

Access to information

Do Ugandans know, and do they want to know?



Key Findings

- 1 out of 10 Ugandans has heard of the Access to Information Act (ATI).
- Of those who are aware of the Act, 85% understand its meaning and purpose.
- 3 out of 4 Ugandans believe that information held by public authorities is a public good, and should be openly accessible to the citizens.
- 1 in 2 Ugandans believes that there should be no restriction (except national security issues) on what kind of information should be accessible, and 2 out of 3 also believes that such transparency and monitoring of public officials would result in decreases of corruption and other wrongdoing.

Introduction

At [Twaweza](#), we strongly believe that public access to government-held information allows individuals to better understand the role of government and the decisions being made on their behalf. With an informed citizenry, governments can be held accountable for their policies, and citizens can more effectively choose their representatives. Equally important, access to information laws can be used to improve the lives of people as they request information relating to health care, education, and other public services¹.

It should also be noted that the Ugandan government maintains a website dedicated to Access of Information (<http://askyourgov.ug/>). The website lists 77 public agencies which can be queried. As of 10 October 2016, 304 ATI requests had been made on the website; of these, 50 were marked as “resolved.” A read through the “resolved” category suggests this label is applied to a query that is answered by a relevant official, although it is not clear whether the information provided in the answer satisfies the

¹ <http://www.cartercenter.org/documents/1272.pdf>

request made. Another 245 queries on the site are marked as “unresolved” and most of these carry a label of “long overdue.” In order to inform our work on freedom of information in Uganda, we sought to find out whether Ugandans know about the existence of the Freedom of Information Act which guarantees them the right to access information held by public institutions², as well as what are Ugandan’s thoughts and opinions about information held by public authorities, and whether ordinary citizens ought to have access to this information. This brief presents key highlights from that research.

Methodology

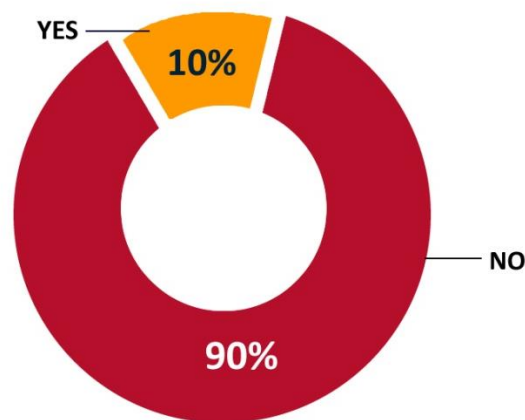
Twaweza East Africa periodically commissions Ipsos Uganda to gather feedback on a number of our areas of work, through nationally representative “omnibus” surveys³. The surveys are conducted several times per year, and consist of face to face interviews with randomly selected respondents, aged 18 or over, using a semi-structured questionnaire. A sample size of 2,000 interviews was determined with a margin of error +/-2% at 95% confidence interval. This sample was distributed evenly based on the estimated population size, and is also representative of the rural/urban clustering. The data presented herein was collected between April and November 2015.

Main findings

Fact 1: 1 out of 10 of Ugandans has heard about the Access to Information Act

Just 10% of citizens have heard about the Access to Information Act (Figure 1). The levels of awareness were evenly spread across gender, age groups and location. There were slight variations across regions: the highest was in the Northern region, with 16% respondents having heard of the Act; the lowest was in the Central region, with 8% having heard of it (data not shown).

Figure 1: have you heard of the access to information act in Uganda? (n=2000)



Fact 2: 9 out of 10 citizens who are aware of the Access to Information Act, understand its purpose

Of those who had heard about the Access to Information Act, 88% were able to correctly describe its purpose in their own words; saying it’s a law that gives every citizen the right to receive and share

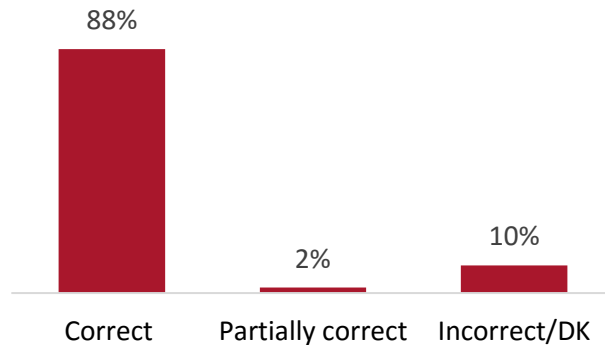
² The Access to Information Act was signed into law in 2011, while the act was passed in 2005

<https://freedomhouse.org/article/uganda-passes-access-information-act>

³ <https://www.surveyanalytics.com/omnibus-survey-definition.html>

information. Another 2% were able to partially describe it by mentioning a few related words like 'people need to know' and 'a law that ensures people have information on performance of civil servants.' 10% could not describe it at all.

Figure 2: Can you describe the Act in your own words? (n=200)



Fact 3: Majority of Ugandans believe that information held by public authorities should be a public resource, accessible to citizens

We presented respondents with four paired statements pertaining to information held by public authorities, asking them to reflect which statement in each pair is closest to their own view. The statements did not specify the kind of information, only noted that its information held by public authorities. As shown in Figures 3 and 4 below, more than three-quarters (77%) of Ugandans agreed that information held by public authorities is a public resource, and a similar proportion (78%) of Ugandans also believe that ordinary citizens should have access to the information held by public authorities.

Figure 3: Which statement about information held by public authorities is closest to your views? (n=2114)

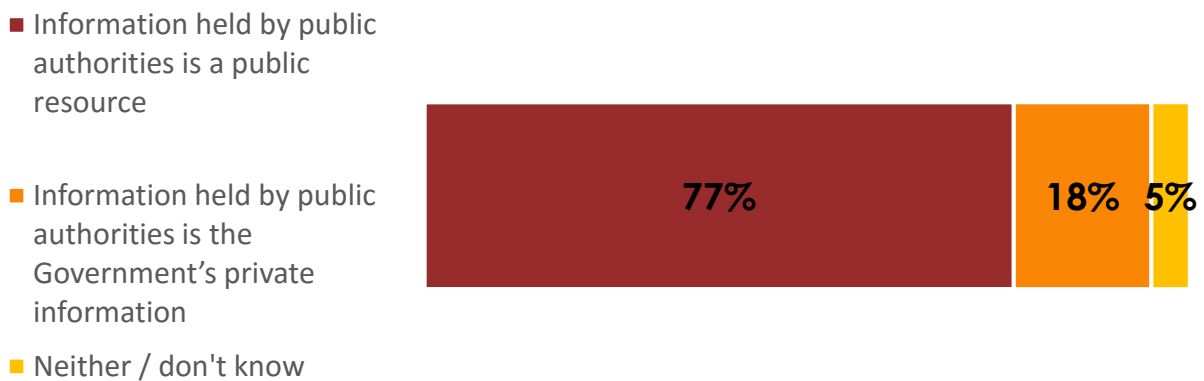
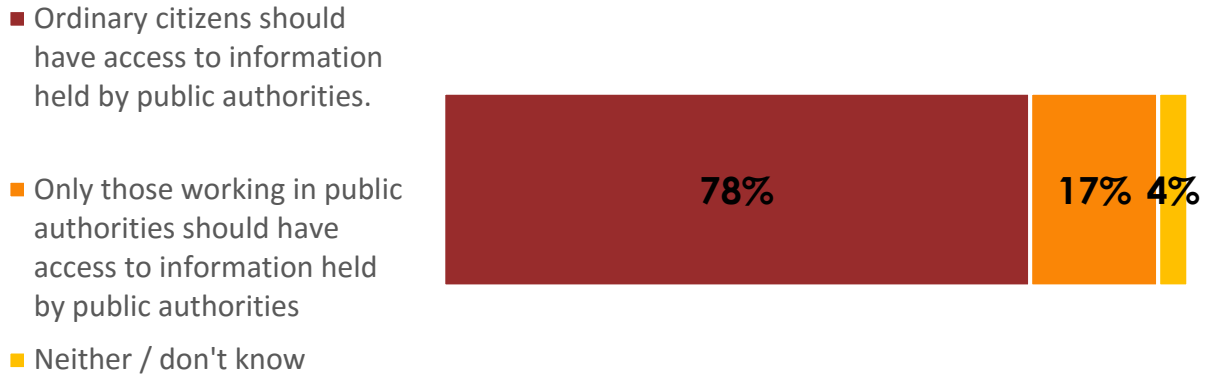
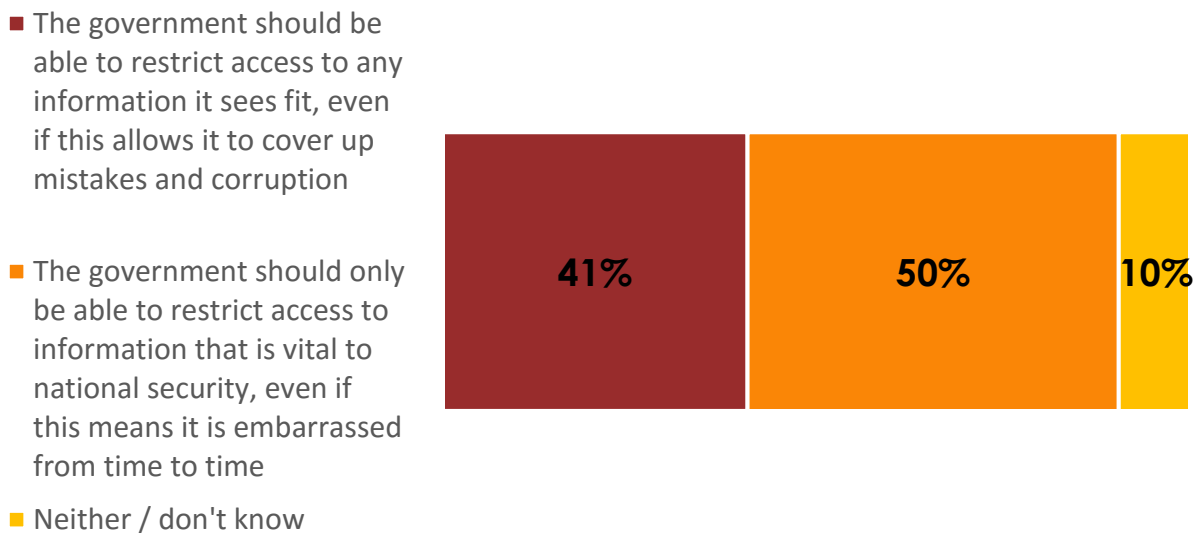


Figure 4: Which statement about *access* to information held by public authorities is closest to your views? (n=2114)



We then asked about respondent’s opinions of when is it appropriate for public authorities to restrict access to information. These results, shown in Figure 5, suggest some degree of tolerance of restricting access to information by the government (41%), even at the cost of covering up mistakes or corruption.

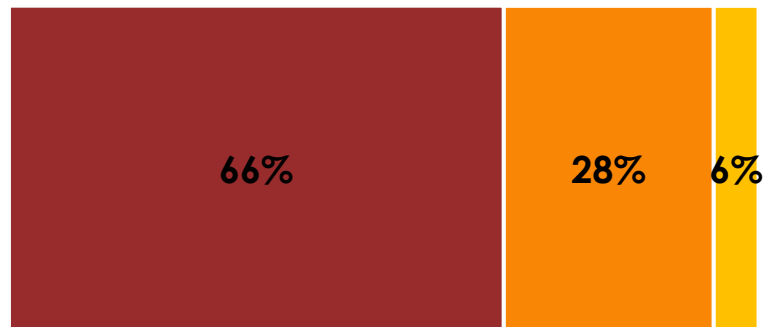
Figure 5: Which statement about when it is acceptable to restrict information held by public authorities is closest to your views? (n=2114)



Finally, we also asked about respondent’s opinions of what would be the effect on public servants if citizens were given free access to information. Figure 6 shows two-thirds (66%) of citizens believe such free access would cut down on corruption and other wrongdoing by civil servants.

Figure 6: Which statement about possible effects of citizens accessing information held by public authorities is closest to your views? (n=2114)

- If ordinary citizens were given free access to information, public servants would be scared and it would cut down on the number of corruption cases and other wrong doings.
- If ordinary citizens were given free access to information, public servants would find other ways of hiding their corrupt acts and wrong doings.
- Neither / don't know



Conclusion

The findings of the survey show very low awareness levels about the Access to Information Act. This lack of awareness is likely to be one of the major reasons why the Act is currently not being used by citizens. On the other hand, when asked about their opinion on whether information held by public officials should be accessible to citizens, the majority (three-quarters) of respondents agreed that such information is a public good and should be accessible to citizens. In this context, awareness campaigns for citizens, alongside targeted support for them to make access to information requests, could be potential areas of focus for any organization wishing to address these issues.

Moreover, two-thirds of respondents believed this kind of monitoring would result in fear among public servants, and therefore a reduction in corruption and wrongdoing. Interestingly, however, given the above high levels of agreement on general accessibility, when asked whether public authorities *ought to be able to* restrict access to information, the answers were mixed: while 50% thought no such restrictions ought to be allowed (except for national security), another 41% believed restrictions were acceptable. Overall, the findings suggest that making wider use of the Access to Information Act might be a powerful monitoring mechanism, even if citizens are currently comfortable with some degree of opacity from the government.

A related area of interest, and a fruitful subject for further research would be to follow up on government responses to such requests, starting with the existing ones. Have, for example, the 42 requests on the website been addressed? What would be the response if these requests rose significantly in volume or sought increasingly sensitive information on resource use and management? What are government officials', at all levels from the nurse to the Minister, attitudes towards government information? Do they feel that citizens have a right to access it or do they feel that much of it is confidential?

Putting these two areas of investigation together would yield powerful insights for anyone interested in enhancing citizens' access to information.