



Who's engaged, who's excluded?

Ugandan citizens' opinions and experiences on media engagement and citizen participation

1. Introduction

Citizens are the heart of any nation. Governments exist to serve the needs of citizens. For this to work, citizens need to be well-informed about the things that matter in their lives, and they need to have meaningful opportunities to input into government decision making processes.

Technology presents various opportunities to improve how this happens – from new forms of news media to new channels by which citizens can communicate both with each other and with decision makers. But access to such technology can be far from equal, with the effect that the poorest and most vulnerable find themselves excluded from new forms of communication, taking them even further away from the spaces where important matters are discussed, and decisions are made.

This brief aims to shed light on Ugandan citizens' opinions and experiences of citizen participation, including media consumption, social media and community meetings. What forms of media do citizens consume most, and how are these patterns shifting over time? How do they use the internet and social media? How many attend community meetings, and how many participate actively at such meetings? What gets discussed? And what might encourage those who don't currently attend to do so?

Data for the brief comes from Twaweza's *Sauti za Wananchi*, a nationally-representative, high-frequency mobile phone panel survey. Information on the overall methodology is available at www.twaweza.org/sauti and more detail on panel members can be found in the brief introducing the second panel¹. For this brief, data were

1. <https://twaweza.org/download/voices-of-the-people-introducing-the-second-sauti-za-wananchi-panel/>

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collected from 2,741 respondents in the seventh round of calls to the second *Sauti za Wananchi* panel, conducted between January 9th and February 13th, 2024.

The key findings are:

- Radio leads as citizens' main source of information, but is declining
- Beyond radio, TV and the internet matter to the middle class, word of mouth and public meetings matter to the poor
- In Central Uganda and Greater Kampala, English and Luganda media dominate, but elsewhere a wide range of languages are used
- Internet usage is rising rapidly, driven by mobile phones and social media
- Social media use is dominated by young, relatively wealthy and well-educated residents of urban areas
- Outside Greater Kampala, most citizens attended a community meeting in the previous year
- Attendance at community meetings has recovered to pre-pandemic levels
- The most widely-discussed topic at community meetings is security
- The main reasons given for non-attendance include lack of information, lack of meetings and lack of time
- Among those who don't usually attend community meetings, most have no contact with community leaders at all

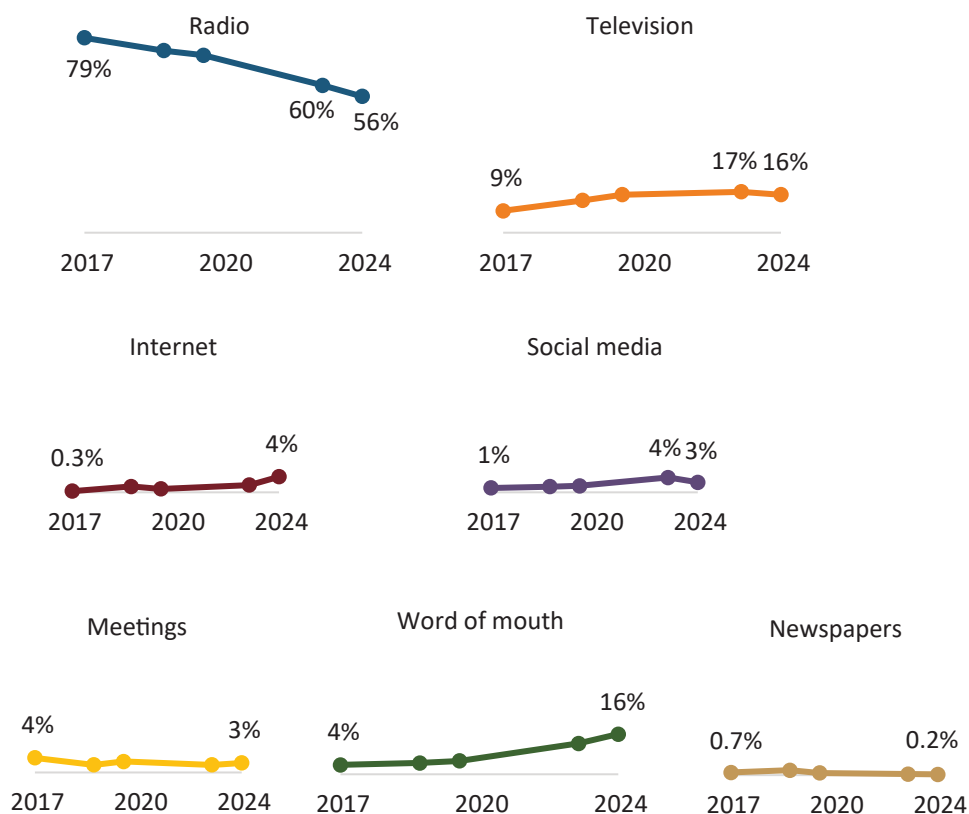
2. Ten insights on citizens' views and experiences on the media and participation

Insight 1: Radio leads as citizens' main source of information, but is declining

Citizens continue to point to the radio as their main source of information (56%), well ahead of any other form of media. However, it continues to show a decline, with other sources gaining ground, including TV (16%, up from 9% seven years ago), word of mouth (16%, up from 4%), the internet (4%, up from 0%) and social media (3%, up from 1%).

Very few citizens (under 1%) point to newspapers as their main source of information.

Figure 1: Which media is your main source of information?

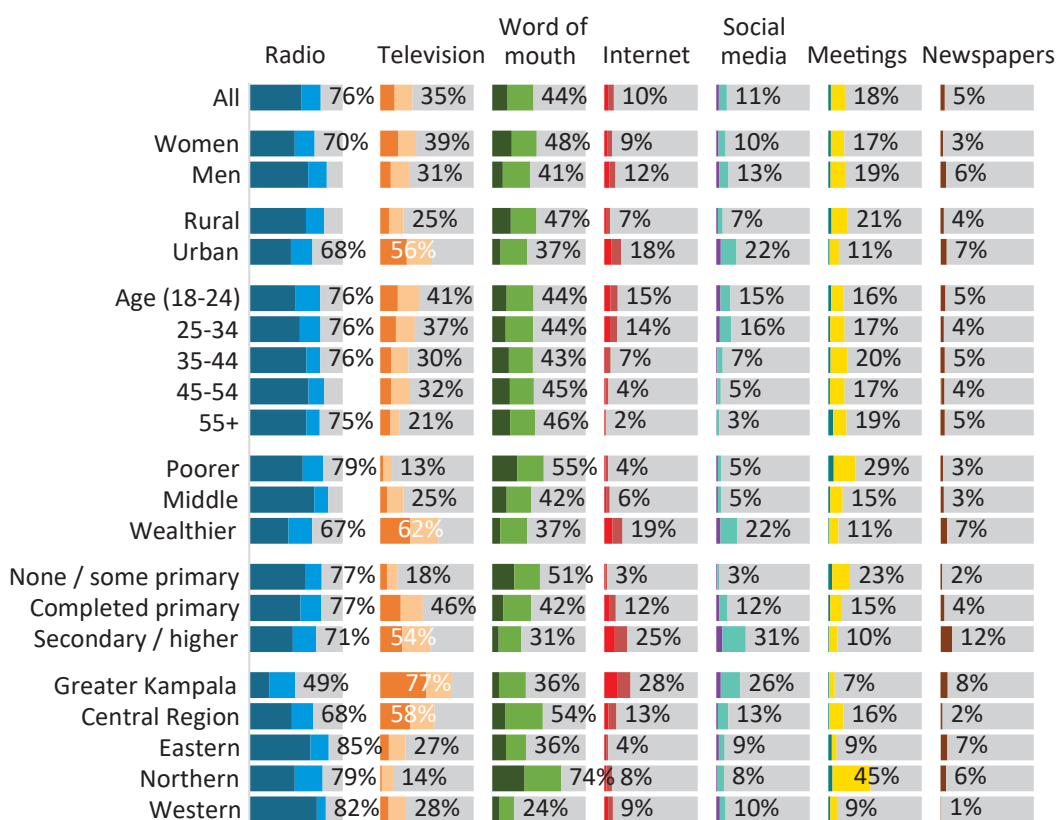


Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 7 (January-February 2024);
Base: all respondents; n=2,741 and earlier rounds (2017-2023)

Insight 2: Beyond radio, TV and the internet matter to the middle class, word of mouth and public meetings matter to the poor

Beyond radio – which is popular with most demographic groups in Uganda – TV and the internet, including social media, are important sources of information for relatively wealthy, well-educated citizens living in urban areas. In contrast, for poorer and less well-educated citizens, word of mouth and public meetings continue to be important sources.

Figure 2: Which media do you use to get information? Which is your main source?



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 7 (January-February 2024);
 Base: all respondents; n=2,741

Insight 3: In Central Uganda and Greater Kampala, English and Luganda media dominate, but elsewhere a wide range of languages are used

The most widely-used language by Ugandans when accessing the media is Luganda, though this is the main media language used by only three out of ten citizens (29%).

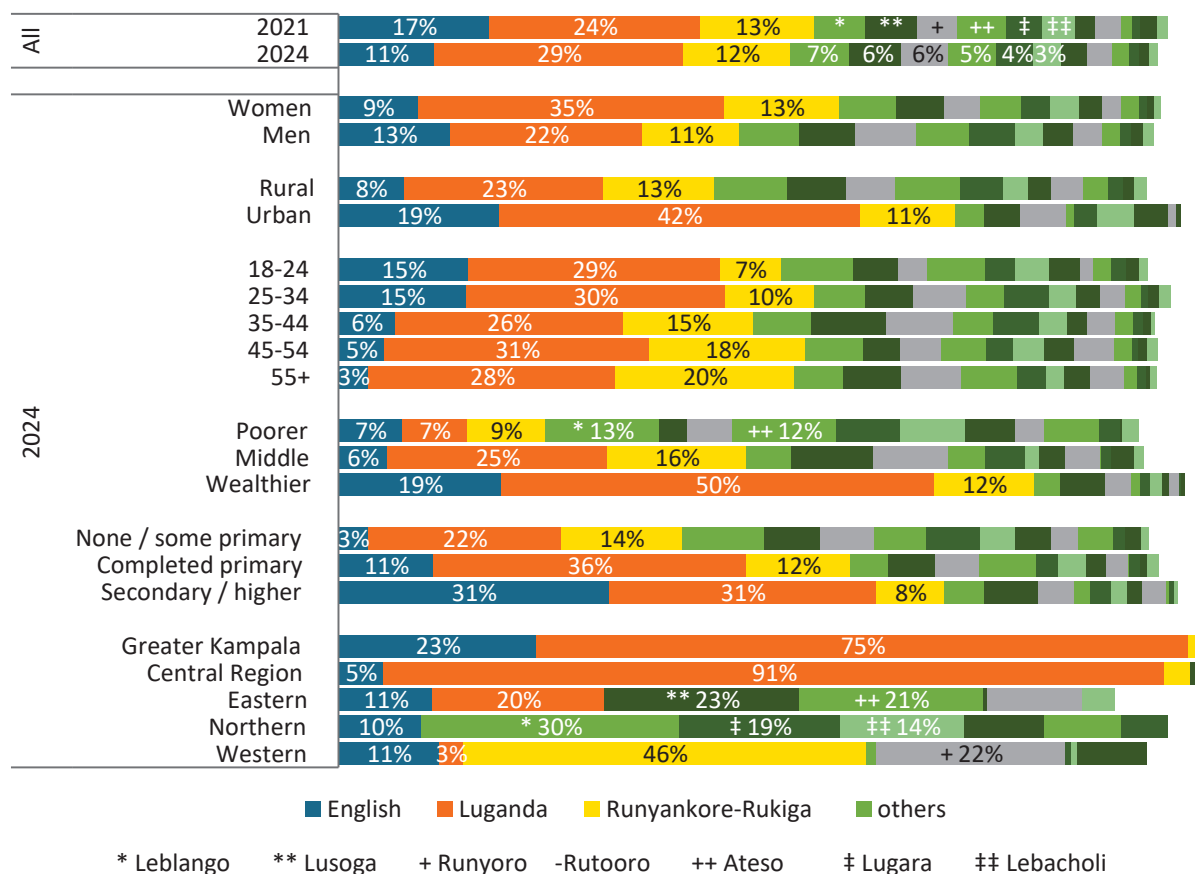
Indeed, while Luganda is overwhelmingly the dominant media language for residents of Central Region (91%) and Greater Kampala (75%), outside these two regions Luganda is very

much a minority language. In Western Uganda, Runyankore-Rukiga dominates (46%), while in Northern Uganda, Leblango is the most commonly-used media language (30%). In Eastern Uganda, no single language dominates, but Lusoga (23%), Ateso (21%) and Luganda (20%) are all widespread.

Nationwide, English is the main media language for one out of ten citizens (11%), but this figure rises to two out of ten (19%) in urban areas and three out of ten (31%) among those with secondary education or above. The number who report English being their main media language has fallen a little since 2021; it is not clear why this is the case, but it may be related to a reported increase in local radio stations broadcasting in local languages.

A very small number (0.2%) report that Swahili is their main media language (not shown in charts). However, it is likely with both Swahili and English that many citizens use these languages as a secondary media language - i.e. not as the main language they use, but as an additional language.

Figure 3: In which language do you get most of your information from the media?



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 7 (January-February 2024);
Base: all respondents; n=2,741 and panel 2 baseline (2021)

Insight 4: Internet usage is rising rapidly, driven by mobile phones and social media

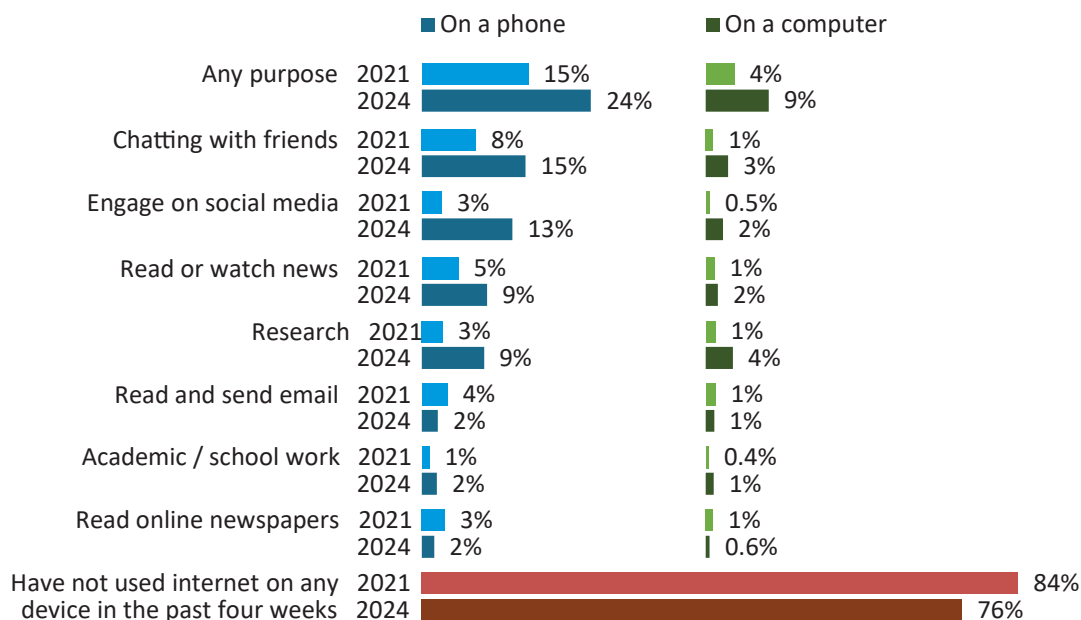
In just the past three years, the number of citizens who had accessed the internet in the previous four weeks on their mobile phone increased from 15% to 24%. There was a similar increase, though from a smaller starting point, in the number who had accessed the internet from a computer.

On mobile phones, citizens' main uses of the internet are for social purposes, specifically chatting with friends (15%) and engaging with social media (13%). These are followed by watching the news (9%) and research (9%). On a computer, the same uses dominate, though research ranks higher.

All these uses of the internet have increased substantially since 2021, while over the same period the number of citizens who report using the internet for sending and receiving email has declined.

Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that the vast majority of citizens (76%) report that they did not access the internet for any purpose in the previous four weeks, and are thus effectively excluded from the many benefits that internet access can bring. Specific reasons for not accessing the internet will vary, but are likely to include the cost of smartphones and internet/data access, access to infrastructure (electricity and network), digital literacy, and simple lack of awareness of what the internet can offer.

Figure 4: What do you use the internet for?



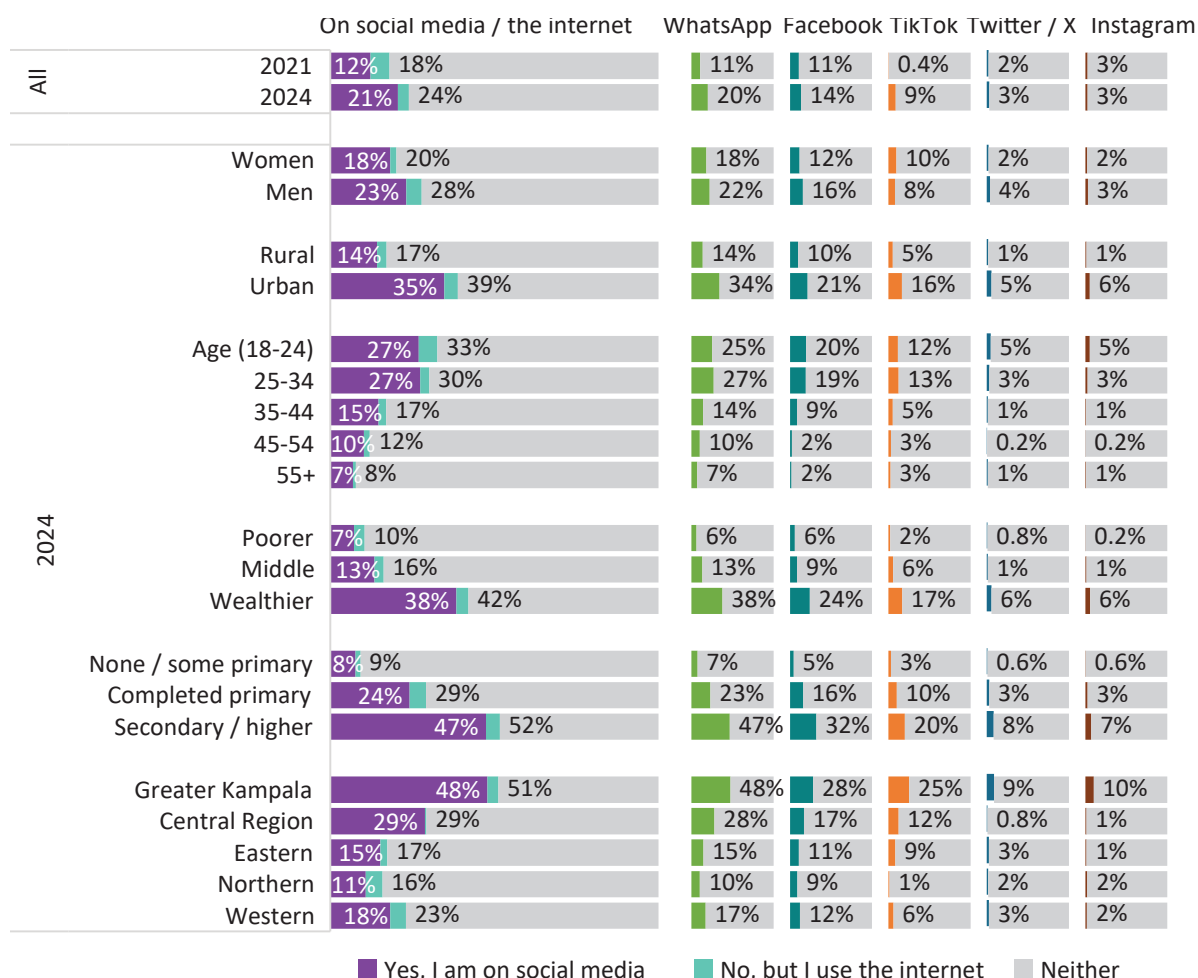
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 7 (January-February 2024);
Base: all respondents; n=2,741 and panel 2 baseline (2021)

Insight 5: Social media use is dominated by young, relatively wealthy and well-educated residents of urban areas

Use of the internet and social media is highly unequal. Younger citizens, those in urban areas, especially Greater Kampala, those with secondary education and above, and relatively wealthy citizens are all far more likely to use social media than other citizens. The link with levels of education is particularly strong.

WhatsApp is the leading social networking service used by Ugandans, with two out of ten citizens (20%) using the service, up from one out of ten (11%) just three years earlier. This is followed by Facebook (14%) and TikTok (9%), which has grown rapidly in the past few years. Twitter / X and Instagram are used by only a very small percentage of citizens, almost all well-educated residents of Greater Kampala.

**Figure 5: Are you a member of a social networking site?
Which social networking sites do you normally use / visit?**



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 7 (January-February 2024);
Base: all respondents; n=2,741 and panel 2 baseline (2021)

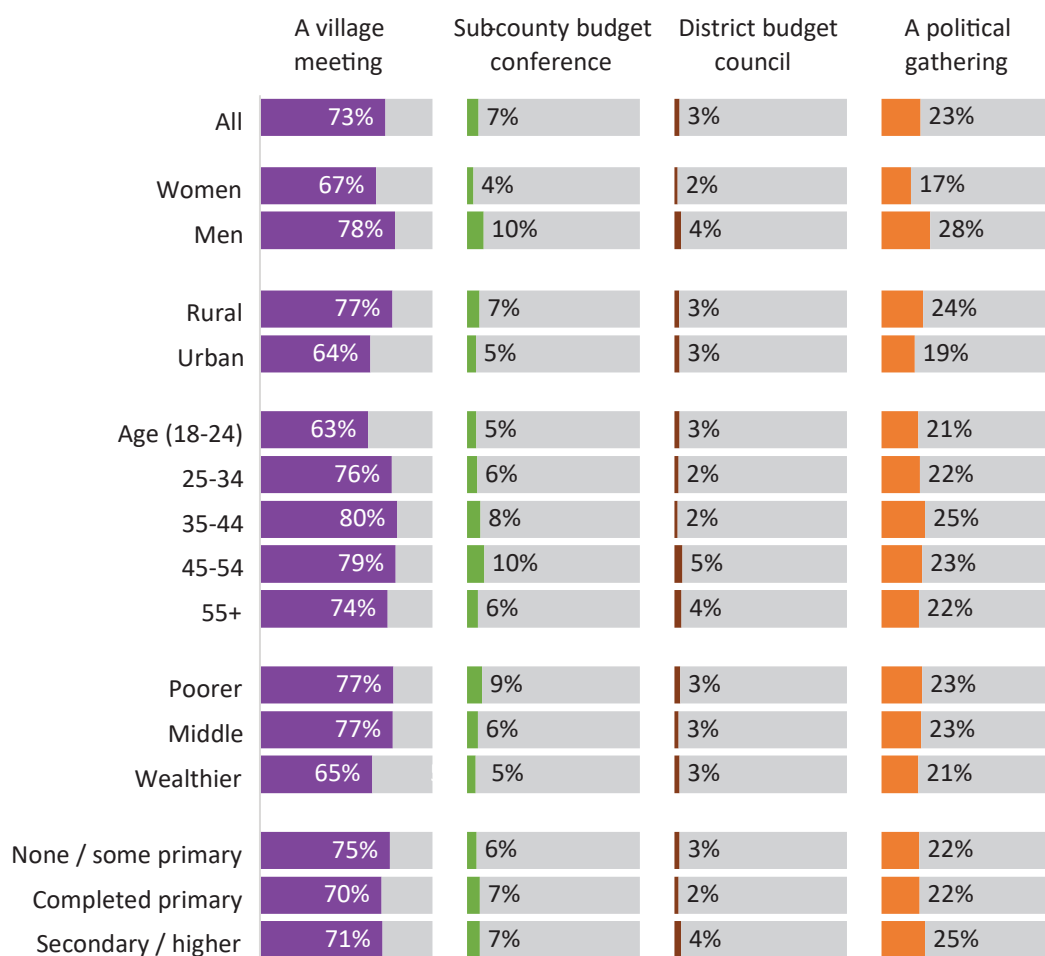
Insight 6: Outside Greater Kampala, most citizens attended a community meeting in the previous year

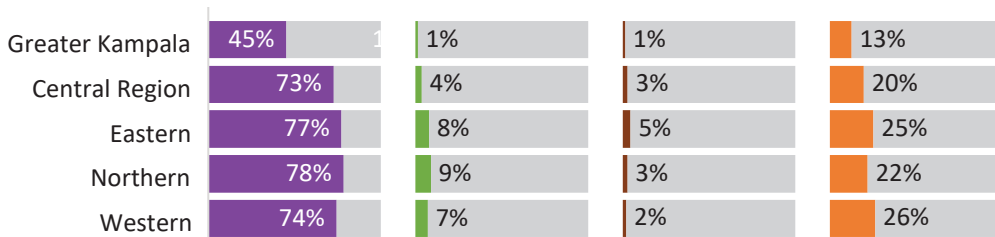
Across Uganda, three out of four citizens (73%) report having attended at least one community meeting in the previous year. Indeed, across almost all demographic groups, a majority report having done so. The exception is Greater Kampala, where fewer than half of residents report having attended a community meeting in the previous year.

Residents of Greater Kampala are also the least likely to have attended a sub-county budget conference, and district budget council meeting or a political gathering over the previous year.

Across all these forms of public meetings or events, men are considerably more likely than women to report having attended. However, when asked who typically attends community meetings, citizens are more likely to say than women do (44%) than men (36%), while a significant number say everybody does (31%) (not shown in charts).

Figure 6: Percentage who attended the following in the past year:





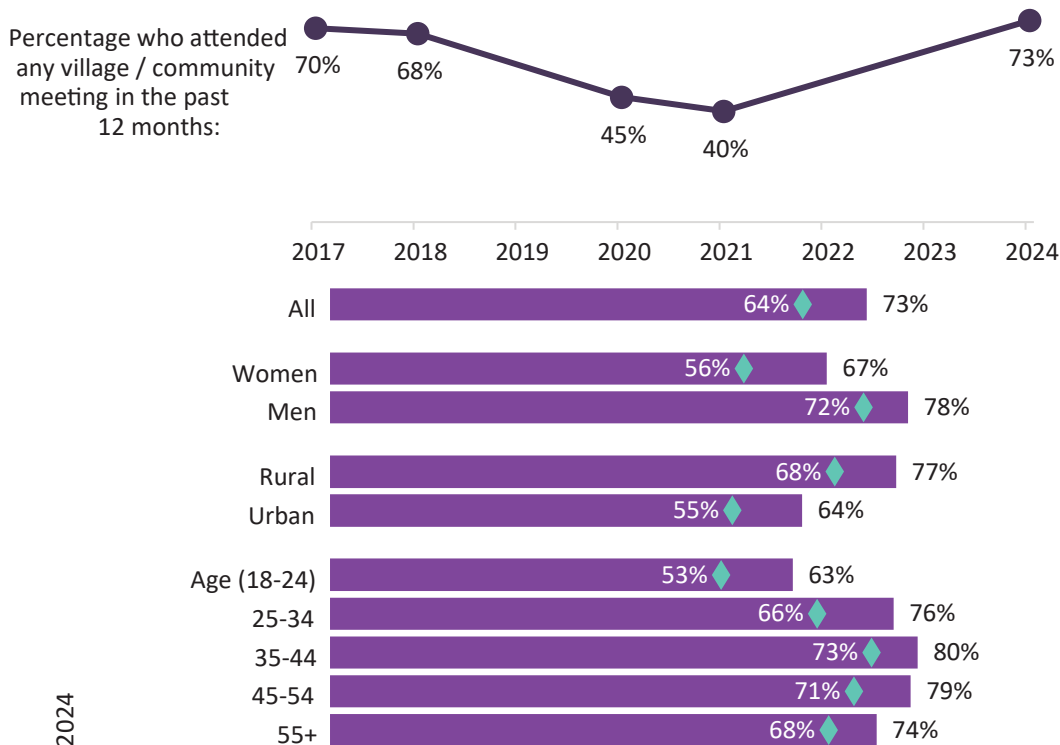
Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone panel survey round 7 (January-February 2024);
Base: all respondents; n=2,741

Insight 7: Attendance at community meetings has recovered to pre-pandemic levels

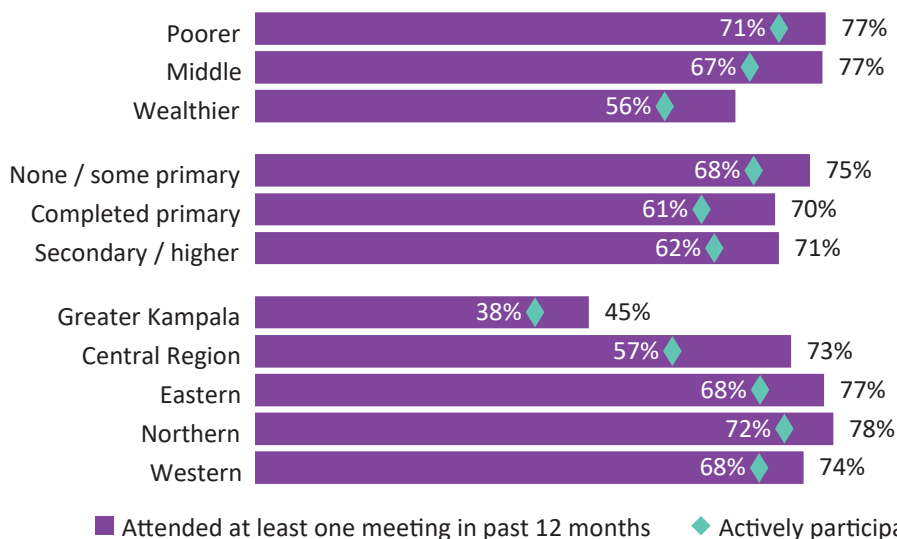
Attendance at community meetings has returned to the levels seen before the Covid-19 pandemic struck in 2020-2021.

Most citizens who report attending such meetings also report actively participating, by asking a question or raising an issue in some way. However, among women, active participation at public community meetings lags even further behind men than attendance.

Figure 7: Did you attend any village / community meeting in the past 12 months? If so, did you actively participate?



2024



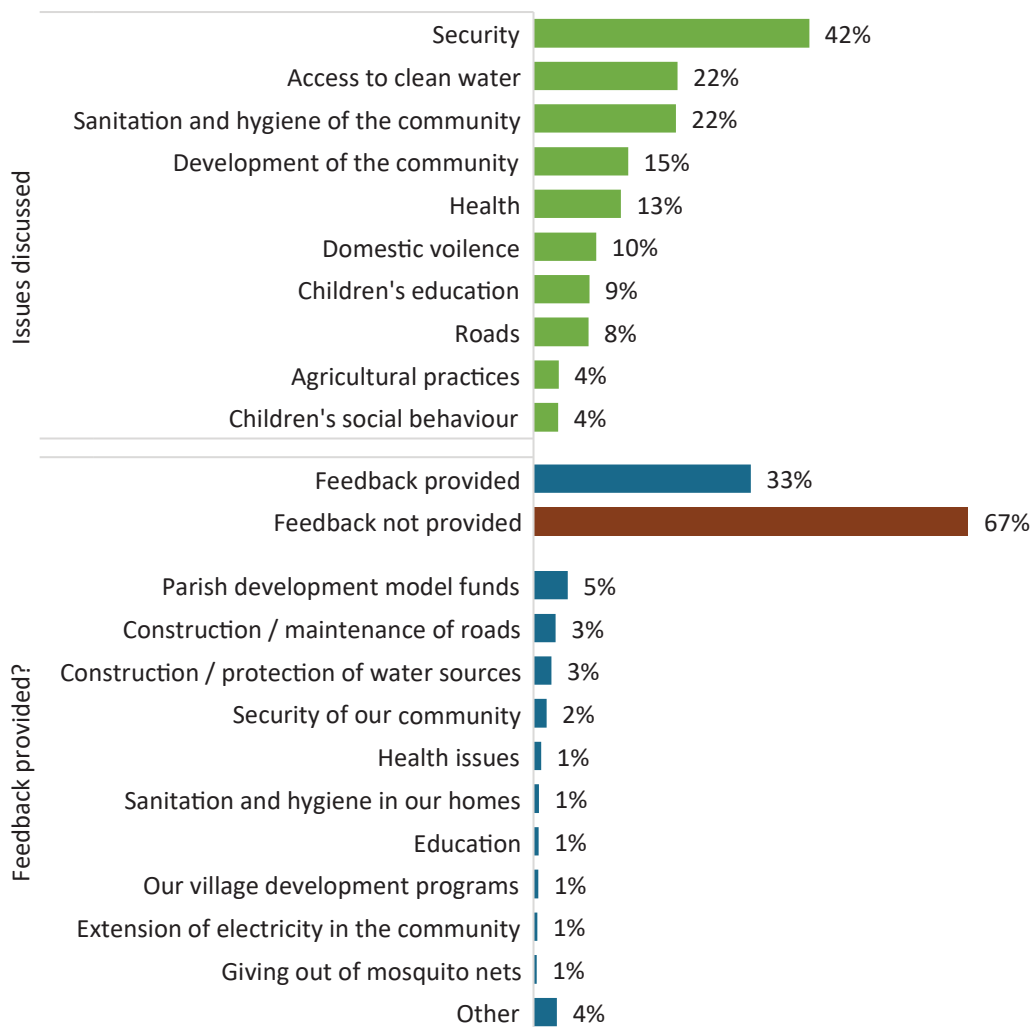
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 7 (January-February 2024);
Base: all respondents; n=2,741

Insight 8: The most widely-discussed topic at community meetings is security

Among those who report attending community meetings, four out of ten (42%) say the topics discussed included security matters, followed by water (22%) and sanitation (22%).

Most of those who attended community meetings said the meetings did not include providing feedback to citizens on government plans or performance. Where there was feedback provided, this was largely provided by the LC I chairperson (around half of reported feedback; not shown in charts).

**Figure 8: During these community meetings, what issues are discussed?
And what feedback is provided to citizens on government plans, budgets and performance?**
(among those who attend community meetings; multiple responses permitted)



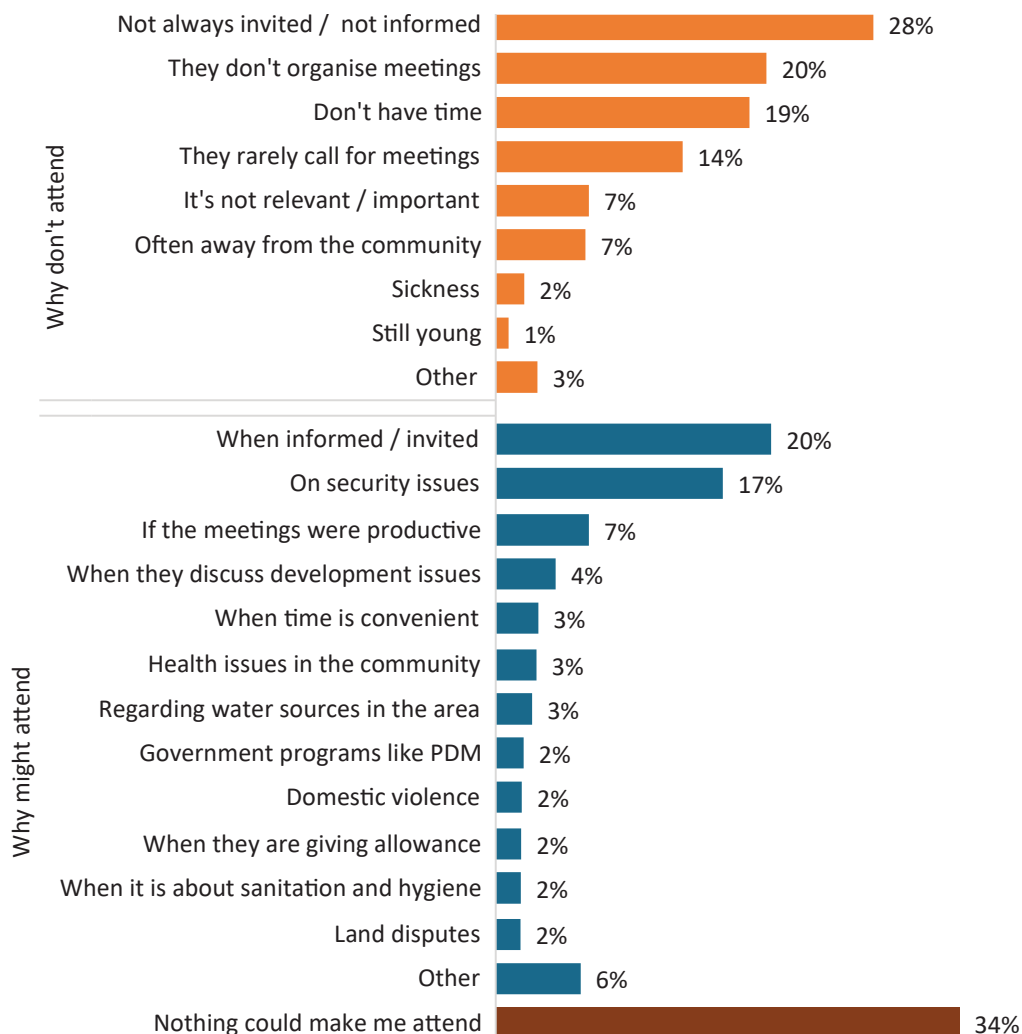
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 7 (January-February 2024);
Base: respondents who attend community meetings; n=2,065

Insight 9: The main reasons given for non-attendance include lack of information, lack of meetings and lack of time

Among those who don't usually attend community meetings, the main reasons they give for their non-attendance are that they are not informed that a meeting is happening (28%), that no meetings take place (20%) or that they don't have time to attend (19%).

Asked what might encourage them to attend future meetings, the main responses are simply that they would need to be informed of the meetings (20%) and that they would be more likely to attend when meetings are called to discuss security matters.

**Figure 9: Why don't you attend community meetings?
What could happen that would make you attend such meetings?**
(among those who don't usually attend; multiple responses permitted)



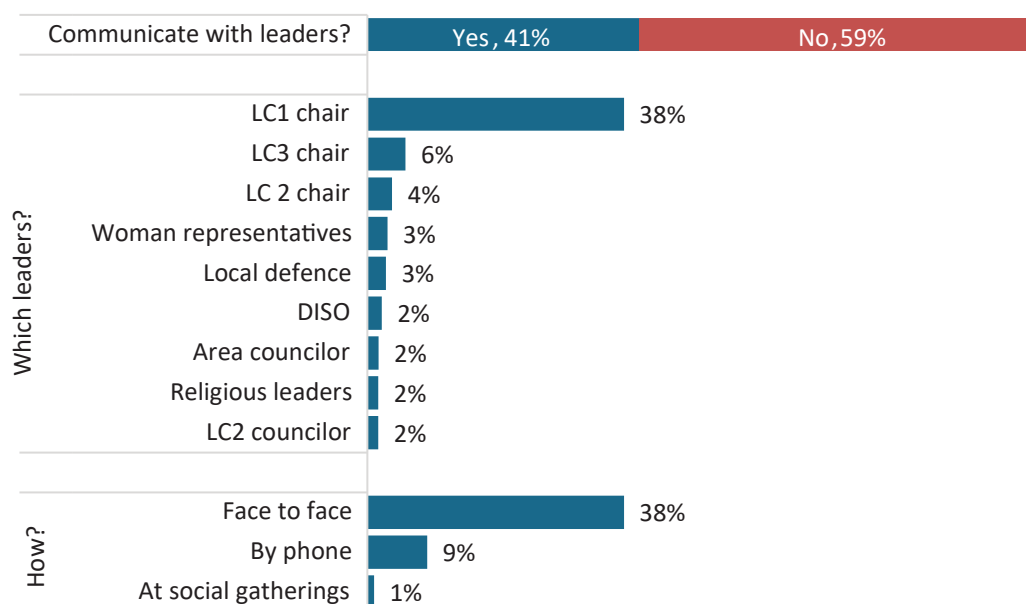
Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone panel survey round 7 (January-February 2024);
Base: respondents who do not usually attend community meetings; n=676

Insight 10: Among those who don't usually attend community meetings, most have no contact with community leaders at all

Among those who don't usually attend community meetings, most (59%) say that they have no contact with community leaders at all. This leaves four out of ten of those who don't attend meetings (41%) who do nevertheless have some contact with community leaders.

In most such cases, this contact is with their LC I chairperson and this takes place face-to-face.

**Figure 10: Do you communicate with your leaders?
If so, which leaders? And how do you communicate with them?**
(among those who don't usually attend; multiple responses permitted)



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 7 (January-February 2024);
Base: respondents who do not usually attend community meetings; n=676

3. Conclusions

At first glance, this brief may look like it covers two quite different topics: the media and community meetings. However, to see it this way would be a mistake, as the two are inescapably connected. Both relate to the central role of citizens in a democratic society. Citizens who are well-informed are better able to engage in public discussions on matters that affect their lives. And for citizens who are less active in following the media, public meetings can offer a valuable opportunity to fill the gap.

The most interesting findings in this data relate to the details of who is – and who is not – engaging with different forms of communication and public debate. We can see, for example, that while radio is gradually losing ground to TV, the internet and social media among citizens' media habits, this trend does not apply to all: poorer citizens, residents of rural areas, older people and those with lower levels of education continue to be highly dependent on radio for their media consumption. It is largely the young, educated, urban and relatively wealthy citizens who are increasingly looking to TV, the internet and social media for their news.

It is worth asking where we each fit into this media landscape, as the answers may be surprising. It is very easy, for example, for those who are engaged throughout the day on WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram or Twitter / X to see such spaces as reflecting public opinion. Lively debate takes place on social media, with participants reflecting many different political points of view. But the data here shows that such spaces are currently a very long way from representing the full range of opinions held by Ugandan citizens. Indeed, users of Instagram and Twitter / X in Uganda are almost entirely young, well-educated urbanites. Even other social media platforms, which have a slightly wider user base, are far from being representative of the country as a whole. Anyone who consumed or posted anything on social media in the past week is among a group who have a lot of privilege compared to the majority of citizens. The same applies – though to a lesser extent – even to those who watched TV in the past week.

Beyond recognising that most citizens are not online and not using social media, this reality has important implications. In large part, it is the same groups who were already excluded from access to decision making and public debate who are now further excluded by not being online. Discussions are taking place and decisions are being made, or influenced, in an entirely new arena, and it is an arena where most citizens are absent.

It is likely that there is a connection here with the languages used. English is the global language of the internet and social media, and while people can and do post things online in many different languages, the dominance of English (and perhaps Luganda) for online conversations will surely serve to further exclude many citizens. Outside of Greater Kampala and Central Uganda, English (and Luganda) are not widely used for consuming media, except by a relatively small group of those with higher levels of education.

The low level of attendance by Greater Kampala residents at community meetings is surely – at least in part – the other side of this same coin. For Kampala residents, attendance at such meetings is a relatively low priority when they have other, more efficient ways of finding out what's happening, and of making their voice heard.

Finally, what does this mean for society, and for government? The first answer has to be that we should all endeavour to remember that every time a discussion moves online, or takes place in English (or even Luganda), it excludes many people. For professional or academic discussions that may be just fine, but on issues of service delivery and governance, it matters that we try to include as many people as possible in public debate. That doesn't mean service delivery and governance should not be discussed on social media, but it does mean that we shouldn't limit our discussions of such matters to spaces where so many people remain on the outside. Government should continue to look for better ways of providing opportunities for citizens to engage offline as well.

And second, we should all remember that social media is very different from society. To those on the inside, it can look and feel like everyone is engaged, but that is a long way from being so. So next time you post, or share, or tweet, or comment, or read, remember that what you are seeing represented is only a small minority of Uganda.

