



Press Release
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Citizens are hungry for information: more than half have visited government facilities for information in the past three months and 8 out of 10 can name specific topics they want more information about

Friday, 28 September 2018, Kampala: Citizens regularly visit government institutions to seek for information: more than half have been to a public health facility (75%), a public school (69%), and village / street offices (54%) to request information. And citizens express desire to have more information from government on public services spending (47%), jobs in government (14%) and money sent to districts (7%). Less than 1 out of 10 Ugandans (7%) say they do not want any information from government.

Citizens also believe strongly in their right to access government information. Eight out of ten say information held by public authorities is a public resource (77%) and that citizens should be able to access information from government (78%).

These finds have been curated and shared by Twaweza to mark **International Right to Know Day** in a short brief titled *Access to Information: unblocking the flow, fulfilling the potential*. The data are drawn from a number of sources including Twaweza's *Sauti za Wananchi*, omnibus national surveys commissioned by Twaweza, a desk review of literature on the subject and a scoping study conducted by the ICT Policy Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa (CIPESA).

Despite strong support and desire to access government information, citizens think that this information is hard to get. Eight out of ten (or more) citizens say it would be difficult or impossible to get information from government on the development budget (90%), agricultural extension services (87%), school exam performance rankings (85%). However think information on construction plans is easier to come by: 47% say it would be difficult or impossible to do so. The main reasons given for these challenges are not knowing where to look for this information (45%) and long travel distances to get it (32%).

And citizens' experiences resonate with institutions or professionals who seek information. The AskYourGov.ug website (76%) and the Hub for Investigative Media (62%) both show that the majority of requests in between 2013 and 2015 are marked as pending (not yet responded to). One out of five requests (21%) on AskYourGov was successful, and one out of eight (12%) on HIM. CIPESA (2016) found that government institutions seemed to use different tactics to avoid fulfillment of access to information requests including: providing incomplete or outdated data, treating requesters with suspicion or hostility, and delaying or dismissing requests for no reason.

When it comes to channels of communication, citizens express clear preferences. If they are seeking information directly from government, citizens will either visit the relevant office physically (100%) or use the phone (71%). Other means of communication including the internet are used by less than 1 out of 10 Ugandans. But when it comes to their main source of information, citizens unequivocally chose radio (75%) as their preferred means to receive information from government with community meetings (32%) a distant second.

So citizens want government information, they are already seeking it in some cases. They also think in general that information from government is hard to access even though it is their right to do so. What can government do to help remove these blockages to information. The first responses are practical: using the channels that citizens choose, making information proactively available and accessible, promoting its availability rather than waiting for citizens to request it and training all government personnel on the access to information law.

Other obstacles, as identified by Twaweza's review of the literature are more complex. On the side of citizens' there are strong tendencies towards relying on word of mouth as a source rather than directly seeking the relevant information, there is also a fear of and deference to authority. Citizens' may also not be motivated to seek government information in the face of more pressing concerns around life necessities. But the cost of filing a request and low access to the internet may also place practical constraints in their way.

On the government side, there are a number of laws that run counter to the spirit of the access to information law including the Evidence Act, the Official Secrets Act and some parts of the Penal Code. In addition, there seems to be a general attitude of secrecy and the fear of releasing 'the wrong thing'. And finally general restrictions on some political rights and concentrated ownership of media outlets all play a role in restricting citizens' access to information.

Violet Alinda, Advocacy Manager at Twaweza, said: *"Uganda is a regional champion in terms of financial transparency and our access to information law has been around for much longer than those of our peers. Yet in reality citizens are not easily able to actualize their right to information. Although some of the obstacles are entrenched and may take time to change, there are some more straightforward practical steps the government can take to address the gap between policy and practice."*

"First, a concerted effort should be made in proactive information sharing from local authorities, in particular via radio and community meetings – this both makes some information available as a default and sends a signal that government business is open to scrutiny. Second, officials in local authorities need to be trained and sensitized on the law and their responsibility in sharing information. This again sends an important signal to public servants and citizens as well as overcoming officials' knowledge gaps about this law. And finally the fee for making requests should be scrapped and replaced with a provision for requesters to pay the cost of reproduction of the information alone (for example photocopying fees). These three steps will go a long way to ensuring Ugandans can enjoy their constitutional and legal right to information."

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Notes to Editors

- The data presented here comes from i) a desk review of the political and social environment for access to information in Uganda, conducted by Dr Julius Kiiiza in 2016; ii) a scoping study conducted on blockages to effective use of Uganda's access to information law, including focus groups, key informant interviews and a small survey of 152 randomly selected respondents, conducted by CIPESA in 2015-2016; iii) a series of questions on access to information and related matters included by Twaweza in two nationally representative surveys: the "Omnibus" surveys, one of 2,252 respondents conducted by Research World International in 2016 and the second of 2,000 respondents conducted by Ipsos Uganda in 2015; and iv) Round 2 of Twaweza's *Sauti za Wananchi*, a nationally-representative mobile phone panel survey, conducted in November 2017.
- Twaweza works on enabling children to learn, citizens to exercise agency and governments to be more open and responsive in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. Follow us at Twaweza Uganda (Facebook), @TwawezaUganda (Twitter), Twaweza East Africa (Instagram)