asked – in general – which media outlet they consider the most trustworthy, 60% of citizens say radio (data not shown).

3. Conclusion

Open government and access to information are often perceived as issues that citizens struggle to conceptualise or that they do not find important. However, *Sauti za Wananchi* found strong support for access to information and accountability among the majority of citizens.

These data reveal that citizens' perceptions of transparency and accountability are framed by immediate concerns about corruption and a poorly-functioning justice system. Policy issues, such as protections for whistle-blowers and speed of response to access to information requests, are less salient. That does not mean that they are not important.

Tanzania is a member of the Open Government Partnership and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. It has recently made some good progress on open data – establishing a national system for making government-held data on health, education and water publicly available. These data from *Sauti za Wananchi* also show that information requests by citizens are generally fulfilled by service providers.

However, two bills that were recently passed by Parliament – the Statistics Act and the Cybercrime Act – include measures that could seriously roll back the openness of governance. The Statistics Act, threatens severe jail terms and fines for anyone publishing statistical information that is “false” or “distorting”. The Cybercrime Act makes the publication of “misleading” information online similarly punishable by imprisonment or stiff fines or both. Furthermore, the long-awaited Access to Information and Media Services

Bills were initially brought to parliament under a certificate of urgency, sharply curtailing any opportunity for the public scrutiny of the bill. Fortunately, the timetable has now been revised to allow time for wider inputs.

Evidence from this and previous *Sauti za Wananchi* findings² show that citizens clearly support increased accountability from public officials. Although the conceptual relationship between access to information and accountability may not be at the forefront of citizens' minds, these data show that citizens are broadly supportive of having access to public information enshrined in law with clear penalties for non-compliance.

The government's posture appears to be ambiguous. There is a tension between the desire to bring Tanzania closer to international norms of greater transparency and accountability and a historical "siri kali" (confidential) culture of doing government business.

However, Government is being pressured by citizens to become more open. It has laid out an ambitious reformist agenda in the field of open governance through the Second Open Government Partnership Action Plan.³ But commitments must be backed by concrete actions. The march towards more open government must lead to real improvements in how citizens interact with and experience government. This is a sure way for government to find itself on the right side of its own citizens and of history.

² *Sauti za Wananchi*, Tanzania towards 2015, November 2014, No. 18 and *Sauti za Wananchi*, Have more laws, agencies and commitments against corruption made a difference?, No. 14, August 2014

³ <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/OGP%20ACTION%20PLAN%20PHASE%20TWO%2006.11.2014%20FINAL.doc>

