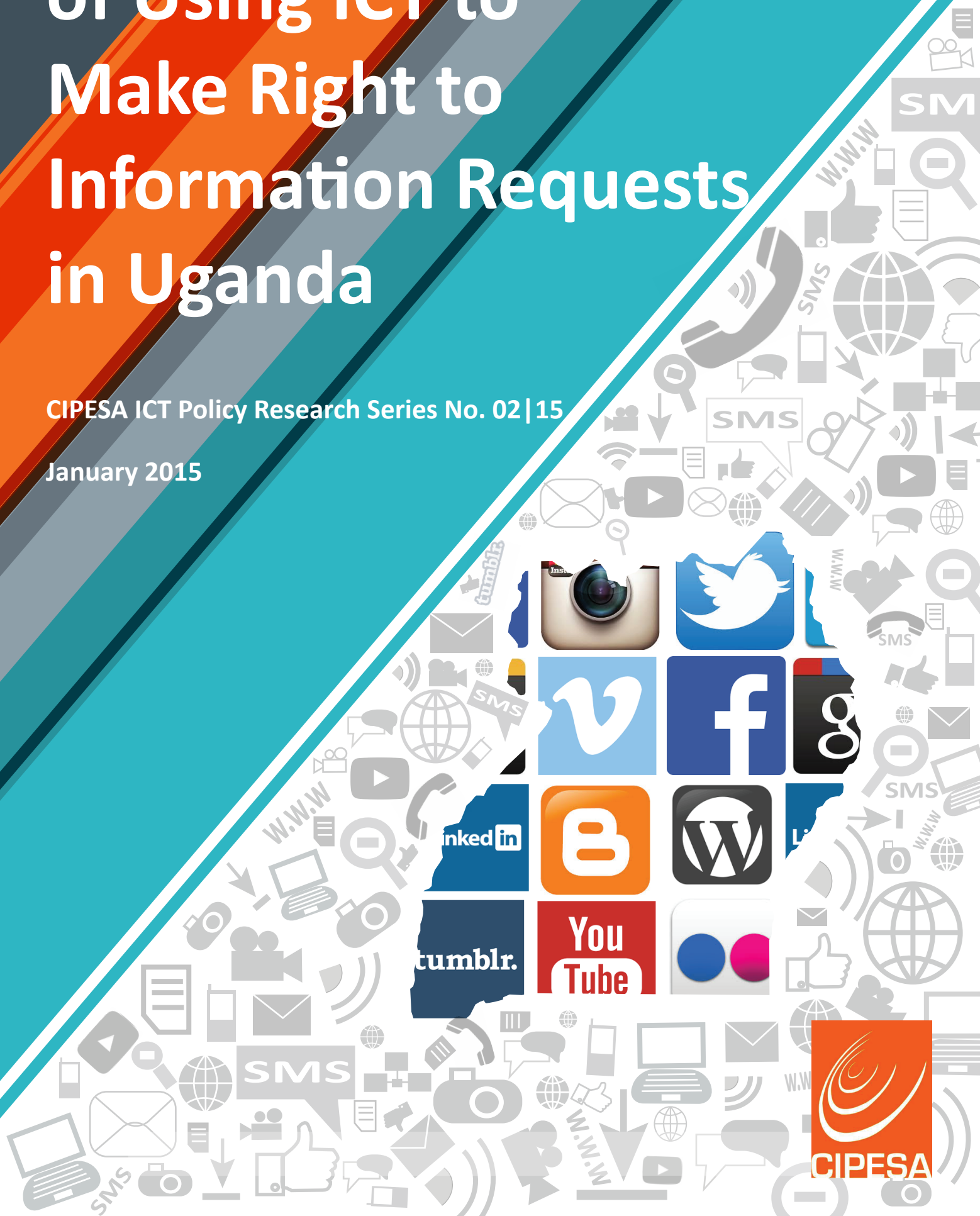


# Citizens' Perceptions of Using ICT to Make Right to Information Requests in Uganda

CIPESA ICT Policy Research Series No. 02 | 15

January 2015



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This report was produced by the Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) with support from the Open Society Foundations.

## **Researchers and Contributors**

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## Introduction

The right of access to information has been referred to as the engine for democracy, essential for openness, accountability and good governance. This right is based on the fundamental premise that a government is supposed to serve the people. The establishment of a legal framework to ensure access to government information by citizens is an important step in the attainment of the right and the quest for more accountable governments.

In Uganda, the right of Access to Information Act (ATIA) was passed in 2005, with the enabling regulations issued six years later in 2011. Unlike the primarily promotional legal frameworks that focus on promoting proactive disclosure by the state, the passage of the ATIA shifted the balance on information control from a presumption of secrecy to a presumption of disclosure, with citizens now having a formal and enforceable right enshrined in law to access a range of information in the hands of government agencies.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Section 5(1) of the Act states that, “Every citizen has a right of access to information and records in the possession of the State or any public body, except where the release of the information is likely to prejudice the security or sovereignty of the State or interfere with the right to privacy of any other person.”

Regrettably, the Act has not registered much success as a tool for satisfying the desire for quality and timely information among citizens, nor has it served as a tool for making government officials responsive to such requests.<sup>2</sup>

A number of arguments have been advanced for this failure. In its current form, the law widely restricts public access to information. Specifically, Section 7 of the regulations imposes access fees of UGX 20,000 (US\$7) and the reproduction costs of the information requested are to be borne by the information requester. This is besides the elaborate and cumbersome process (Section 7 of the regulations) that information requesters are subjected to while submitting information requests. Additionally, the Official Secrets Act (1964) restrains public officials from engaging in proactive disclosure of certain information.

Besides advocating for the amendment of certain prohibitive sections of the regulations and the law, there have been several efforts within both government and civil society to exploit the available opportunities to enhance peoples’ access to information. One of these is the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), such as email, social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.), and Short Message Services (SMS), among others.

<sup>1</sup> Anupama Dokeniya, 2013, *Implementing Right to Information: A case study of Uganda*; World Bank

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

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The government, through the Ministry of Information and National Guidance, in partnership with civil society actors has embarked on an initiative to promote the use of ICT to enhance the operationalisation of the ATIA by promoting online information requests through a specialised web-portal. Launched in August 2014, [www.askyourgov.ug](http://www.askyourgov.ug) (AYG) is aimed at promoting Ugandan citizens' right to information in support of transparency, accountability and good governance.

As a key stakeholder and one of the promoters of the portal, the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) commissioned a survey to assess citizens' perceptions of the use of ICT in actualisation of the right of access to information in Uganda. The research was administered among 235 respondents and covered 10 districts of Gulu and Lira (representing the Northern region); Iganga, Mayuge and Mbale (representing the Eastern region); Kasese and Kabarole (representing the Western region); Mpigi and Masaka (representing the Southern region) and Kampala (representing the central region).

The survey questionnaire was composed of both quantitative and qualitative questions that probed how citizens were utilising ICT to source information held by Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). It also explored citizens' familiarity with the right to information law in Uganda. The nature of information that citizens were interested in sourcing and which ICT tools were most likely to be utilised when requesting information, were also investigated.

The survey results indicate that some citizens have experience in exercising their right to information, with a few utilising ICT platforms to make requests for information. However, due to poor responses from officials, few exercised the right regularly. Younger internet users were most familiar with the right to information law, but even amongst this group, the gender gap was visible. Almost all respondents, however, agreed that ICT could play an integral role in effectuating the right to information in Uganda, noting that this would make it much easier and convenient to request for information while at the same time increasing responsiveness from MDAs.

While the results represent a small sample of the Uganda population, they mirror the attitudes and perceptions held by many on the right to information. The results can be used by academics, private sector, civil society and government bodies in the development of inclusive mechanisms for the flow of information between citizens and the state.

## Survey findings and analysis

### Profile of participants

Survey respondents were 63% male and 37% female. Most respondents (42%) were aged 18-24, while 40% were in the 25-34 age group.

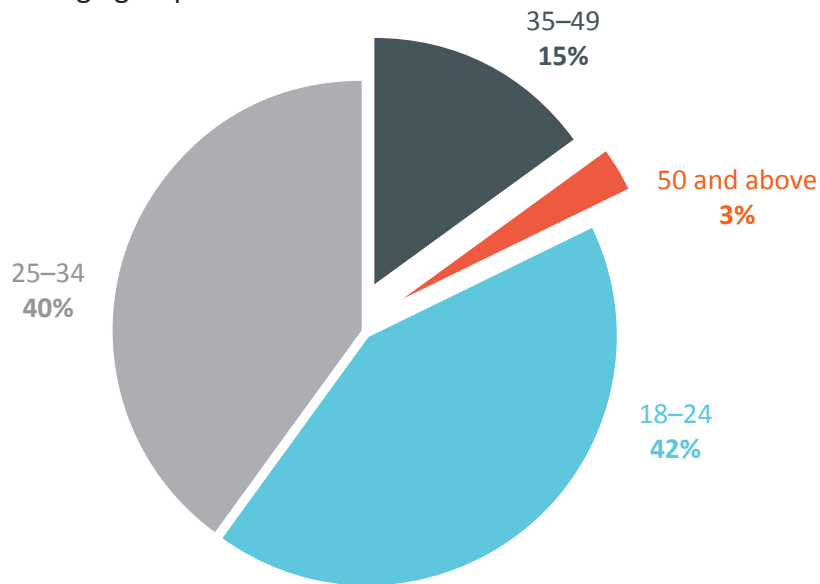


Figure 1: Respondents' age groups

Students (32%), the media (31%), and civil society (18%) comprised the main respondent categories.

Students	32%
Media	31%
NGO/Civil society/Community Based Organisation	18%
Private Sector	10%
Other	9%

Table 1: Respondents by sector

## Knowledge of Uganda's Access to Information Act

Nearly half of the respondents (46%) indicated that they were moderately knowledgeable about Uganda's access to Information law. Those who considered themselves extremely knowledgeable about the law were 10%, while 9% had no knowledge at all of the law.

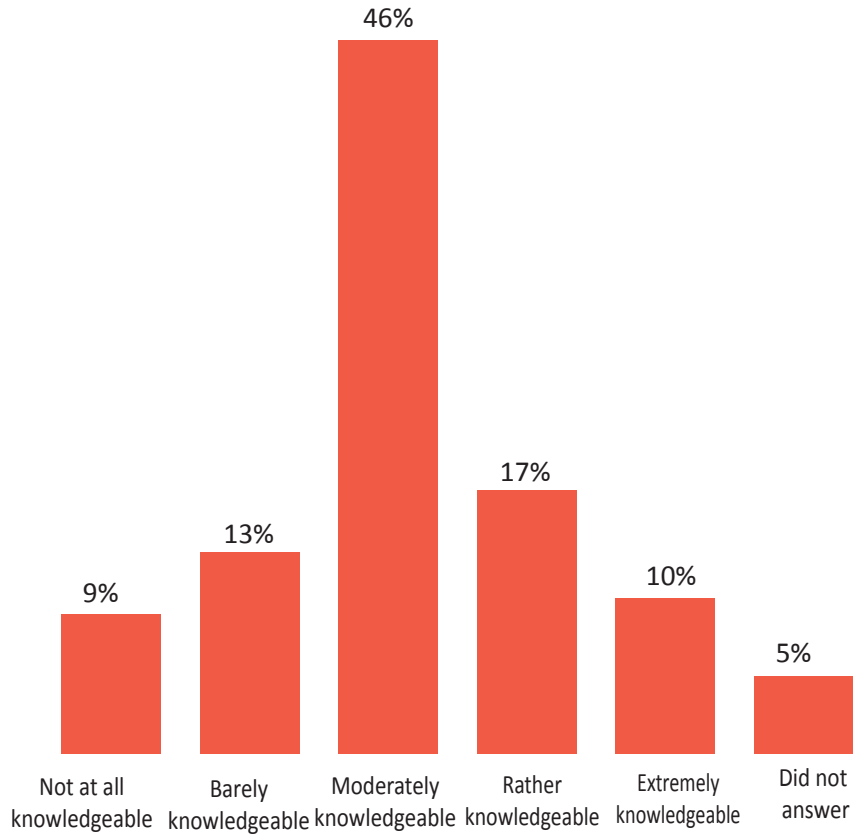


Figure 2: How would you rate your knowledge of Uganda's Access to Information Act?

## Knowledge of the Act by age

The 25-34 age group had the largest proportion of respondents who were either extremely knowledgeable or rather knowledgeable about the law.

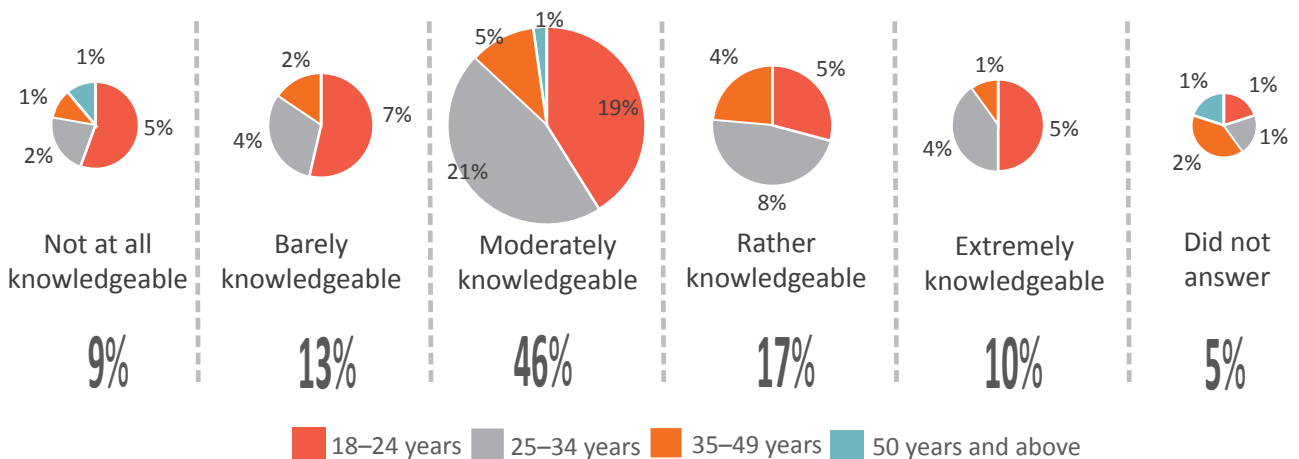


Figure 3: Level of knowledge of ATIA by age group

## Knowledge of the Act by gender

An equal proportion of males and females (5%) were extremely knowledgeable about the law. Overall, a slightly bigger proportion of males than females had good knowledge of the law.

	Not at all knowledgeable	Barely knowledgeable	Moderately knowledgeable	Rather knowledgeable	Extremely knowledgeable	Did not answer
Male	6%	7%	31%	12%	5%	2%
Female	3%	6%	15%	5%	5%	3%
Total	9%	13%	46%	17%	10%	5%

Table 2: Knowledge of ATIA by gender

By sector, the media and civil society were the most knowledgeable about the Act.

	Not at all knowledgeable	Barely knowledgeable	Moderately knowledgeable	Rather knowledgeable	Extremely knowledgeable
Student	5%	5%	13%	5%	4%
Media	1%	4%	18%	6%	3%
NGO/Civil society/CBO	1%	1%	10%	4%	1%
Private sector	1%	1%	3%	1%	1%
Other	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%
Total	9%	13%	46%	17%	10%

Table 3: Knowledge of the Act by sector

## Making information requests using ATIA

Some 33% of respondents indicated having ever made an information request using the ATIA law. However, respondents said only 28% of the requests made were attended to with positive outcomes. Requests made ranged from information about the proposed Uganda Museum redevelopment, disease prevalence including HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, the work of the National Planning Authority, police statistics on mob justice, infrastructure contracts (roads and dams), banking regulations, press regulations, private sector performance records, vacancies, Municipal Council audit reports, and revenue collections from market vendors.

Others had requested for information on education sponsorships, World Bank contributions towards projects, district budgets, national surveys, agricultural sector budgets, Town Council bylaws, the Hansard of Parliament, civil servants' retirement benefits, foreign military interventions, the Bugisu cooperative union wrangles, and various statistics from local governments.

Among the reasons cited by those who had never made requests using the law were the “long process”, “cumbersome bureaucracy” and the 21 days wait stipulated by the law within which public officials have to respond to a request. Some respondents cited ignorance of the law.



Figure 4: Have you ever made a request for information using the Access to Information Act?

### Knowledge and proficiency in using select ICT tools and services

Respondents were asked about their knowledge of ICT tools and services and proficiency in using them. SMS emerged as the top tool most respondents (58%) had excellent knowledge of and proficiency in using, followed by use of social media (44%) and search engines (42%).

Tool/Service	Knowledge and proficiency in use				
	None	Poor	Workable	Good	Excellent
Google and other search engines	2%	2%	12%	42%	42%
Email (including sharing photos and documents as attachments)	3%	4%	12%	45%	36%
Contribute to online discussion groups/chats	4%	11%	19%	40%	26%
Use of social media (Twitter, Whatsapp, Facebook, Myspace, etc)	3%	3%	10%	40%	44%
SMS on mobile	0	3%	11%	28%	58%
Blogging	26%	20%	23%	20%	11%
Downloading files (documents and media)	3%	8%	15%	34%	40%
Video conferencing (SKYPE, Google plus etc)	19%	21%	26%	20%	14%

Table 4: Knowledge and proficiency in using select ICT tools and services



## Frequency of using ICT tools and services

A great majority of respondents - 71% - indicated use of Facebook on a daily basis, followed by SMS at 64% and email at 54%. Only 1% of respondents had never used email and SMS. One third of respondents did not use Whatsapp at all, while 26% did not use Twitter at all.

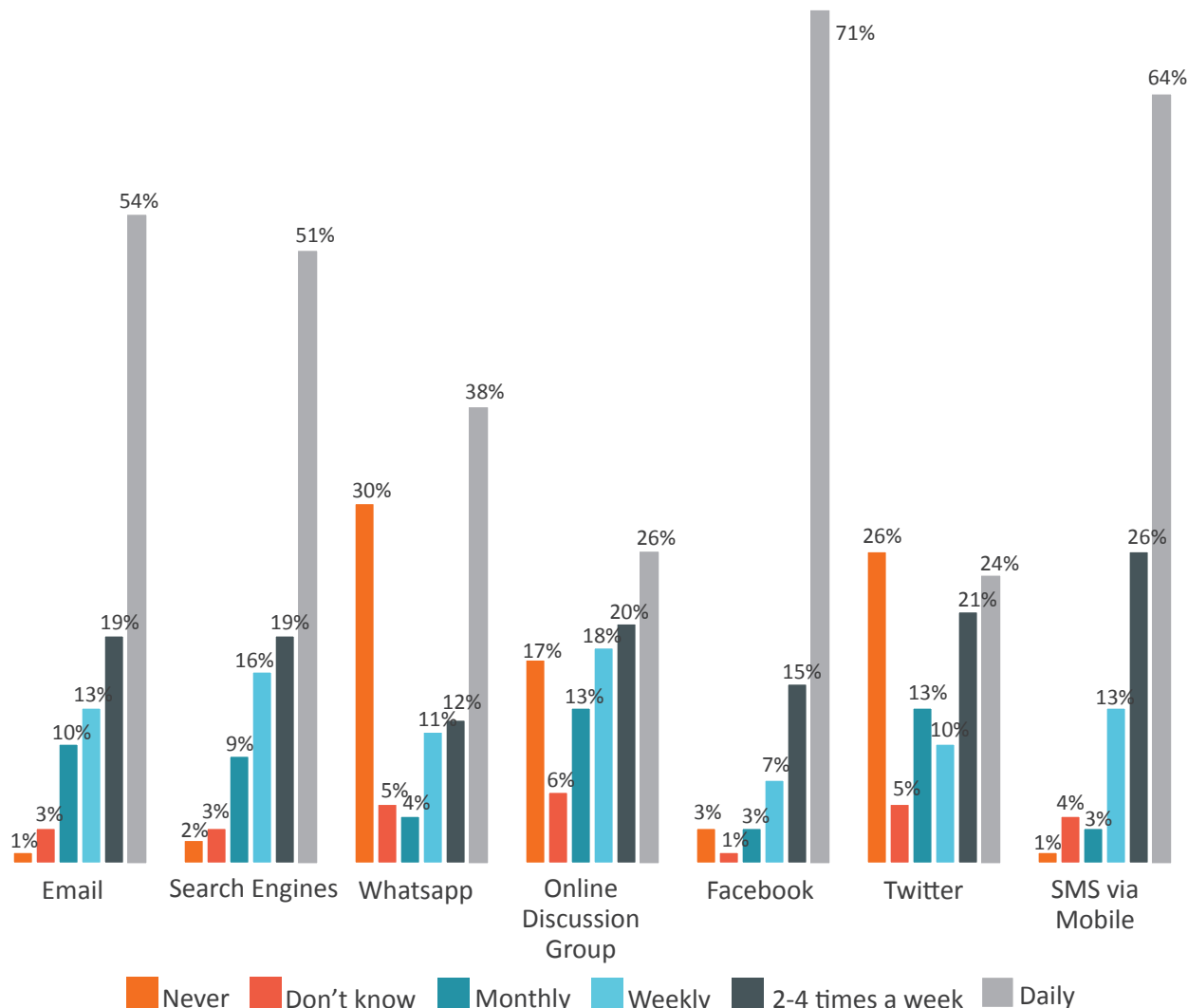


Figure 5: How often do you use these ICT tools and services?

Younger people were the most abundant daily users of the three most frequently used tools (Facebook, SMS and email). Nearly one third of the 18-24 age group used Facebook and SMS daily, while almost a quarter of the 25-34 year olds used Facebook, SMS and email daily.

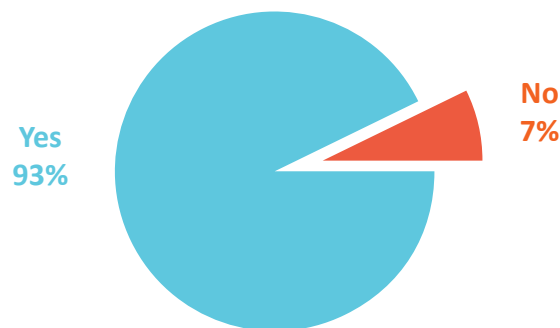
Age group	Facebook	SMS	Email
18-24	32%	30%	18%
25-34	28%	24%	24%
35-49	10%	9%	10%
50 and above	1%	1%	2%
Total	71%	64%	46%

Table 5: Daily use of Facebook, SMS and email by age

### **ICT use would make it easier to make requests for information**

The majority (93%) of respondents agreed that ICT had the potential to make it easier for citizens to make requests for information. Only 7% did not think so. Among the reasons given for ICT's potential to positively impact citizens' requests for information were its ability to provide the requested information in soft copy thereby allowing for further dissemination and analysis, and cost effectiveness in reducing the transport burden on citizens. "Cheap and convenient", stated one respondent. There was also the view that ICT would allow for more direct engagement with officials and instantaneous receipt of responses. One notable response was that ICT would enable the public to make information requests from "officials they fear" to face physically.

Those who doubted the potential of ICT stated that officials could ignore electronic requests, and also noted that there were few users of ICT in Uganda. It was also noted that many citizens may not trust information disclosed electronically as much as that released physically.



*Figure 6: Do you think the use of ICT would make it easier to make requests for information?*

### **ICT use would make public bodies more likely to release information**

Just over two thirds (79%) believed that the use of ICT to make information requests was likely to make public bodies more responsive than use of manual, non-ICT means. "Requests [through ICT] are made public hence forcing bodies to respond," said one respondent. Other explanations given were the reduced workload on officers who may readily have information in soft copy and would not have to print and process paperwork for responses.

Ease and convenience of responding to information requests, and the ability for disclosures to reach wider masses (through websites and other mediums), moreover instantaneously, were also cited as potential enablers for ICT to make public bodies more responsive.

Those who doubted that ICT would change public officials' responsiveness stated that government officials were still stuck in the old manual system, lacked the necessary skills to use electronic systems, and were likely to claim they did not receive electronic requests even when they did.

### **Likelihood of making an information request using an ICT-based system**

Half of the respondents reported that they were likely to make an information request using an ICT-based system; 32% were very likely.

Very likely		32%
Likely		50%
Unlikely	9%	
Very Unlikely	4%	
Don't know	5%	

Figure 7: What is the likelihood you would make a request for information via a web or mobile phone based system which directly sends your request to the email address of a public official?

The likelihood to use an ICT-based system was lowest among respondents aged 50 and over. Respondents aged 18-24 and 25-34 were the most likely to use an ICT-based Right to Information (RTI) system.

Age group	Don't know	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very likely
18–24	3%	1%	2%	24%	13%
25–34	1%	2%	5%	18%	13%
35–49	1%	0.5%	1%	7%	6%
50 and above	0	0.5%	1%	1%	0
Total	5%	4%	9%	50%	32%

Table 6: Likelihood of using ICT-based RTI system by age

Of the respondents with a history of making information requests 88% were likely or very likely to make a request via ICT. Of the respondents who had never made an information request using the RTI law, 29% indicated a very high likelihood for using an ICT-based system to make requests. Similarly, 50% of those with no prior history of making a request were likely to make a request via an ICT-based system. Of those who were unlikely to make an information request via ICT, 12% had never made an information request before.

Information request made in the past	Likelihood of making request via ICT				
	Don't know	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very likely
Yes	3%	6%	3%	49%	39%
No	6%	3%	12%	50%	29%

Table 7: Likelihood of using an ICT-based RTI system against history of making an information request

The portability of the mobile phone, which enabled choice of where and when a citizen could make an information request, made it an ideal access to information tool. On the other hand, limited access due to poor network coverage, high internet tariffs, slow internet speeds, language barriers and illiteracy, were stated as reasons that may hinder lodging information requests via web or mobile phone based systems. Citizens' privacy and security concerns were also raised, with one individual stating that the use of an ICT-based system did not guarantee confidentiality of the user's personal information.

### Perceived usefulness of ICT for making RTI requests

More than half the respondents (53%) strongly agreed, while 39% agreed that ICT would make it easier and simpler to make RTI requests. No respondent indicated strong disagreement with the ability of ICT to make RTI requests easier and simpler. A majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that using ICT to make information requests would make government bodies more responsive. Only 6% disagreed.

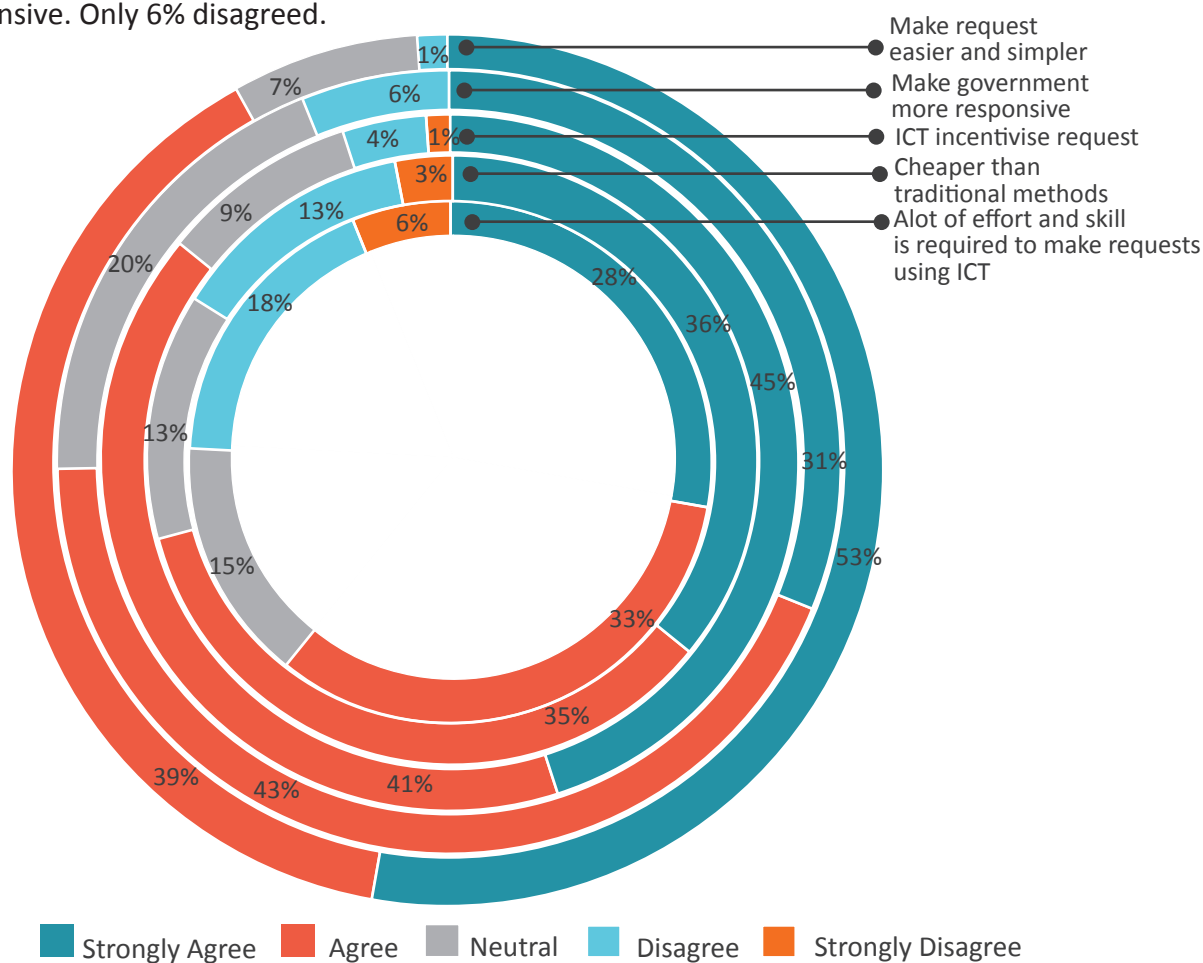


Figure 8: What is your perceived usefulness of ICT for making RTI requests?

Those who disagreed that ICT would make it less costly to make RTI requests were 16%, while those who believed it would be cheaper were 71%. One third of respondents thought that a lot of effort and skills would be needed to use ICT effectively for information requests, while an additional 28% strongly agreed about the need for skills and effort. Meanwhile, 86% of the survey participants indicated that they would need more incentive to make requests for information through ICT than traditional methods – such incentives could include toll free SMS, speedy responses to requests and security guarantee of the requester's personal information.

## How public bodies can proactively become more open

Respondents suggested ways in which central and local governments, as well as statutory bodies can more actively open up their information through ICT:

- Create and actively maintain databases of all available information
- Proactively disseminate information to citizens through text messages, emails, and public dialogues
- Disclose information to public ICT centres for onward dissemination to grassroots
- Enable online subscriptions for news and updates on websites
- Regularly upload news and documents to websites
- Use radio, television and social media (Facebook, Twitter and blogs) for engagement and debates
- Provide ICT equipment and internet subscriptions for all local governments to ensure maintenance of their websites and social media accounts
- Develop specialised websites dedicated to information provision purposes.
- Build ICT skills for public officials
- Open up customer care lines/information desks for handling information requests
- Adopt ICT syllabus in school curriculums
- Pursue policy efforts that reduce the cost of ICT acquisition and use
- Provide clear contact information for relevant officials

## Priority public bodies to request information from

Respondents were also asked to list priority public bodies that they would make an information request from using ICT. The ministries of ICT, health, education, finance and internal affairs emerged in the top five. The private sector was also listed.

Ministry of Information and Communication Technology
Ministry of Health
Ministry of Education and Sports
Ministry of Finance
Ministry of Internal Affairs
Ministry of Defence
Office of the Prime Minister
Ministry of Information and National Guidance
Uganda Communications Commission
Police
Local Governments
Ministry of Labour, Gender, Youth and Social Development
Electoral Commission
Ministry of Justice
Ministry of Public Service

Table 8: Top 15 MDAs to request information from

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## Discussion

The results of the survey indicate a wide knowledge gap of the ATIA law and a need amongst citizens for effective channels through which to exercise their right to access information. Respondents were groups that regularly needed information from public bodies so it would be assumed that they knew more about the law. However, only the media showed fair knowledge about the law.

Considering that only one third of the respondents had made a request for information using ATIA was further testimony that few people were knowledgeable about the law and how to apply it, or had faith in government bodies responding positively to requests.

The diversity of information requests which participants had made in the past showed that citizens had wide-ranging information needs. All these needs are best met by proactive disclosures from government bodies rather than citizens' demands for information. This also calls for swift responses to requests once public bodies receive them. At another level, the breadth of the various information requests showed that respondents were aware of their information needs and, in many cases, which public body to approach to meet these needs.

Whereas there was scepticism among some respondents about the ability of ICT to enhance greater transparency in government operations, an overwhelming majority (93%) believed that ICT had the potential to make it easier for citizens to make requests for information, while 79% believed that the use of ICT to make information requests was likely to make public bodies more responsive than use of non-ICT-based means. This disposition needs to be exploited by providing positive examples of how ICT has enabled openness in government.

High proficiency in using ICT tools and services and frequency of using them means there is a good opportunity to use ICT-based systems. A great number of respondents had high proficiency in using social media, SMS and search engines, among others. The sum of skills in using these tools means that such citizens can be able to participate in RTI discussions on social media or in making requests via the online information request platform, [www.askyourgov.ug](http://www.askyourgov.ug). With 71% of respondents reporting that they used Facebook daily, this social networking site becomes worth exploring in advancing the RTI Uganda.

Overall, individuals surveyed commended efforts/systems implementation both by government and civil society that are aimed at information sharing. However, recommendations were made for widespread publicity of such initiatives as these actions will spark increased awareness amongst more citizens to appreciate their right to access and request for information.

## Recommendations

- Both civil society and government agencies should use the available online tools and proactively engage in information sharing and dissemination to meet both the anticipated and real needs of the citizens.
- Access to information advocates and public information officers should use SMS and other social media platforms to urge citizens to make requests, as well as to send notifications about responses to their requests.
- Although citizens have a wide range of information needs, they need further motivation to use initiatives such as the AYG online platform or to make manual requests, particularly citing the ATIA. Therefore, there is a need to popularise these initiatives by providing speedy responses to online requests and to promote discussion on the RTI, both through online and offline methods.
- There is need to create more awareness about ATIA among citizens. Besides creating awareness, it is necessary to make it easier and convenient for people to lodge requests by popularising the AYG online portal. In addition, engage with civil society to help citizens utilise the portal to make requests and provide successful case studies on when requests were made and speedily responded to positively.
- Concerns about using online systems need to be studied and addressed in campaigns that promote the use of such systems. For instance, privacy and security concerns were expressed by some respondents. The online systems therefore should strive to incorporate education campaigns to assure citizens that there are no repercussions to them by virtue of using portals like AYG or participating in social media discussions and other activities in promoting RTI.
- There is need for continuous monitoring of systems deployed and evaluation of their efficiency and effectiveness.
- A combination of ICT and non-ICT-based means should be used to promote access to information, including the intergration of new media tools such as Facebook and Twitter into the digital systems deployed.
- In terms of systems development, considerations should be made for user friendliness, language and access for the disabled.

This report was produced in the context of the work by the Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) on leveraging the Right to Information and Open Data to promote service delivery in East Africa, with the support of Open Society Foundations.



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