



Active and engaged?

Ugandans' experiences of participation and citizens' agency

1. Introduction

Democracy has famously been described as “government of the people, by the people, for the people”. The phrase indicates that citizens are not passive bystanders on issues of governance, but rather are active participants. In turn, governments give citizens opportunities to make their voice heard, listen to what they say, and make decisions that take these views into account.

In practice, of course, things do not always happen this way. Citizens are busy with their family and work responsibilities and have other interests. Some government leaders and officials would prefer not to have to concern themselves with citizens' views, perhaps because they think that citizens are not experts or that listening to them slows down the work of government. Others may see better opportunities for personal gain when their work is kept out of public view.

This research brief presents data on Ugandan citizens' views and experiences of participation and citizen agency. How do citizens participate in government, and which citizens participate more or less than others? What prevents people from doing so? What topics are most commonly discussed? What opportunities to make their voice heard do citizens see as the most straightforward? And do citizens feel their government leaders are respectful and responsive towards them?

Data for the brief come from Twaweza's new *Sauti za Wananchi* survey. *Sauti za Wananchi* is a nationally-representative, high-frequency mobile phone panel survey. Information on the overall methodology is available at www.twaweza.org/sauti. For this brief, data were collected from 1872 respondents in the eighth round of calls to the *Sauti za Wananchi* panel, conducted between 8 and 20 December, 2018.

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The key findings are:

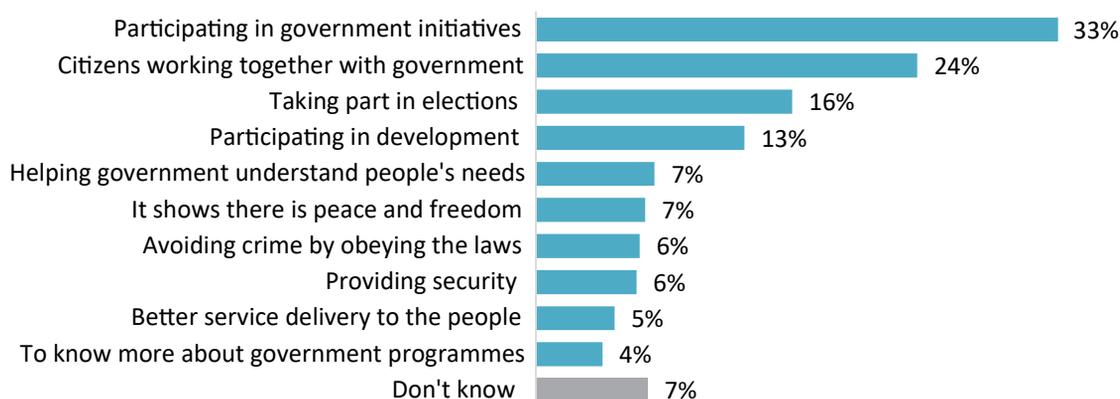
- Citizens see participation primarily as participating in government initiatives
- Fewer than half of citizens say they have attended a public meeting in the last year
- Citizens say the most impactful meetings were organised by the LC I chair
- A wide range of reasons are given for not attending meetings
- 4 out of 10 citizens have approached a local leader to address a problem in the past year
- Citizens see local government representatives as their main channel for expressing their needs to county government
- 3 out of 5 citizens have got together with others to raise an issue in the past year
- 3 out of 4 citizens say it is not easy to participate in local government planning and budgeting
- Most citizens say sub-county level leaders take ordinary Ugandans' views into account when making decisions, but national leaders do not
- Half of citizens say their community leaders are respectful towards the people

2. Ten insights about participation and citizen agency

Insight 1: For citizens, participation means being part of government initiatives

One out of three citizens (33%) see participation mainly as taking part in government initiatives, and a further one out of four (24%) see it as citizens working together with government. Substantial numbers also see participation as voting / campaigning in elections (16%) or more generally as participating in development (13%).

Figure 1: What does citizen participation in government mean to you?¹
(up to three responses permitted; top ten answers shown)



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;
Base: all respondents; n=1,872

¹ Percentages in charts may not add up to 100% due to rounding

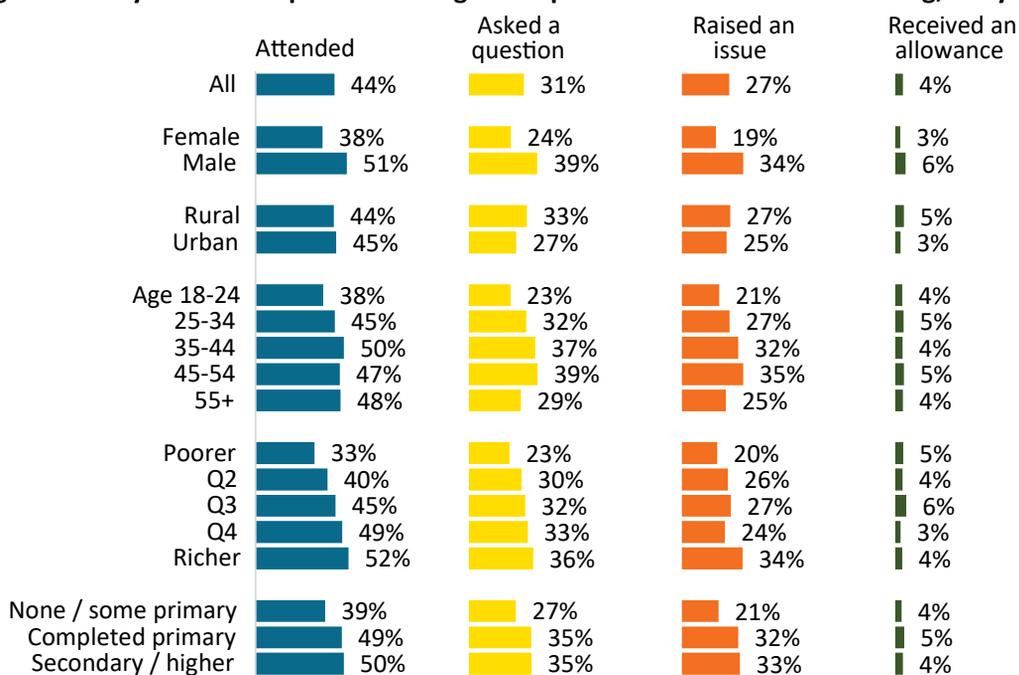
Insight 2: Fewer than half of citizens have attended a public meeting in the last year

Less than half of the adult population (44%) have attended a public meeting in the past 12 months. The figure is higher among men (51%) than women (38%) and lower among younger citizens (38%). There is also a clear link with wealth, with richer citizens (52%) more likely than poorer citizens (33%) to have attended a public meeting.

Three out of ten citizens (31%) say they asked a question at a public meeting in the past year, and almost as many say they raised an issue (27%). In each case, reported levels of engagement at meetings are substantially higher among men than women, and higher among wealthier and more educated citizens.

One out of twenty citizens (4%) report having received an allowance in return for attending a meeting. This represents one in ten of those who attended a meeting.

Figure 2: Did you attend a public meeting in the past 12 months? At the meeting, did you ...?



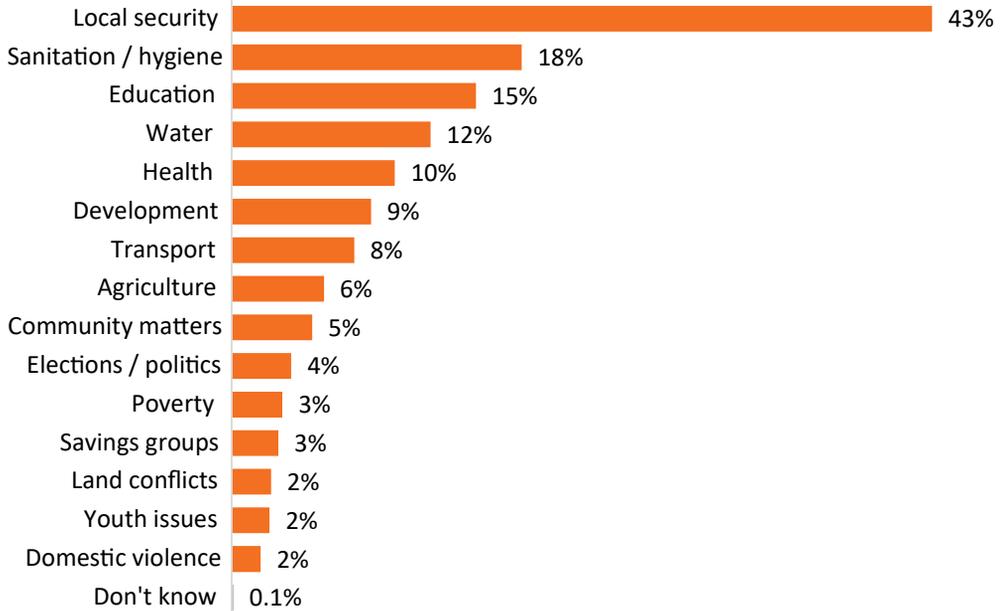
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;

Base: all respondents; n=1,872

The most common topic on the agenda at these public meetings was local security, which was raised at four out of ten meetings (43%). This is discussed more than twice as often as the next most common topic: sanitation and hygiene (18%). A wide variety of other issues are

also discussed, including education (15%), water (12%), health (10%), development (9%) and transport (8%).

Figure 3: What was the meeting about?
(multiple responses permitted; top 15 answers shown)



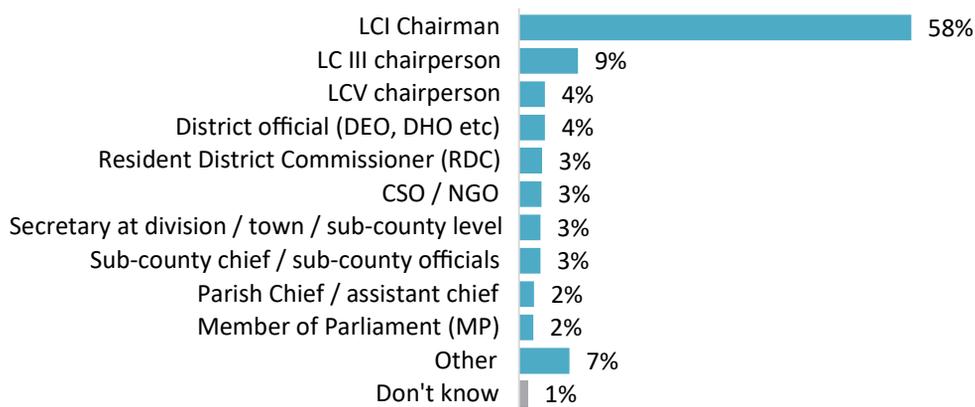
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;

Base: those who have attended at least one meeting in the last 12 months; n=867

Insight 3: LC I meetings are reported to be the most impactful

Six out of ten citizens (58%) say the meeting that made the biggest impression on them was organised by their LC I chair. This is much higher than for meetings organised by any other actors. Meetings organised by the LC III division chair rank in second place (9%).

**Figure 4: Think of the meeting that made the biggest impression on you.
Who organized this meeting?**



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;

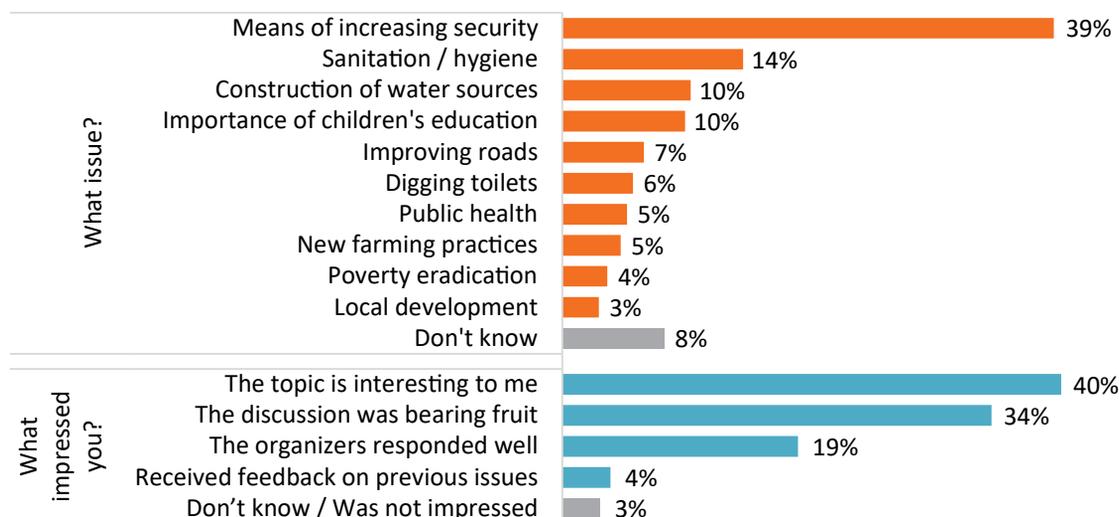
Base: those who have attended at least one meeting in the last 12 months; n=867

Among those who have attended a meeting, four out of ten (39%) say increasing security was the most impressive topic of discussion.

The main reason given for being impressed by a meeting was that the topic was interesting, stated by four out of ten citizens (40%).

Figure 5: In the last meeting you attended, which issue discussed was impressive?

What impressed you about the meeting?
(multiple responses permitted; top answers shown)



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;

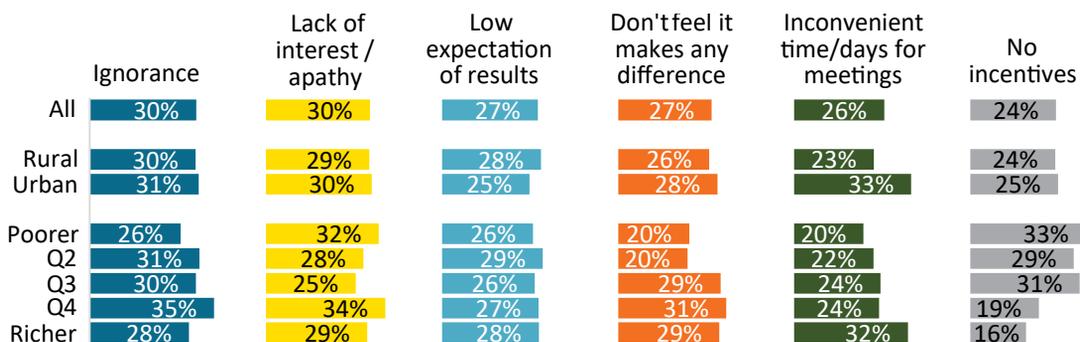
Base: those who have attended at least one meeting in the last 12 months; n=867

Insight 4: There are many reasons for non-attendance at meetings

Six different reasons are each cited by one out of four or more citizens for non-attendance at public meetings. This includes ignorance (30%), lack of interest (30%), low expectation of results (27%), a sense that it makes no difference (27%), inconvenient scheduling (26%), and the lack of compensation (24%).

Inconvenient meeting schedules are more commonly cited as a problem among wealthier citizens (32%) and in urban areas (33%), while a lack of compensation is more commonly cited by poorer citizens (33%).

Figure 6: What stops people in this area from attending public participation forums?



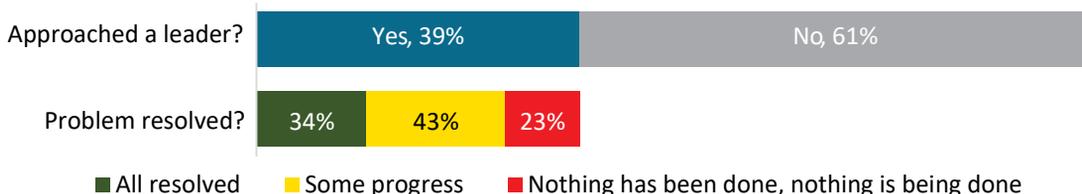
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;

Base: those who have attended at least one meeting in the last 12 months; n=867

Insight 5: 4 out of 10 citizens talked to a local leader about a problem in the past year

Four out of ten citizens (39%) have joined with other members of their community to approach a local leader to address a problem. In one third of such cases (34%), the problem was resolved, while some progress was made in a further 43% of cases.

Figure 7: In the past year, have you and other members of your village/neighbourhood jointly approached a local leader? Were the issues resolved?

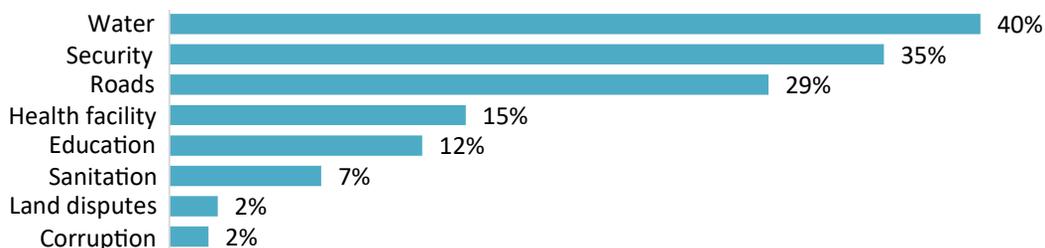


Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;

Base: all respondents; n=1,872

The most common issues for citizens to raise in this way are water (40%), followed by security (35%) and roads (29%).

Figure 8: What was/were the problems/issues which you wanted to be addressed or help on?
(multiple responses permitted; top eight answers shown)

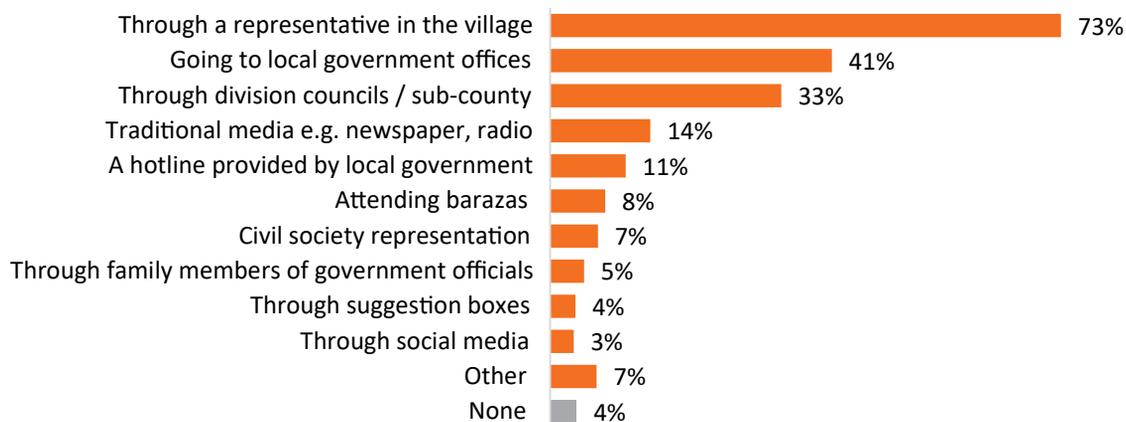


Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;
Base: those who have approached a local leader in the past year; n=741

Insight 6: Citizens see local government representatives as their main channel for expressing their needs to government

Three out of four citizens (73%) say local government representatives at village level are the main way to express their needs to county government, more than any other mechanism. This is followed by physical visits to local government offices (41%) and through division committees (33%).

Figure 9: Can you tell me (up to three) ways available to you, as a citizen, to express your needs to the local government?

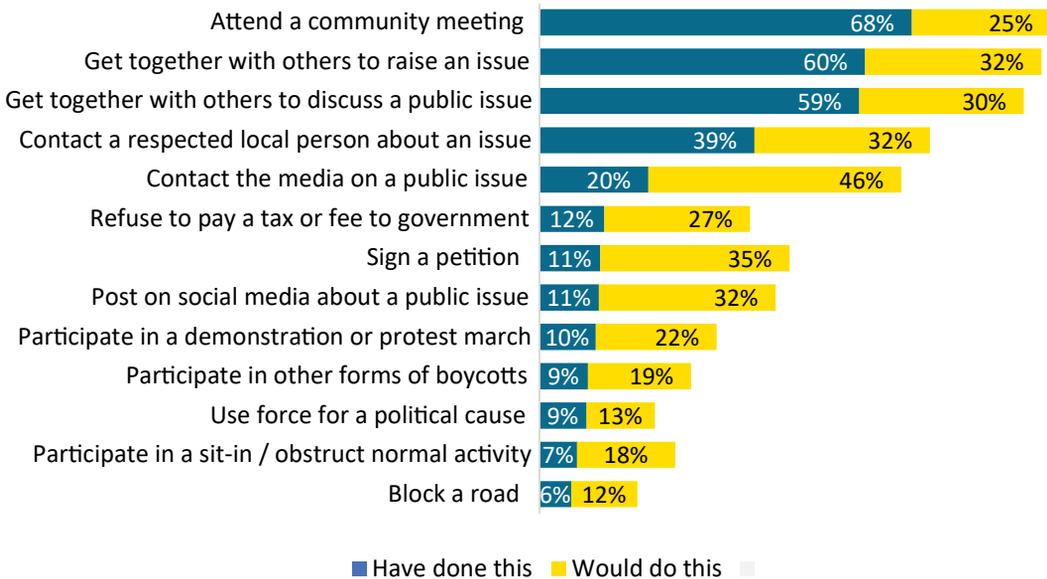


Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;
Base: all respondents; n=1,872

Insight 7: 3 out of 5 citizens have got together with others to raise an issue in the past year

Two out of three citizens (68%) say they have attended a community meeting in the past year, and a further one out of four (25%) say they would do so if they had the chance. Other actions taken by a majority of citizens in the past year include getting together with others to raise (60%) or discuss (59%) an issue. Four out of ten (39%) have contacted a respected local person about an issue, and two out of ten (20%) have contacted the media. More confrontational methods of expressing a view – such as boycotts, demonstrations, sit-ins or road blocking – are less common.

Figure 10: Have you, personally, done any of these things during (the past year)? If not, would you do so if you had the chance?



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;
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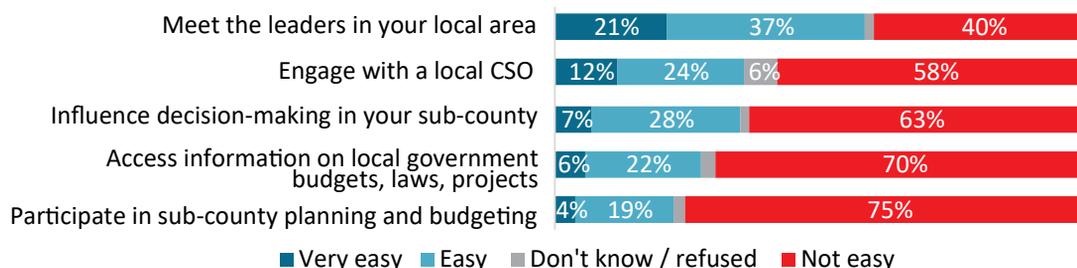
Insight 8: 3 out of 4 citizens say it's hard to be part of sub-county planning, budgeting

Three quarters of citizens (75%) say it is not easy to participate in sub-county planning and budgeting, compared to one out of five (19%) who say it is easy and one out of twenty (4%) who say it is very easy.

Most also say that it is not easy to access information on local government budgets, laws and projects (70%), influence decision making in your county (63%) or engage with a local CSO (58%).

However, a majority (68%) say it is either easy or very easy to meet the leaders in their area.

Figure 11: In your opinion how easy is it to do the following?



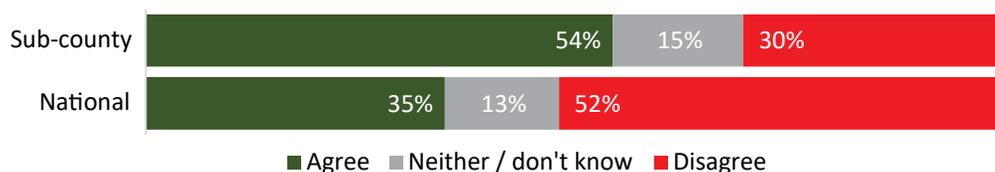
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;
Base: all respondents; n=1,872

Insight 9: The majority of citizens say sub-county level leaders take ordinary Ugandans' views into account when making decisions

Over half of citizens (54%) agree that those in authority at sub-county level take the opinion of ordinary Ugandans into account when making decisions on issues of public interest. Three out of ten (30%) disagree with this.

For national level leaders, the situation is reversed. A little over half (52%) say those in authority nationally do not take the opinion of ordinary Ugandans into account, while one out of three (35%) say that they do.

Figure 12: Do you agree or disagree that those in authority at national / sub-county level take the opinion of ordinary Ugandans into account when making decisions on issues of public interest?

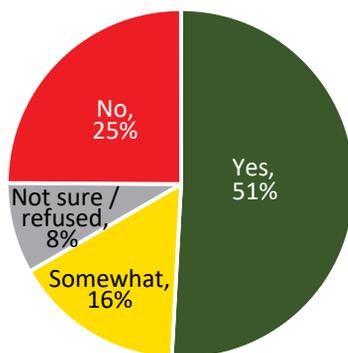


Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;
Base: all respondents; n=1,872

Insight 10: Half of citizens say their community leaders are respectful

Half of citizens (51%) say the leaders in their community put enough effort into being respectful towards the people. One out of four (25%) say that leaders do not do this.

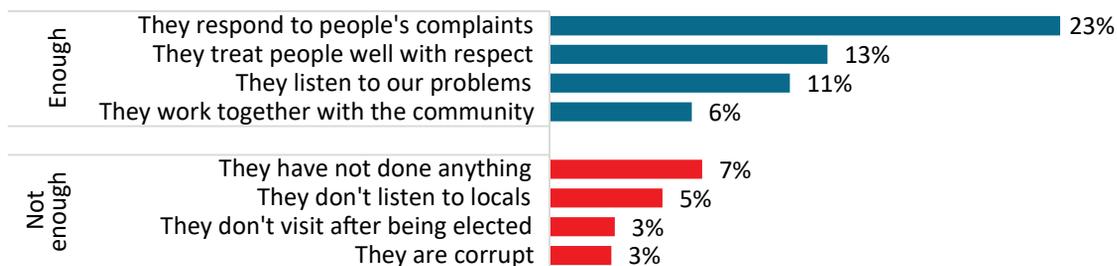
Figure 13: In your opinion, do leaders in your community put enough effort into being respectful towards the people?



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;
 Base: all respondents; n=1,872

The main reasons for saying that community leaders are respectful are that they respond to people’s complaints (23%), that they treat people with respect (13%) and that they listen to citizens’ problems (11%). The main reasons for saying that leaders do not put in enough effort to be respectful are that they have not done anything (7%) and that they don’t listen to locals (5%).

Figure 14: Why do you say so community leaders do / do not put in enough effort? (top four answers shown)



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi*, round 9, 8-20 December 2018;
 Base: all respondents; n=1,872

3. Conclusions

The first conclusion from this brief is that participation is viewed more as something that is organised by the government rather than insisted-upon by citizens. One third define participation primarily as citizens participating in government initiatives, compared to one quarter who see participation as citizens working together with government – a more equal relationship.

This is not to say that participating in ways that are organised by the government is a bad thing. It is positive that as many as 44% of citizens have attended public meetings in the past year, and even more positive that 31% have asked a question at these meetings. These are impressive levels of participation, though it is significant that men are a lot more likely than women to speak at public meetings. Further, there is also an active culture of citizens speaking to local leaders about problems in their community – 39% have done so in the past year.

Second, there is a marked difference between how citizens see local government compared to national. First, a clear majority of citizens say the “most impressive” meetings they have attended were organised by their LC I chair. And second, more citizens say sub-county authorities take their views into account than say the same for national authorities. In part, this may well be the natural consequence of proximity – that local leaders are more visible to citizens, perhaps known socially – but it may also be a sign that this proximity translates into more responsiveness on the part of local leaders.

Third, despite the above, there are still signs that local government could be more open and responsive to citizens than is currently the case. The majority of citizens say that it is not easy to participate in county planning and budgeting, access information on local government budgets, laws and projects, influence decision making in your county or engage with a local CSO.

Overall, there are rich insights here to help encourage an even stronger culture of citizen agency and participatory development in Uganda. The most common reason cited for people not attending meetings are all around a lack of faith in the value of their engagement: it won't make a difference. If citizens felt their participation to be meaningful, there is a chance of unlocking their potential to drive progress and development.

