



Into the light

Citizens and access to information

1. Introduction

"Information is the currency that every citizen requires to participate in the life and governance of society." - Justice A. P. Shah, former Chief Justice, Delhi and Madras High Courts, 2010.

In a democratic system, citizens are most powerfully engaged in governance when there is both easy access to information and they have full freedom to express their views. This allows them to better understand the roles of different public institutions and the decisions made on their behalf¹. Informed citizens make better choices of whom to elect to represent them, and are better able to hold their governments to account for their policies and performance².

The government of Tanzania has acknowledged the many benefits of

transparency of public information. Notably, it submitted its finances to public scrutiny through parliamentary discussions, aired live on television and radio, of the Controller and Auditor-General's audit reports. Tanzania was an early member of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative which commits participating governments to encourage civic participation, increase the availability of information on government activities, and conform to high standards of professionalism³.

However, more recent events suggests that official appetite for openness is fading. In early 2015, four proposed bills (two of which became law) created doubts about the government's commitment to greater

1 *Access to Information. A Key to Democracy.* Rep. The Carter Center, Nov. 2002. Web.

2 *ibid*

3 "Open Government Declaration." *Open Government Partnership.* N.p., Sept. 2011. Web. <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/about/open-government-declaration>

transparency. Indeed, they displayed a worrying disregard by the government that proposed them, for the freedom of conscience and expression enshrined in Article 18 of Tanzania's Constitution. The Statistics Act, for example, places severe restrictions on the publication or communication of contentious statistical information. The Cybercrimes Act grants excessive powers to police officers to confiscate, without a court order, any data and equipment deemed useful for criminal investigation. It also permits the use of minimum sentences and fines for offences – the publication of 'misleading' information carries a minimum jail sentence of three years and/or a fine of TZS 5 million. These Acts have a chilling effect on independent scrutiny of the government and reduce the space for open, evidence-based debate on topics of public interest.

So, what do citizens think? Where do they get their information? How much do they trust media outlets and the government? How much freedom do they think the press should have? And how much do they know about the new laws that could potentially restrict their access to information and expression?

Data for this brief come from Twaweza's flagship *Sauti za Wananchi* survey. *Sauti za Wananchi* is a nationally-representative, high-frequency mobile phone panel survey. It is representative for Mainland Tanzania. Information on the overall methodology is available at www.twaweza.org/sauti. For this brief data were collected from 1,811 respondents from the second *Sauti za Wananchi* panel. This was the seventh round of calls to the new panel, conducted between 10 and 25 February 2016.

The key findings are:

- When seeking information, 7 out of 10 citizens (74%) would visit government/public institutions and 14% would solicit information by phone.
- However, more than 8 out of 10 citizens have never visited public institutions (such as schools, health facilities, or water supplier offices) to ask for information.
- 7 out of 10 citizens (70%) rely on radio as their main source of information. Radio (80%) and television (73%) are also the most trusted sources.
- 2% of citizens know The Cybercrimes Act in detail.
- 9 out of 10 citizens (91%) believe that if the government wants to ban a newspaper, they should first have to defend that decision in court.

4 "Tanzania." *Open Government Partnership*. N.p., n.d. Web.www.opengovpartnership.org/country/tanzania

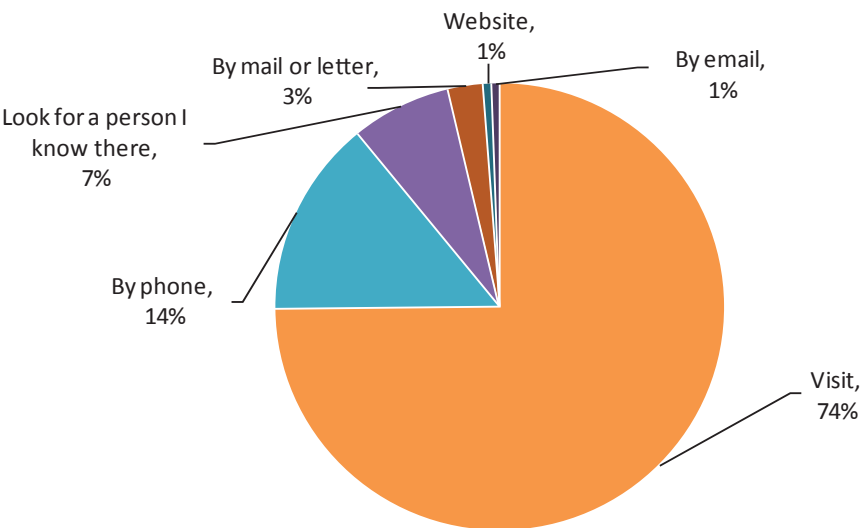
5 "Other" (1%) not shown

2. Six facts about access to information in Tanzania

Fact 1: 7 out of 10 citizens would obtain information by visiting institutions

In pursuit of its commitments under the Open Government Partnership (OGP), the Tanzanian government has created various websites, including one for water point mapping and a “How do I?” website for general information, in the hope that these will be useful tools for the public⁴. However, when asked how they would obtain information from public service institutions, 74% of citizens responded that they would physically visit the respective institutions. Only 1% said they would go online.

Figure 1: When you think of accessing information and documents from organizations that deliver services to the public, what is the main way you would seek/ask for this information⁵?

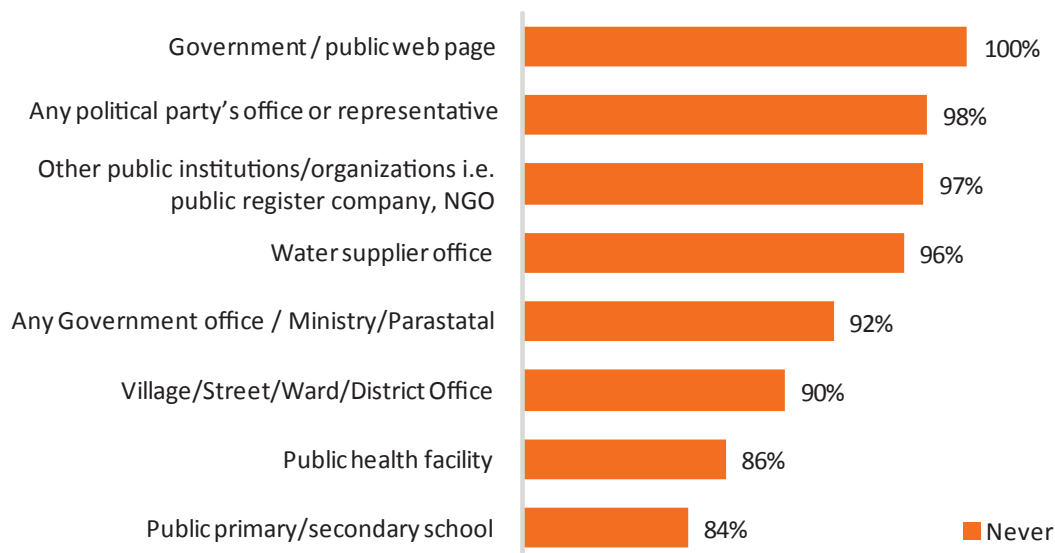


Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey – Round 8 (February 2016)

Fact 2: More than 8 out of 10 citizens have never asked for information from public institutions

Many citizens do not actively seek information on public services or how public institutions are run. When asked about the last time they had visited various institutions to ask for information, more than 8 out of 10 citizens stated that they had never asked for information from any of the institutions mentioned.

Figure 2: When was the last time you sought information from:



Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey – Round 8 (February 2016)

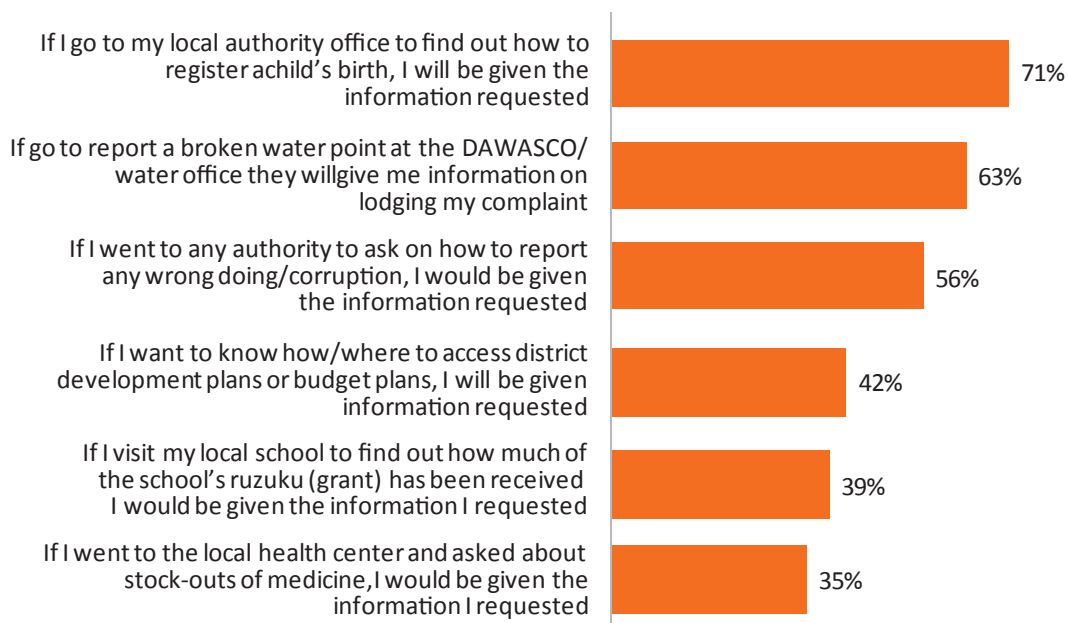
Fact 3: Citizens are least confident about obtaining information from health centres (35%) and schools (39%)

Citizens have varying levels of confidence in public service institutions to provide information. They are most confident of getting information about registering a child's birth (71%) and being able to lodge a complaint with DAWASCO (63%). In contrast, citizens are least sure about getting information on medicine stock-outs (35%), grants in public schools (39%), and district development plans/budgets (42%).

6 *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey – Round 8 (February 2016). Full dataset available at www.twaweza.org/sauti.

7 Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Figure 3: Please tell me if this is the case:



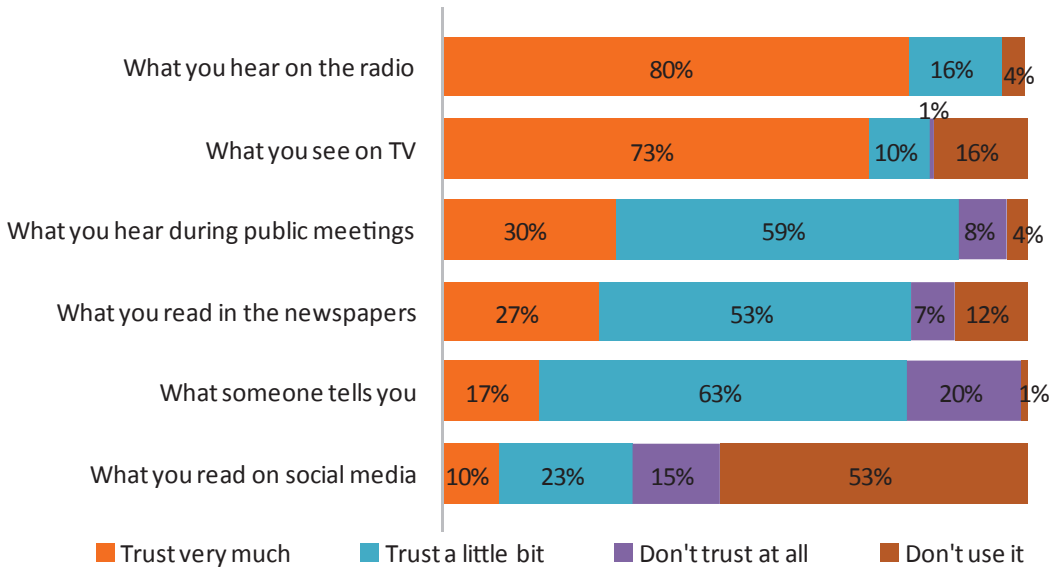
Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey – Round 8 (February 2016)

Fact 4: Traditional media (radio 80% and television 73%) are the most trusted sources of information

Citizens rely on radio (70%) and to a lesser degree television (21%) as their main sources of information⁸. When asked which media sources they trust most, both radio (trusted by 80% of citizens) and television (trusted by 73% of citizens) were cited as the most trusted. In contrast newspapers are only trusted by 27% of people. Although social media is the least trusted, and least used, source of information, the *Sauti za Wananchi* data indicate that 47% of citizens use social media somewhat regularly.

⁸ *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey – Round 30 (February-March 2015). Full dataset available at www.twaweza.org/sauti.

Figure 4: How much do you trust?:

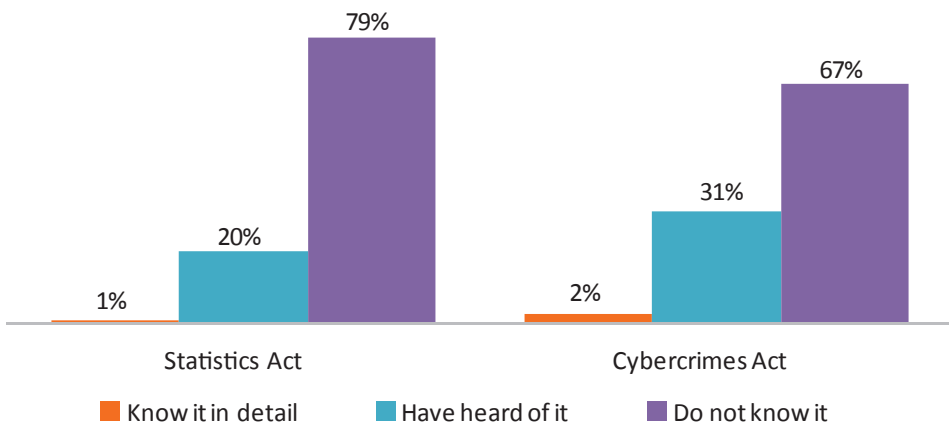


Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey – Round 8 (February 2016)

Fact 5: 1 out of 50 of citizens (2%) know The Cybercrimes Act in detail

The Cybercrimes Act, was passed in April 2015 and in force from September 2015. Civil society organizations and journalists argued that this Act has the power to stifle any dissenting views and encourages self-censorship among media stakeholders and citizens alike. 2% of citizens report knowing The Cybercrimes Act in detail although 31% had heard about it. Only 1% of citizens report knowing The Statistics Act in detail.

Figure 5: Do you know of:



Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey – Round 8 (February 2016)

Fact 6: 9 out of 10 citizens (91%) think that the government should get court approval before banning a newspaper

Citizens are supportive freedom of information, with 91% stating that the government should have to defend any ban on newspapers in court. Similarly, 60% of citizens state that the government should only place restrictions on information that is vital for national security. Citizens also believe in the power of open, accessible information: 78% state that free access to information would reduce corruption and wrongdoing in the country. This is little changed from 2015 when 80% of citizens thought this was true⁸.

**Figure 6: Please pick the statement you agree with the most
(more popular statements shown):**



Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey – Round 8 (February 2016)

3. Conclusion

Access to information is vital for a well-functioning democracy. In order for citizens to truly engage in their own governance systems, they must be well informed about the issues as well as government policies and performance. The majority of Tanzanian citizens do not seek out information from various public institutions. They trust traditional broadcast media – radio and television – as their main sources of knowledge. Should the government review the allocation of communications resources in favour of traditional media at the expense of web-based information access? Or should it make government websites more accessible, informative and attractive? The low use of government websites by citizens, many of whom use social media, is worth exploring.

The Cybercrimes and Statistics Acts of 2015 have raised concerns in the media because of their harsh proposed punishments and excessive powers given to police officers. Citizens

have heard of the Cybercrimes (31%) and Statistics Acts (20%), but very few are aware of their contents. And citizens generally believe in the power of information, with almost 8 out of 10 (78%) stating that free access to information would reduce corruption and wrongdoing.

The fifth phase government's attitude on public access to information is not yet clear. Accountability of public servants to citizens is a central pillar of its approach. However, there have also been a number of early decisions that point to a deep suspicion of greater transparency: early in 2016, the Minister of Information, Culture and Sports announced the ban of Mawio newspaper. Live broadcasts by the public broadcaster of parliamentary debates have been curtailed, ostensibly for budget reasons. Citizens have yet to witness their new President or Prime Minister outline their strategies and plans in an interview. In addition two bills – Access to Information and Media Services – that were strongly opposed by activists and journalists in 2015 continue to be pushed into the parliamentary agenda without a clear process outlined for addressing the concerns raised.

In its laudable pursuit of a well governed country in which services are delivered and citizens' lives improve, the fifth phase government would do well to enshrine access to information in law. When public information is abundant and easily accessible, citizens are better able to understand the decisions made in their name, cooperate with government even when they are implementing unpopular policies and to expose wrongdoing. Transparency is not a guarantor of accountability, but without it there is almost no chance of citizens holding their leaders to account for serving their interests.

Access to information and freedom of expression may not appear as important for citizens as the more bread and butter issues of food, income, education or health services. However citizens have shown that they see the potential in greater transparency and are supportive of access to information more generally. This represents a unique opportunity for government to facilitate access to public information and to guarantee freedom of expression. Without cooperation from well-informed citizens who can hold service providers and duty bearers to account, the ambitious agenda of the fifth government of Tanzania will be seriously handicapped.