



Frankly speaking

Ugandans' opinions and experiences of information and the media

1. Introduction

Public access to information and freedom of expression are cornerstones of good governance and democracy. When citizens have easy access to information held by the government, this can act as a powerful check on corruption and other wrongdoing. And if citizens can easily access information from local schools, clinics and other frontline service providers, it becomes much more straightforward for them to benefit from whatever government initiatives are in place to assist them.

Freedom of expression is even more fundamental. At a basic level, this asks whether anybody is above scrutiny and criticism. Are newspapers and other media free to report on corruption, for example, and are citizens free to express their opinions, even when being critical of national leaders and other powerful figures in society?

This brief explores citizens' experiences and opinions on access to information and the media. How widely do citizens typically seek

information from public service providers and other government agencies, and what responses do they receive when they do? What sources of news and other information do they rely on, and how much do they trust these sources? Do they feel free to criticise public figures, and do they feel citizens should have the right to do this? Do they see restrictions on the media as helpful to national development, or detrimental? And how familiar are they with existing laws and policies that enable (or restrict) access to information and freedom of expression?

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 1,980 respondents in the second round of calls to the Sauti za Wananchi panel, conducted between 24 and 30 November, 2017.

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Sauti za Wananchi



The key findings are:

- A majority of citizens have sought information from health facilities, schools and village / street offices
- Almost all citizens choose physical visits as their preferred way of seeking information from government offices
- Around half of citizens are confident their requests for information would be met positively
- 9 out of 10 citizens have a national ID card, 6 out of 10 have a birth certificate and 1 in 20 has a passport
- Radio is the most popular source of information for citizens
- Citizens generally feel free to criticise local government leaders, but are less confident about criticising national leaders
- 2 out of 3 citizens say the media should be able to operate without government control
- 8 out of 10 citizens say criticism of leaders is a good thing
- Very few citizens are aware of laws and services that relate to information access and use

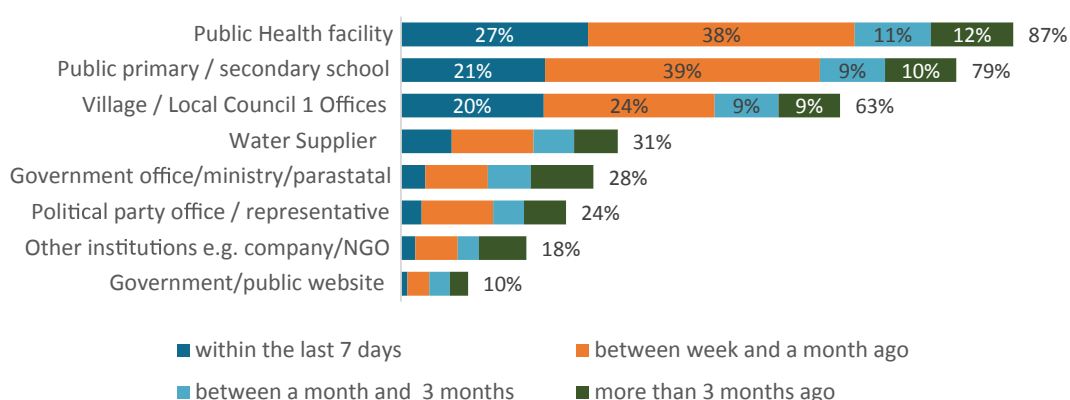
2. Nine facts about Ugandans' views on information and the media

Fact 1: A majority of citizens have sought information from health facilities, schools and village / street offices

Nine out of ten citizens (87%) have sought information from a public health facility at least once, with more than two out of three (65%) having done so in the past month. Eight out of ten (79%) have sought information from public primary or secondary schools, and six out of ten (60%) have done so from their village or Local Council 1 offices.

Citizens seek information less often from water suppliers, national government offices, political parties and NGOs. Just one out of ten citizens (10%) has ever sought information from a government website.

Figure 1: From which government institutions do you request information?¹



Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

The most common type of information sought by citizens from public service providers or other agencies is information about services. This accounts for around half the information requests at most types of service provider. The request for information on services is higher at public health facilities (87%) compared to other providers. Information about resources is much less commonly sought by citizens, with typically one out of ten requests being of this type. At schools, the figure is slightly higher, with two out of ten information requests (21%) seeking information about resources (not shown in charts).

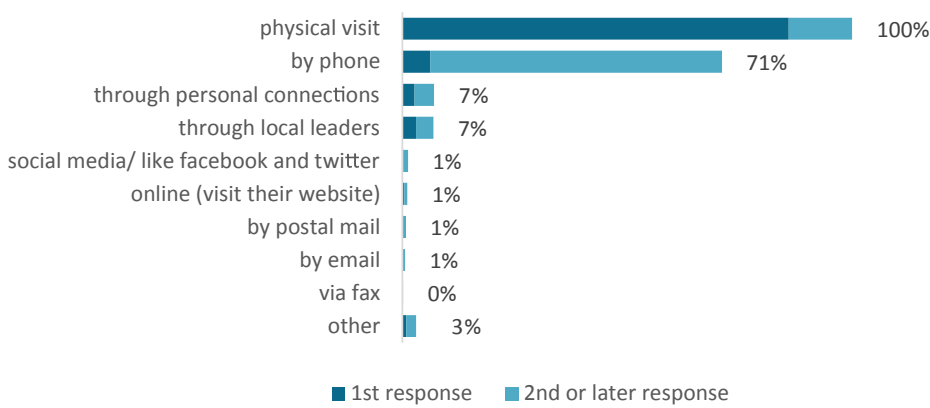
Across all the different service providers, two out of three requests for information (66%) were described by the requester as completely successful and most of the rest (31%) were partially successful. In five out of six cases (85%), the requester described the process as easy (not shown in charts).

Fact 2: Almost all citizens prefer to request information through a physical visit

Almost all citizens (96%) choose visiting the office as their most preferred way to get information from a government office. Phone calls are also popular, with seven out of ten (71%) saying they would use this approach, though physical visits were much more likely to be citizens’ first option. Others would consult their local leaders or knowledgeable friends about that government office (14%).

Only very small numbers would use social media (1%), the internet (1%) or email (1%) when seeking information.

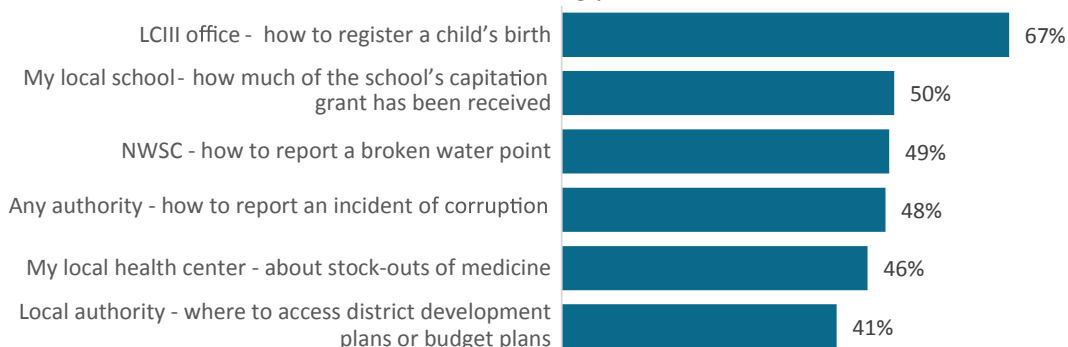
Figure 2: How would you approach a government office if you wanted to seek information? (multiple responses permitted)



Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

Two out of three citizens (67%) think they would be given details of how to register a child’s birth if they asked at their Local Council III office. In most cases, however, the figure is lower, including asking a school for information on school resources (50%), asking about medical stock-outs at a health centre (46%) and asking local government for information on development plans and budgets (41%)

Figure 3: Do you think you would get the following information from these different institutions?
(% answering yes)



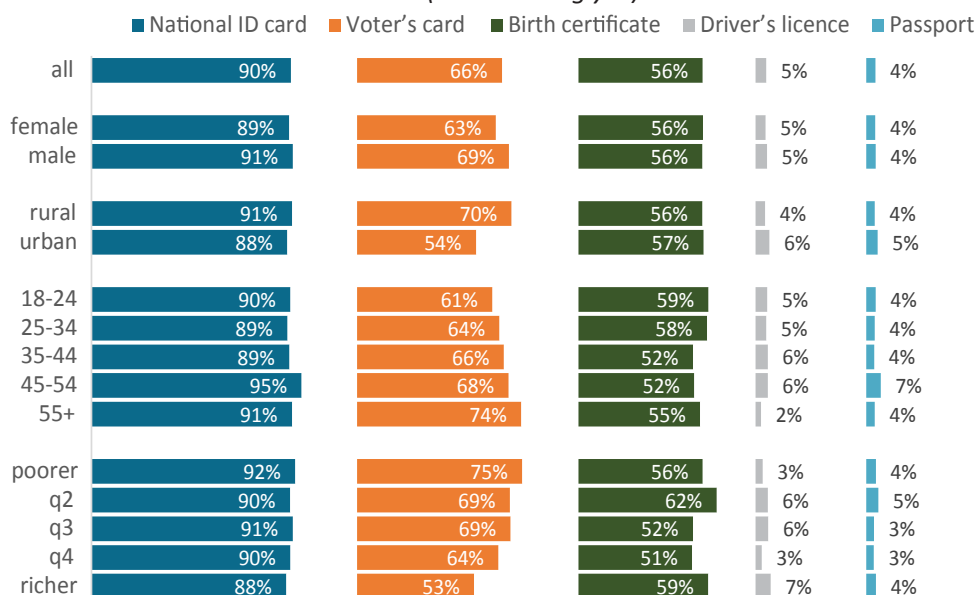
Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

Fact 3: 9 out of 10 citizens have a national ID card, 6 out of 10 have a birth certificate and 1 out of 20 has a passport

Nine out of ten Ugandans (90%) have a national ID card, and two out of three (66%) have a voter's card. Six out of ten (56%) have a birth certificate, and one out of twenty has a driver's license (5%) or passport (4%).

These figures are largely consistent across key demographic groups, though possession of a voter's card is higher in rural areas (70%) than urban (54%), and higher among older and poorer people than among the young or the wealthy.

Figure 4: Do you have the following documents ...?
(% answering yes)

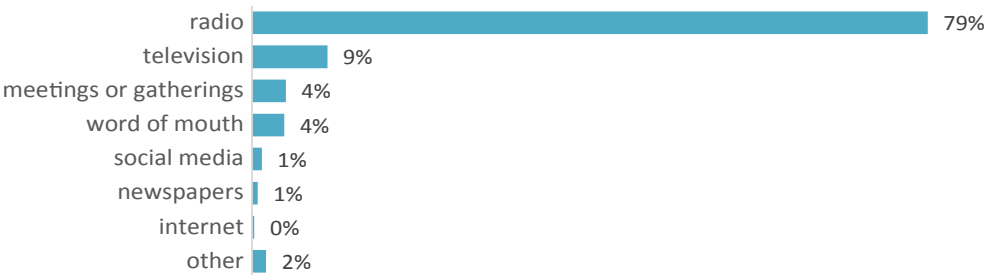


Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

Fact 4: Radio is the most popular source of information for citizens

Eight out of ten citizens (79%) point to the radio as their main source of information. This is followed at some distance by television (9%), public meetings (4%) and word of mouth (4%). Only very small numbers describe either social media (1%), newspapers (1%) or the internet as their main source of information.

Figure 5: Which media is your main source of information?

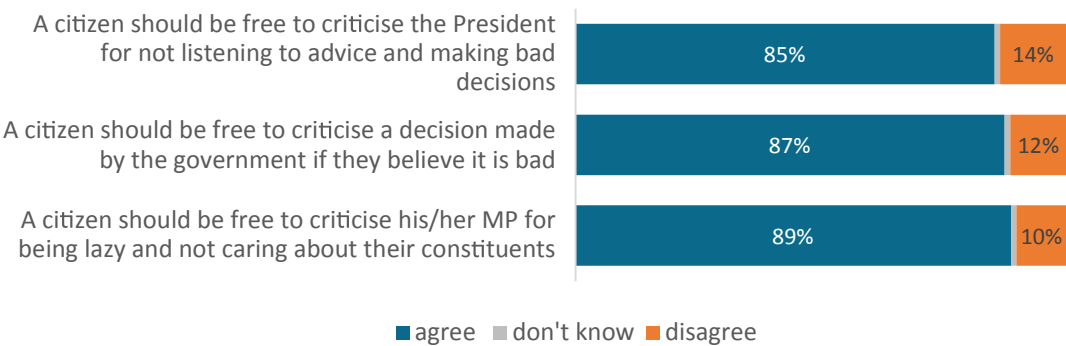


Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

Fact 5: Citizens feel they have the right to criticise leaders in principle, not practice

Citizens are confident about their right – in principle – to criticise national leaders. Five out of six citizens (85%) say citizens should be free to criticise the President, and similar numbers say citizens should be free to criticise the government in general (87%) and their own MP in particular (89%).

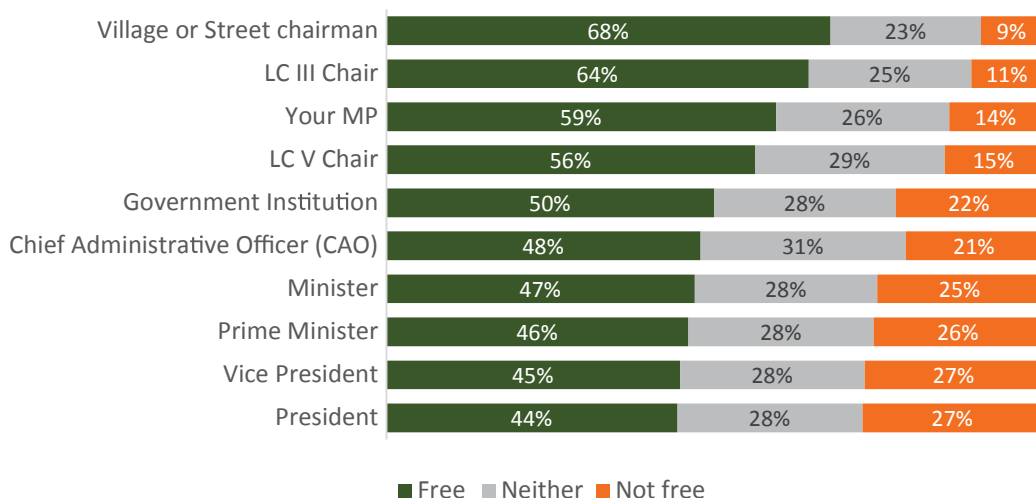
Figure 6: Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

Two out of three citizens (68%) feel free to criticise their village or street chairperson, and their Local Council III chair (64%). More than half also feel free to criticise their MP (59%) and their Local Council V chair (56%). With national level leaders, however, citizens are less confident. Less than half say they are free to criticise Ministers (47%), the Prime Minister (46%), the Vice President (45%) or the President (44%).

Figure 7: How free are you to criticize information or statements provided by the following individuals or institutions?

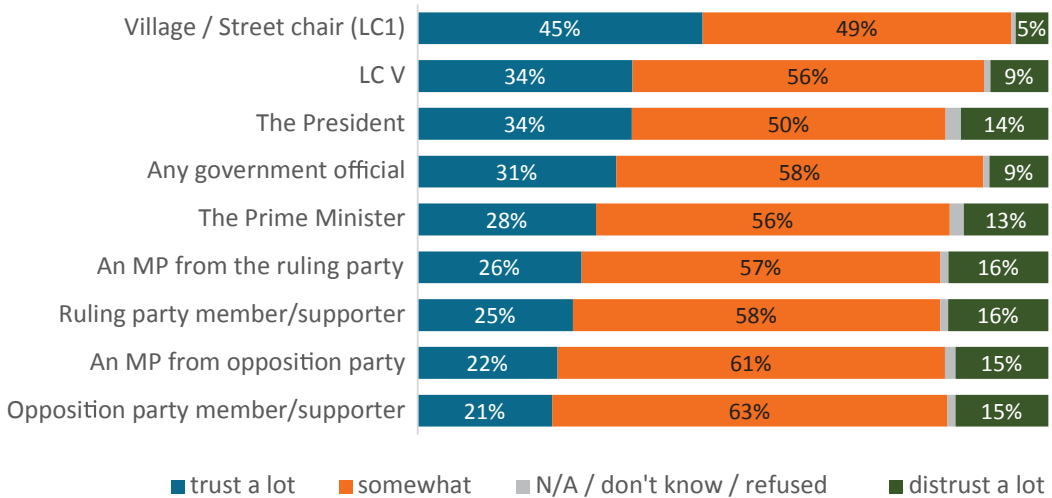


Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

Fact 6: Most citizens don't trust information from politicians and social media

Citizens are somewhat sceptical of information provided by politicians. In most cases, a majority of citizens say they neither trust nor distrust information provided by different politicians. The most trusted sources of information within government are the Local Council I chairperson, trusted by just under half (45%), the Local Council V councillor (34%) and the President (34%). One out of five citizens trust information provided by opposition MPs (22%) or opposition party members and supporters (21%).

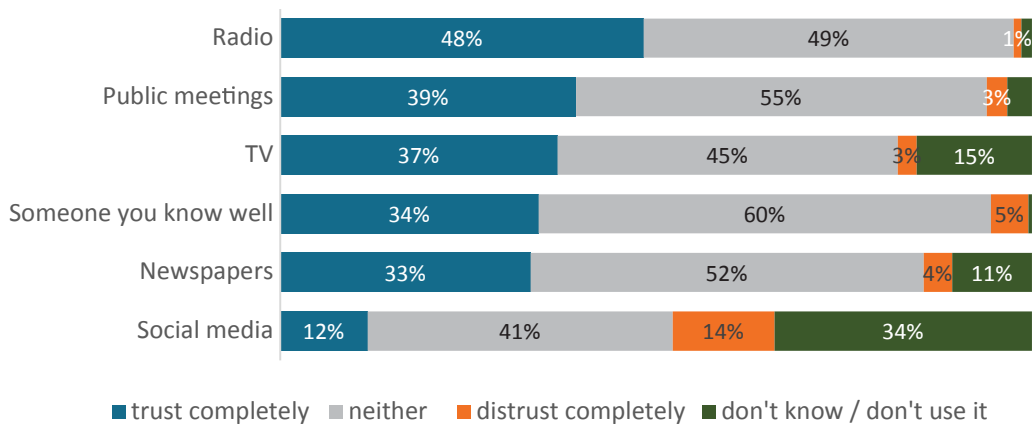
Figure 8: How much do you trust the information obtained from each of the following people?



Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

The most trusted media source is radio; almost half (48%) of citizens trust what they hear on the radio. Social media is the least trusted source (12%), though one out of three citizens (34%) say they are not familiar enough with social media to reach a judgement.

Figure 9: How much do you trust information obtained from each of the following sources?

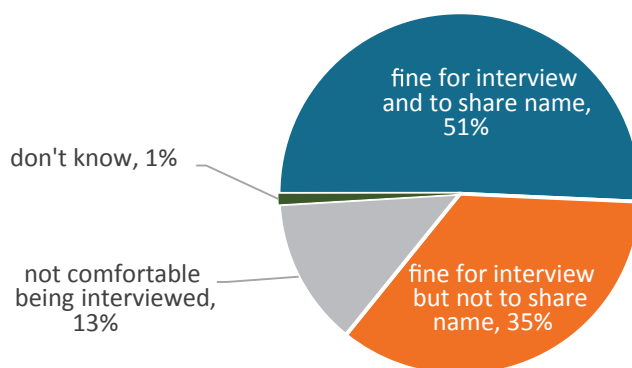


Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

Fact 7: 7 out of 8 citizens would be happy to be interviewed by a journalist

A clear majority of citizens (86%) would be happy to be interviewed by a newspaper, TV or radio journalist, and half (51%) would be willing for their name to be published or broadcast. One out of eight citizens (13%) would not be comfortable being interviewed.

Figure 10: Would you be comfortable being interviewed by a journalist (from newspapers/TV/radio)? If yes, would you be comfortable sharing your name in the interview with the journalist?



Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

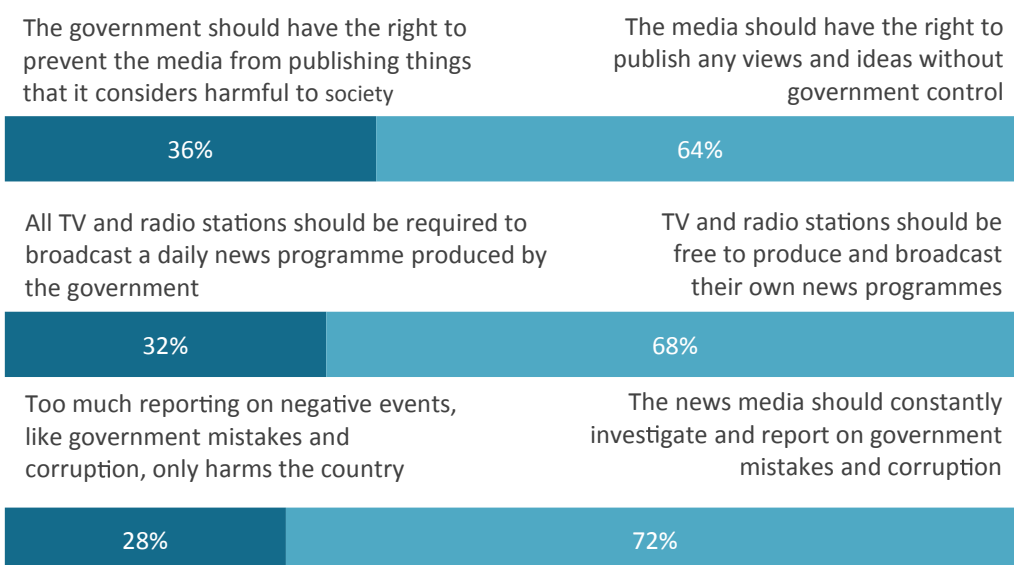
There are only minor differences in willingness to be interviewed and share their name between different demographic groups. Men (53%) are slightly more willing than women (48%) to be interviewed and for their name to be shared, and those in rural areas (53%) are more willing than urban residents (45%), but the differences are small (not shown in charts).

Fact 8: Most citizens believe in strong protections for media freedom

Two out of three citizens (64%) prefer the idea that the media should be able to operate without government control over the alternative. Along the same lines, two out of three (68%) say TV and radio stations should be free to broadcast their own programmes and should not be required to broadcast news programmes produced by the government. And three out of four (72%) say the news media should constantly report on government mistakes and corruption.

Six out of ten (58%) say freedom of speech is a human right and so anybody should be permitted to become a journalist, without any need for professional licensing. Three out of four (77%) say the government should not be permitted to punish a newspaper without first seeking and getting approval from the courts (not shown in charts).

Figure 11: From each pair of statements, which do you agree with the most?

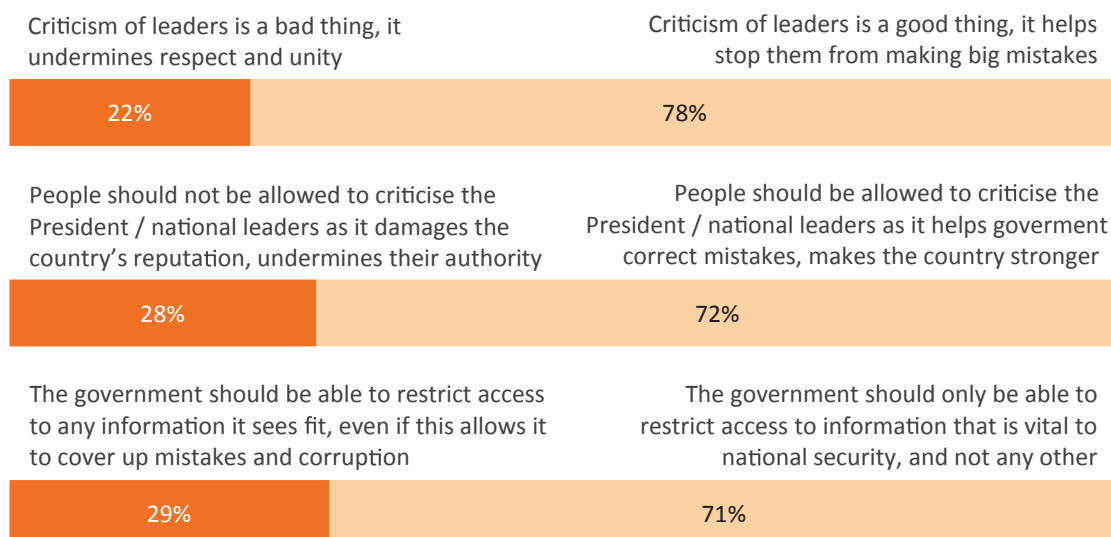


Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

Citizens are also strong supporters of the right of individual citizens to express critical views. Eight out of ten citizens (78%) say criticism of leaders is a good thing, as it helps stop them from making big mistakes. Similarly, three out of four citizens (72%) say people criticising national leaders makes the country stronger, by helping the government to identify and correct its mistakes.

Finally, seven out of ten citizens (71%) say restrictions on access to information should be strictly limited to information that is vital to national security.

Figure 12: From each pair of statements, which do you agree with the most?

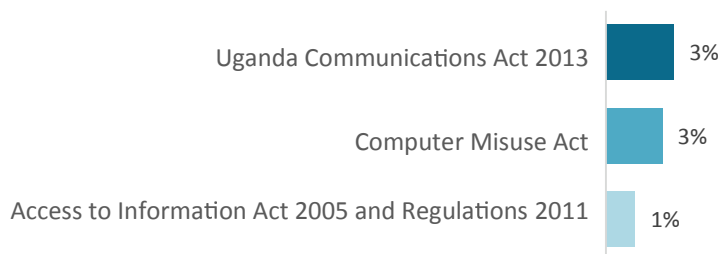


Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

Fact 9: Very few citizens are aware of laws and services that relate to information access and use

Less than one out of twenty citizens (3%) is aware of either the Uganda Communications Act or the Computer Misuse Act, and just one out of a hundred (1%) are aware of the Access to Information Act.

Figure 13: Are you aware of ...?

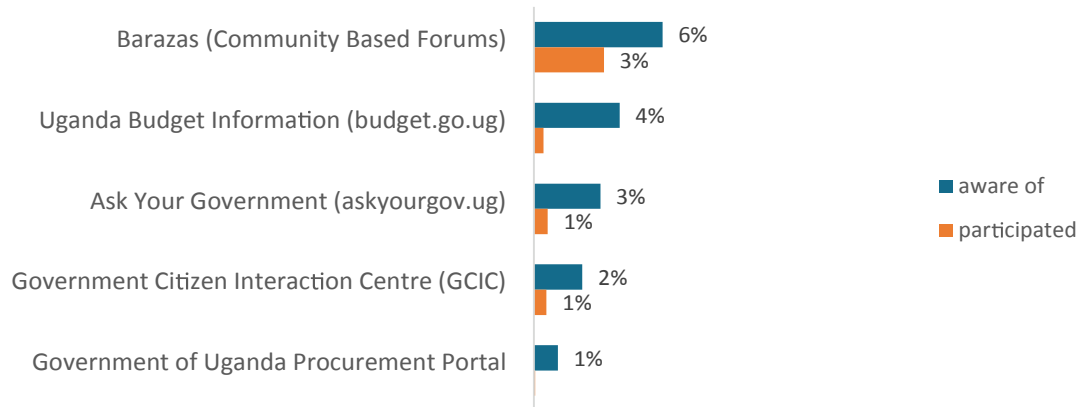


Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

Similarly, few citizens are aware of initiatives to enable greater access to and/or use of information in civic life, and even fewer have ever taken advantage of such initiatives. One out of twenty citizens (6%) is aware of Community Based Forums / Barazas, half of whom (3%) have participated.

With online platforms, awareness is even lower, including the Uganda Budget Information website (4%), the access to information tool, Ask Your Government (3%), and the Government Procurement Portal (1%). Less than one out of a hundred citizens have used these services.

Figure 14: Do you know about and have you used / participated in the following:




Source of data: *Sauti za Wananchi*, Round 2, 24-30 November 2017; n=1,980

3. Conclusion

This brief finds an active culture of citizens seeking information from government, and the general expectation that public servants will respond positively to such requests. This expectation fits the reported reality, with citizens saying that most of their requests for information from government service providers are successful. It should be noted, however, that most of these requests are for information about services, rather than more sensitive information about staffing, budgets and other resources.

In this context, the low level of public awareness of laws and services that give citizens the right to access information from government, including the Access to Information Act (2005) and various online platforms to make budget, procurement and other government-held information available to citizens may be surprising. However, such platforms are unlikely to ever come into widespread public use; their potential largely stems from the possibility that intermediaries – journalists, academics, people in civil society, elected representatives and others, will access information through these platforms and use their positions to raise public awareness of what they find. As such, low public awareness is neither a surprise nor necessarily an obstacle to the effectiveness of these platforms.

In truth, the dominance of old forms of media over new technology is a consistent theme throughout the brief. Citizens prefer to seek information from government by visiting offices or making phone calls, rather than via social media or government websites. They prefer radio as a source of information over social media or online media. Although this may as well be bound up in limited access to these platforms and channels, it calls for some realism among of citizens – including freedom to criticise. Here there is a clear distinction between



the potential of technology to transform public engagement in general and access to information in particular.

There are also significant trust issues whether with media or political leaders. Large swathes of citizens only somewhat trust statements made by all levels of political leadership and are unsure as to whether they trust different kinds of media content. This is a difficult context in which to promote citizen engagement in issues affecting their lives: there is no single source of information that is trusted by more than half of citizens.

The second major theme of this brief is freedom of expression – both of the media and of citizens – including freedom to criticise. Here there is a clear distinction between citizens' strong support for freedom of expression, freedom to criticise and freedom of the media on the one hand, and their sense that this freedom may not be as strong in practice as they feel it should be in principle. In all these cases, citizens express clear preference for such freedoms over the alternatives. Criticism is seen as a good thing, enabling mistakes to be identified and rectified, rather than a cause of embarrassment and disharmony. And media restrictions are seen as a bad thing, allowing some in government to get away with corruption and other wrongdoing.

There are causes for optimism: Uganda has citizens with specific expectations and authorities whom are prepared to, for the most part, respond to them. Yet the tension between how things should be and how they are in terms of free expression is an area that needs to be addressed to take Uganda forward.