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THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online



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UGANDA

USING ICTS TO DEMAND BETTER SERVICE DELIVERY



WOUGNET

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Introduction

A society in which people are ignorant about government functions and systems typically breeds an environment in which corruption and poor service delivery can thrive. Information and communications technologies (ICTs) can be strategically used to improve access to public services, increase the efficiency, transparency and accountability of government and political processes, as well as empower citizens by enabling them to participate in government decision-making processes.¹ At local levels, pro-poor ICT-based governance and public service delivery strategies and applications can be applied to enhance development and poverty reduction within the larger context of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).²

The emergence of new technology, especially the internet and social media, has made information available to multiple users instantly. The internet is reducing corruption through providing an avenue for people to report when they pay a bribe, thereby exposing corrupt departments, loopholes used by officials to demand bribes, and situations under which bribes are demanded, as well as to report on other issues of bad governance in their communities.

This report is based on WOUGNET's experience in the project "ICTs for improved service delivery", which is being conducted under the ICT for Democracy in East Africa (ICT4DemEA) initiative with support from the Swedish Program for ICT in Developing Regions (Spider).

Policy and political background

The decentralised system of governance in Uganda meant that resources, both financial and human, were transferred from the centre to lower administrations so as to bring service delivery closer to the population. Uganda's decentralisation policy was

enshrined in the country's Constitution in 1995, and was legalised by the Local Government Act of 1997.³

The Auditor General's report of 2009⁴ shows that most districts failed to explicitly account for the resources that were dispersed to them in the previous three financial years. There were widespread irregularities that indicated overwhelming embezzlement and corruption in district administration. Although this was reported in the mainstream media,⁵ there was no demand for accountability from the people.

Print and electronic media coverage in Uganda is still minimal and has hardly penetrated the rural areas, where close to 80% of the people live.⁶ However, community radios are enabling citizens to hold their leaders accountable through reporting poor service delivery and bad governance issues. Political will has increased transparency, but when leaders do not have the capacity and the will to launch administrative reforms to end corruption, naming and shaming offers a workable alternative.

Voluntary Social Accountability Committees (VSACs)

A lack of civic awareness makes public monitoring of service delivery unattainable in most districts, and consequently widespread corruption and poor service delivery remain a challenge even at the local government level.⁷ Information about service delivery and accountability is under the control of the district political and civil service leaders, which breeds an environment in which rural populations treat the provision of services as a gift or favour from their leaders/governments.⁸ This makes them settle for anything, including shoddy work; they never sanction public servants who have embezzled public funds but rather glorify corrupt people

1 Bestle, L. (2007) Pro-Poor Public Service Delivery with ICTs: Making local e-governance work towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, UNDP. www.apdip.net/apdipnote/11.pdf

2 Proposal submitted to Spider for the period 2011-2012, p. 3.

3 World Bank (2003) Decentralisation Policies and Practices: Case Study Uganda.

4 Office of the Auditor General (2009) District Financial Performance Report 2009.

5 Electronic media stations and print media houses such as New Vision and Monitor Publications.

6 Synovate (2009) Survey on Penetration and Listenership of Different Media Houses in Uganda.

7 Uganda Anti-Corruption Network (2010) District Evaluation Report.

8 Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU) (2009) Strategy Document.

in their villages. They never know, for example, how much money has been passed to their local leaders for a road or school or health facility.

WOUGNET – the Women of Uganda Network – is using ICTs to increase the capacity of grassroots populations to demand better services from their leadership. The project targets women, through its women’s groups. It has instituted a type of committee called a Voluntary Social Accountability Committee (VSAC) to assist in implementing the project. VSACs are found at the parish level and comprise 15 members (11 women and four men) who meet monthly to share bad governance and poor service delivery issues in communities, then report to WOUGNET staff.

WOUGNET has three information centres fully connected to the internet in Apac, Amuru and Kampala. The project beneficiaries in Apac and Amuru districts have free access to these centres to improve their ICT skills. WOUGNET has set up an open source platform, Ushahidi, where bad governance, poor service delivery and good governance issues identified by VSACs are uploaded to create public awareness about the plight of the local people.

VSACs are undergoing training on how to use different ICTs such as computers, the internet, digital cameras and mobile phones, and participate in radio talk shows on promoting good governance. WOUGNET is also using social media to report bad governance (e.g. Facebook and Twitter).

The challenges encountered include:

- Absence of basic ICT infrastructure
- High illiteracy levels
- Language barriers (i.e. the dominance of the English language)
- Slow adaptation of ICT use and application by the VSACs
- Lack of demonstrated benefit of ICTs to address ground-level development challenges.

Despite the challenges, the internet is an effective tool that can be used to fight corruption and promote good governance. Through VSACs, the population is being made aware of the services in their communities that they should take advantage of in order to improve their livelihoods and for poverty reduction.

Internet exposes corruption in health centre

Bad governance and poor service delivery issues identified during a meeting by the VSAC from Kidilani parish, Chegere sub-county, included limited access to medical services at Kidilani Health

Centre II. Antenatal and maternity services had ceased to be provided since August 2011, leading to the deaths of newborn babies or complications during childbirth. In one case a mother who went into labour either had to travel up to Apac Referral or Atapara hospital in Oyam district or had to have a home birth.

The VSAC also reported hidden costs incurred by expectant mothers who needed to be attended to while giving birth. The community had complained about the hidden costs incurred after deliveries, and the midwives were ordered to stop making the charges or to face punishment. They were told to write down the details of deliveries made and to send them to the referral hospital in order to receive payment on a monthly basis. However, on many occasions when this money was transferred to the district referral hospital, it never got to the health centre. Due to a lack of motivation, these midwives abandoned the job and some have turned to dealing with other issues such as malaria.

The health centre lacks decent staff housing and this prompted the community to construct grass-thatched houses. Some staff opted to commute from their homes which are quite far from the health centre. For example, a nurse who commutes from her home in Atinglaki village, which is around eight kilometres from the health centre, often reports for duty at midday and leaves by 3:00 p.m. In the end, not all the patients are attended to.

The VSAC also reported that the health centre cleaner, someone in charge of cleaning the health unit premises, had last worked four months earlier and was still on sick leave. However, he had no documentation showing that he was on leave because of delays at the Apac district referral hospital. Since no one was assigned to step into his place, the health centre grounds had become overgrown, making it risky for patients and visitors.

WOUGNET uploaded this information onto the Ushahidi platform to increase awareness on what was happening in Kidilani parish. The VSAC members then followed up with their leaders at the sub-county level on matters regarding the state of service delivery at the health centre. Their leaders took action by meeting with the District Health Officer, and the response was prompt. An “in-charge” (a midwife who oversees the operations of a health centre) and three other nurses were posted to Kidilani Health Centre II, and the cleaner recovered and is now maintaining the health centre premises. The nurses and the in-charge are the ones administering medication to the patients, unlike previously when the cleaner was assigned to do that. The community expressed appreciation for the benefits they

are deriving from the health unit and we as WOUNET attribute these changes to the VSAC.⁹

Conclusions

Corruption creates many public sector dysfunctions and it is ordinary citizens who bear the brunt of corruption, have direct experience of it, and suffer from it. For people, corruption is not abstract. It can be encountered in daily life and impacts on their health, education, security, jobs and even survival: from a widow who cannot get her food ration card because she cannot afford the bribe demanded by the civil servant, to voters whose elected officials siphon off or misuse funds intended to alleviate poverty, to parents whose children die in collapsed schools during a strong earthquake while nearby buildings remain standing. Corruption deprives the community of accessing services and goods that are meant for them.

Corruption undermines good governance and the rule of law. Good governance requires fair legal frameworks that are enforced impartially. It also requires full protection of human rights, particularly those of minorities.¹⁰ The impartial enforcement of laws requires an independent judiciary and an impartial and incorruptible police force. However, with corruption, officials who are arrested always bribe their way out. For instance, it is often the small fish that are caught while the big fish who embezzle much more always get off scot-free.

There are several institutions that fight corruption in this country, though they are particularly weak and prone to being overrun by informal politics. Until recently, few studies had explored effective methods of combating corruption by increasing access to information, specifically information about government policies and practices. This points to an urgent need to put internet-based systems in place to check corruption, enhance transparency and promote access to information.¹¹

Although the use of the internet is still in its infancy, both the creation of information and policy making can be made interactive using the internet. Policy research may benefit from feedback from users. This is because the internet provides a mechanism for users to become active partners in the dissemination of information in the policy-making process.

The internet can be used effectively to share government budgets and work plans with the citizens. This will enable them to effectively monitor government expenditure. Corrupt officials can also be exposed through the internet. We believe that naming and shaming will help to promote transparency and accountability.

One of the most stunning findings in recent corruption research is the discovery of the negative relationship between women in government and corruption. It is claimed that higher rates of female participation in government are associated with lower levels of corruption.¹² Why does the participation of women in government reduce government corruption? Substantial literature in the social sciences suggests that women may have higher standards of ethical behaviour and be more concerned with the common good – criminologists have developed many theories that are potentially relevant. Women may be brought up to be more honest or more risk averse than men, or even feel there is a greater probability of being caught. Therefore increasing women's participation in public governance may reduce corruption.¹³

Action steps

- Advocate for improved access to ICT facilities to encourage rural people to exploit the advantages of ICTs.
- Advocate for the use of social media, especially under restrictive regimes when meeting physically is difficult. Using social media to report and act on corruption disrupts its systems, increases citizen participation, strengthens campaign organisation and capacity, wins people over and weakens sources of support and control for unaccountable and corrupt power holders.
- Lead internet-based anti-corruption campaigns, as the internet enables citizens to track how public funds are used, and makes issues international. An example of a civic campaign with international dimensions is the "Ask Your Government"¹⁴ campaign, which gathers governmental budget information from 84 countries and gives citizens access to this information.

9 More information concerning the project and issues related to bad governance and corruption can be found at www.wougn.net.org/ushahidi/reports, www.wougn.net.org and www.kicinfo.org

10 Okullo, G. (2011) Paper presented on good governance, at awareness raising workshops in Apac and Kole, December.

11 Wu, W. C. (2011) Internet Technology and its Impact on Corruption, thesis presented to the Department of Political Science, University of California, San Diego, 28 March, p. 6.

12 Sung, H. E. (2003) Fairer Sex or Fairer System? Gender and Corruption, *Social Forces*, 82 (2), p. 703-723. www.jstor.org/stable/3598207

13 Ibid.

14 www.newtactics.org/en/blog/new-tactics/empowering-citizens-fight-corruption#comment-5112

- Disseminate information on corruption and bring this to the attention of the authorities who can take action/put social pressure on institutions responsible for handling it. For example, social media, websites and a web-based platform such as Ushahidi can be used for this.
- Use the internet to expose corrupt individuals so as to deny them opportunities to work elsewhere and again mismanage resources.
- Call upon donors to stop funding sectors where there is mismanagement of resources.
- Team up: fighting corruption collectively with all stakeholders increases the effect of individual action, since there is strength in numbers that leads to change. ■