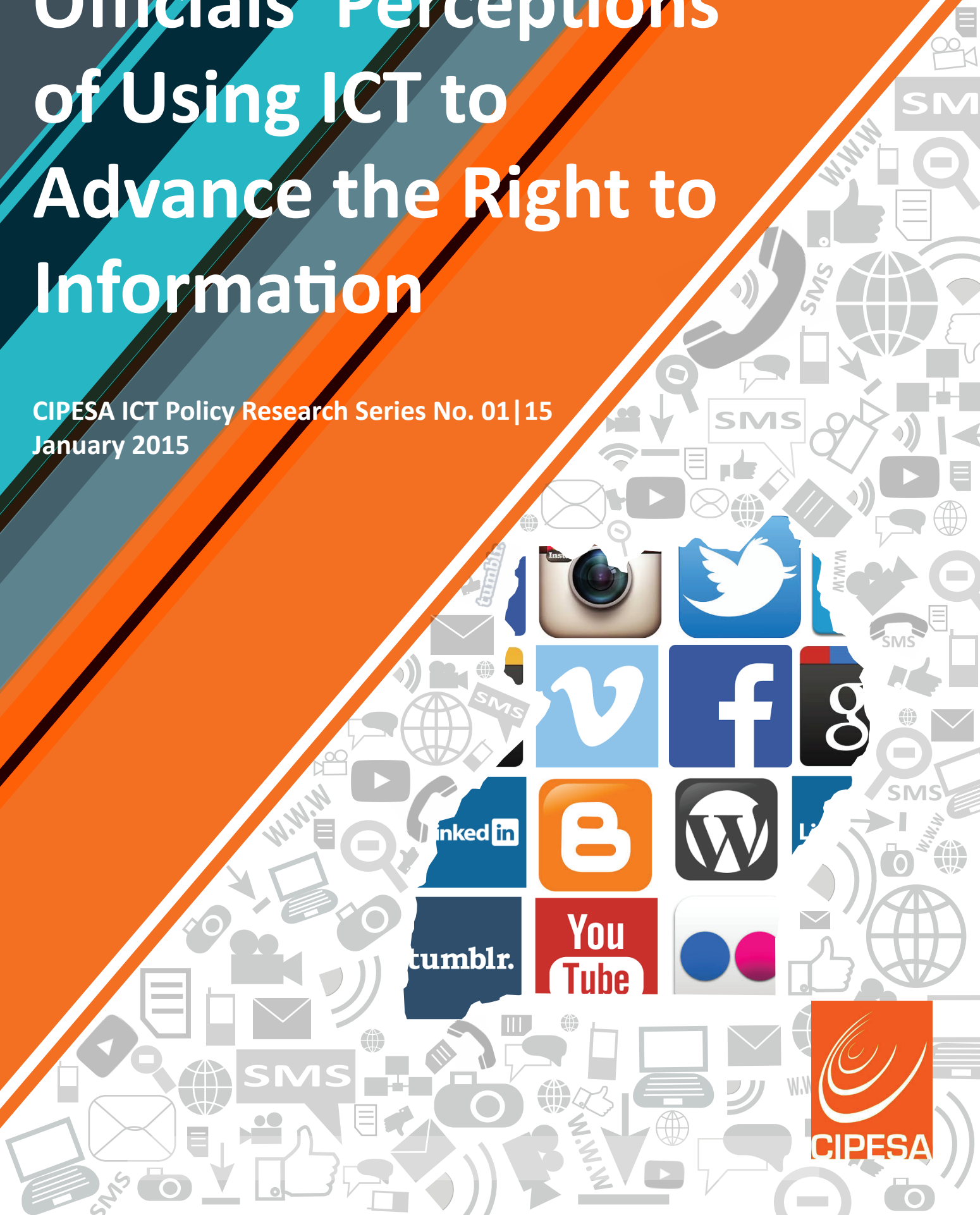


Ugandan Public Officials' Perceptions of Using ICT to Advance the Right to Information

CIPESA ICT Policy Research Series No. 01 | 15
January 2015



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Introduction

Uganda passed an Access to Information Act (ATIA) in 2005. The law and its 2011 regulations give citizens the right to access information and records of government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), local governments, statutory corporations and bodies, commissions and other agencies.

In August 2014, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) through the Ministry of Information and National Guidance launched the Ask Your Government (AYG) online platform (www.askyourgov.ug). AYG is an initiative of the OPM in partnership with the Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) and the Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC). It is aimed at promoting Ugandan citizens' right to information in support of transparency, accountability and good governance.¹

Accordingly, CIPESA and AFIC conducted a survey to gain an in-depth understanding of public officials' perceptions about using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools and systems such as AYG to respond to information requests and advance the right to information (RTI).

The survey, conducted in November 2014, involved 62 officials from over 30 MDAs. See Annex 1 for the list of MDAs surveyed and Annex 2 for the survey instrument.

¹ *Uganda Launches Portal to Support Citizens Right to Information*, <http://www.cipesa.org/2014/08/-press-release-uganda-launches-portal-to-support-citizens-right-to-information/>

Survey findings and analysis

From the officials surveyed, 56% described themselves as media, communications or public relations officers, while 24% and 8% were information officers and government project officers respectively. Other respondents included one Permanent Secretary, a Deputy Director, a Director, Senior State Attorney, a Communications Consultant, an Assistant Commissioner and a Policy Analyst. There was an equal number of women and men involved in the survey.

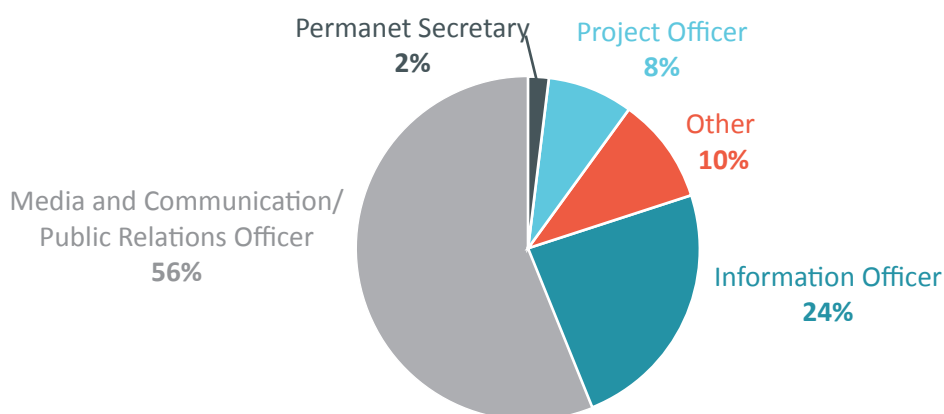


Figure 1: Which of the following best describes your current position?

Knowledge of Uganda's Access to Information Act

The majority of officials surveyed were knowledgeable about Uganda's Access to Information law, with 40% indicating moderate knowledge of the law while 24% were rather knowledgeable and 18% extremely knowledgeable.

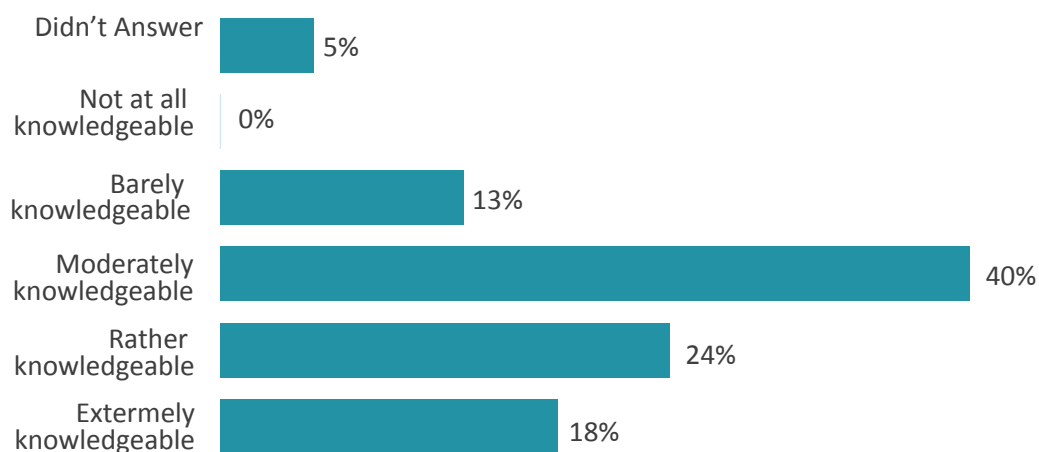


Figure 2: How would you rate your knowledge of Uganda's Access to Information Act?

Just over a third (39%) of officials had ever received an information request from the public made formally using the 2005 ATIA. The majority (61%) had not received requests made using the ATIA. Information requested for was on a wide range of topics, including statistics and reports for various MDAs and sectors, compensation for Kasese airport expansion, waste management in Kampala, motor vehicle procurement in Kalangala district, disaster management activities, land title processing, capitation grants, pension payments and audit reports. Officials said they responded positively to 83% of the information requests. Of the unsuccessful requests, one official noted that he was unable to provide the requested information because he was “blocked by the technical authorities in the ministry.”

Only 13% of the officials had received requests for information through completed forms provided for under the ATIA and regulations. The greater number (87%) said most information requests made to them by the public were made informally (without completing a form as per the ATIA). Requesters used various means including email, telephone, letters, verbally in person, and during interviews by journalists and researchers.

Proficiency in using technology tools and services

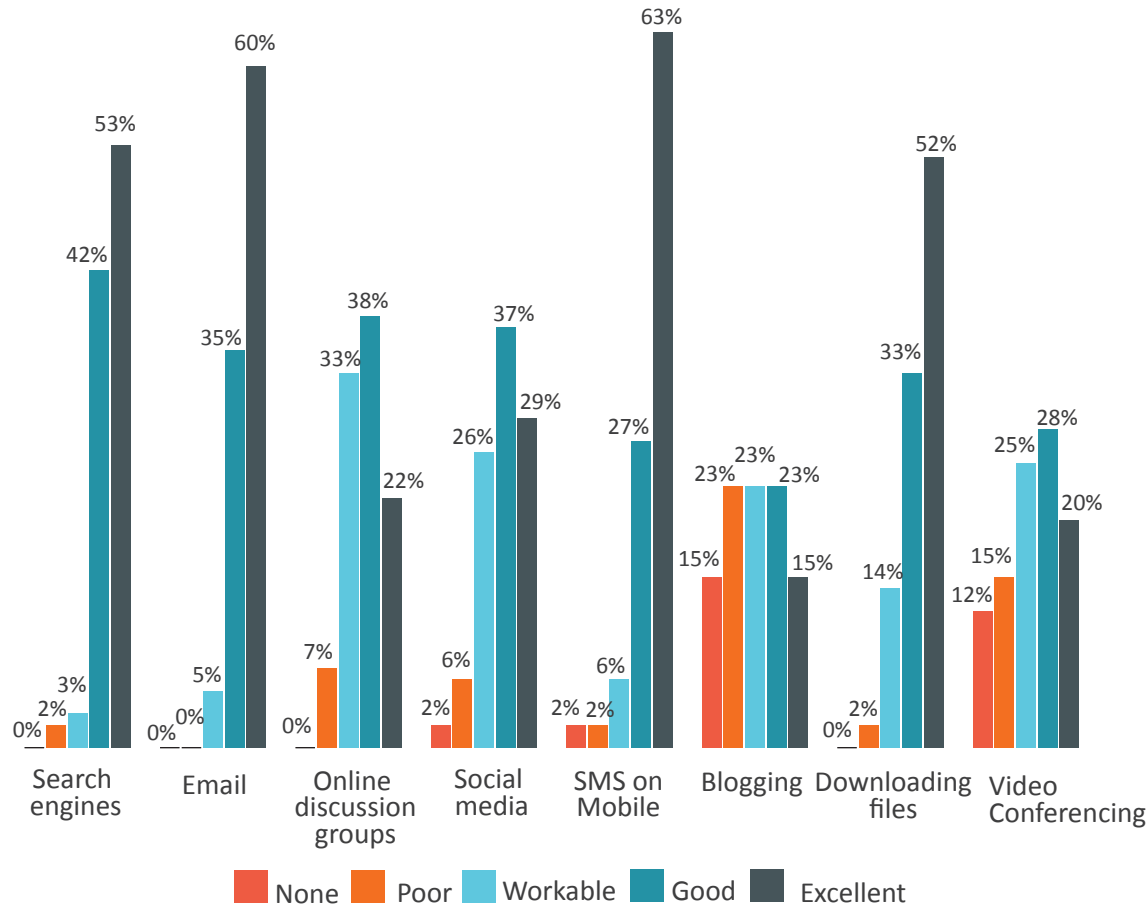


Figure 3: Please rate the level of your knowledge and proficiency in using the following technology tools and services

SMS on mobile phone (63%), email including sharing photos and documents as attachments (60%) and search engines including Google (53%) were the top three ICT tools and services that officials had excellent knowledge of and proficiency in using. These were followed by downloading files

(documents and media) at 52%. None of the officials surveyed indicated a lack of knowledge and proficiency in using search engines, email, discussion groups/chats and downloading files. Regarding social media, 37% of respondents rated their proficiency as good, while 29% rated it as excellent. The two least known and used tools and services were blogging (15%) and video conferencing (12%).

Frequency of using ICT tools and services in official capacity

There was frequent use of ICT among respondents, with 91% using email daily. Daily usage of SMS was reported by 85% of respondents, search engines (83%), and social media (53%).

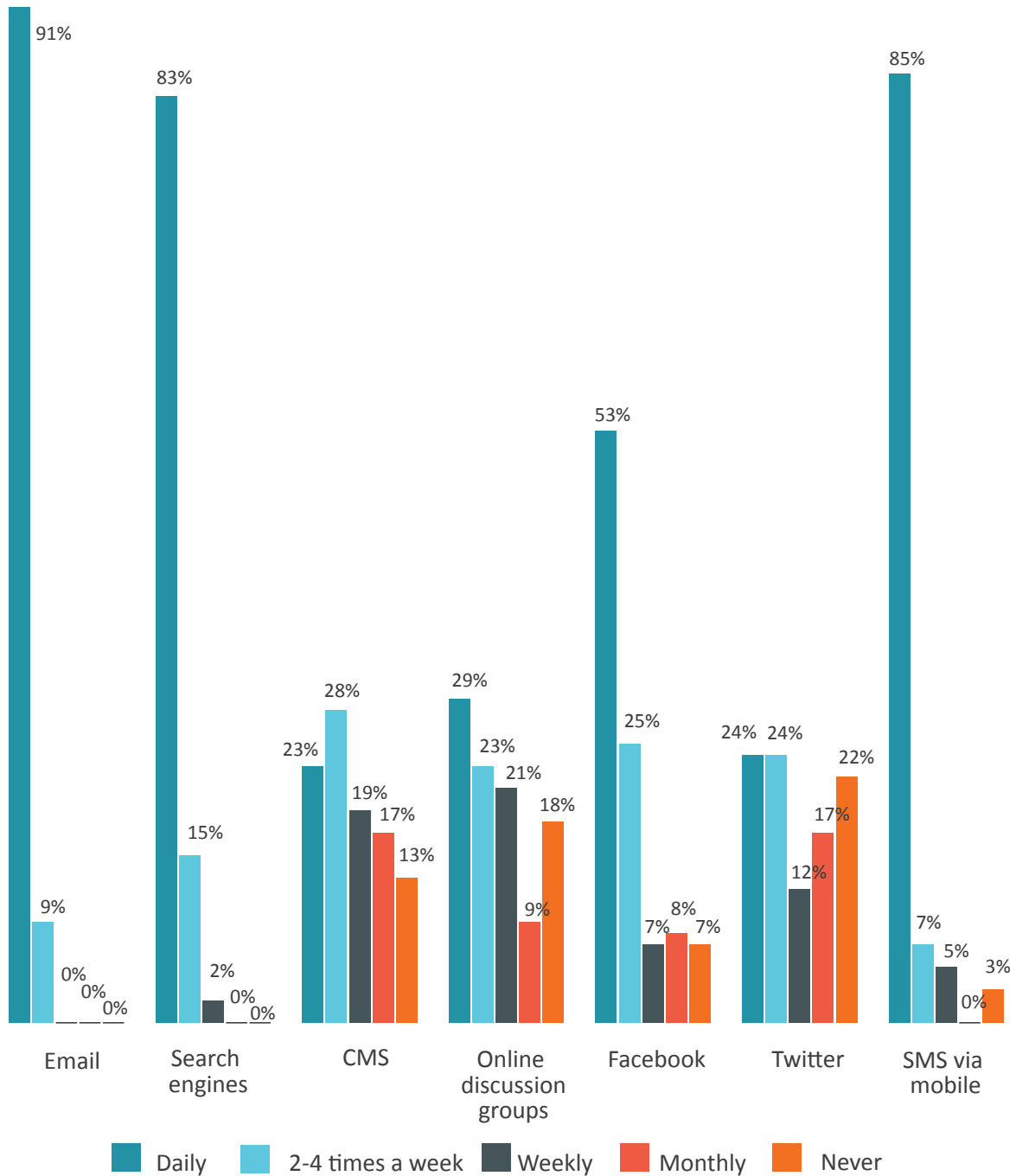


Figure 4: How often do you use these ICT tools and services in your role as a public official?

Regarding content management systems (CMS) for website updates and document uploads, there was daily use by 23% of respondents; 2-4 times for 28%. Nearly half of the officials surveyed used Twitter between daily and 2-4 times a week. The use of online discussion groups was less frequent with 29% of respondents using them daily. Twitter and discussion groups had the highest number of officials that never used them – 22% and 18% respectively.

Almost all officials (98%) agreed that ICT would make it easier for them to respond positively to requests for information made electronically. They stated that advancements in technology capabilities and its widespread adoption among citizens meant that ICT provided for quick and sometimes real-time responses, wider audience dissemination and minimised the use of paper. “You can post information and respond to queries from anywhere,” said one official. Another stated that ICT “broke” the chain of bureaucracy.

The 2% who disagreed stated that the use of ICT including among citizens and government officials remained a preserve of a few ICT literate citizens who can afford to use the technologies.

How government openness benefits citizens

The majority (60% of respondents) strongly agreed with the statement that disclosure of information by government officials was beneficial to citizens. Another 31% agreed.

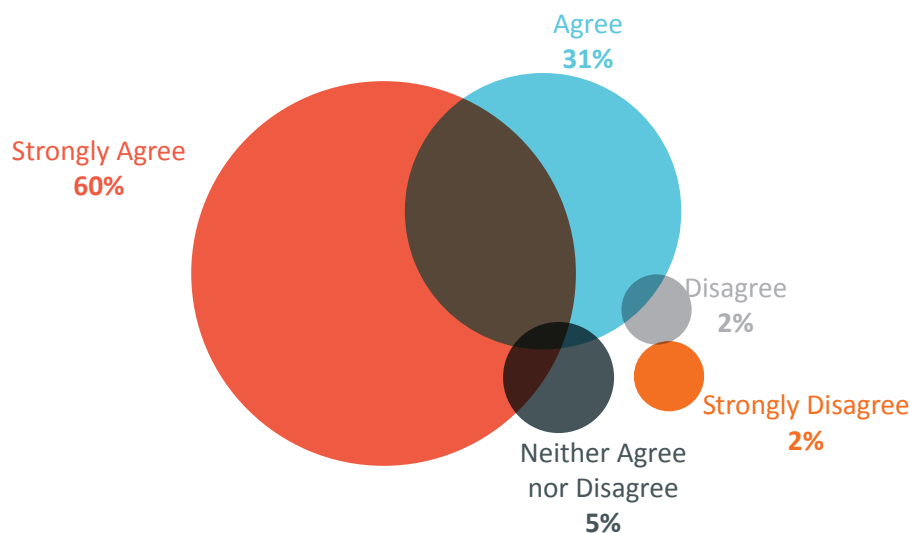


Figure 5: Increased openness and disclosure of information by government officials is beneficial to citizens

Knowledge and use of www.askyourgov.ug

Of the officials surveyed, 79% had heard of the www.askyourgov.ug (AYG) portal. However, only 23% had ever used the portal.

Heard of AYG	Used AYG		Total
	Yes	No	
Yes	23%	56%	79%
No		21%	21%
Total	23%	77%	100%

Table 1: Officials knowledge and use of www.askyourgov.ug

The portal allows officials to respond to public information requests and to request to update available information of an MDA. At the time of the survey, update requests received included: updating contact email addresses, adding an MDA previously not listed and updating agency profiles.

How to improve use of www.askyourgov.ug

Respondents made suggestions on how to increase the use of the AYG portal by citizens and officials:

- Increase awareness and capacity building through trainings and workshops
- Undertake publicity campaigns through print and broadcast media
- Devise efforts to make access to the internet more affordable
- Create AYG links to and from different MDA websites
- Integrate AYG requests and responses made through social media feeds into the portal
- Stricter enforcement of government ICT compliance measures such as the Government of Uganda Website Standards and Social Media Guidelines by MDAs and constant follows ups on their performance.

Usefulness of ICT for responding to RTI requests

Of the officials surveyed, 75% strongly agreed and 21% agreed that the use of ICT would make it easier and simpler to respond to information requests. Those in strong agreement that using ICT to make RTI responses had the potential to make government bodies more responsive and more effective were 73%. A further 23% were in agreement.

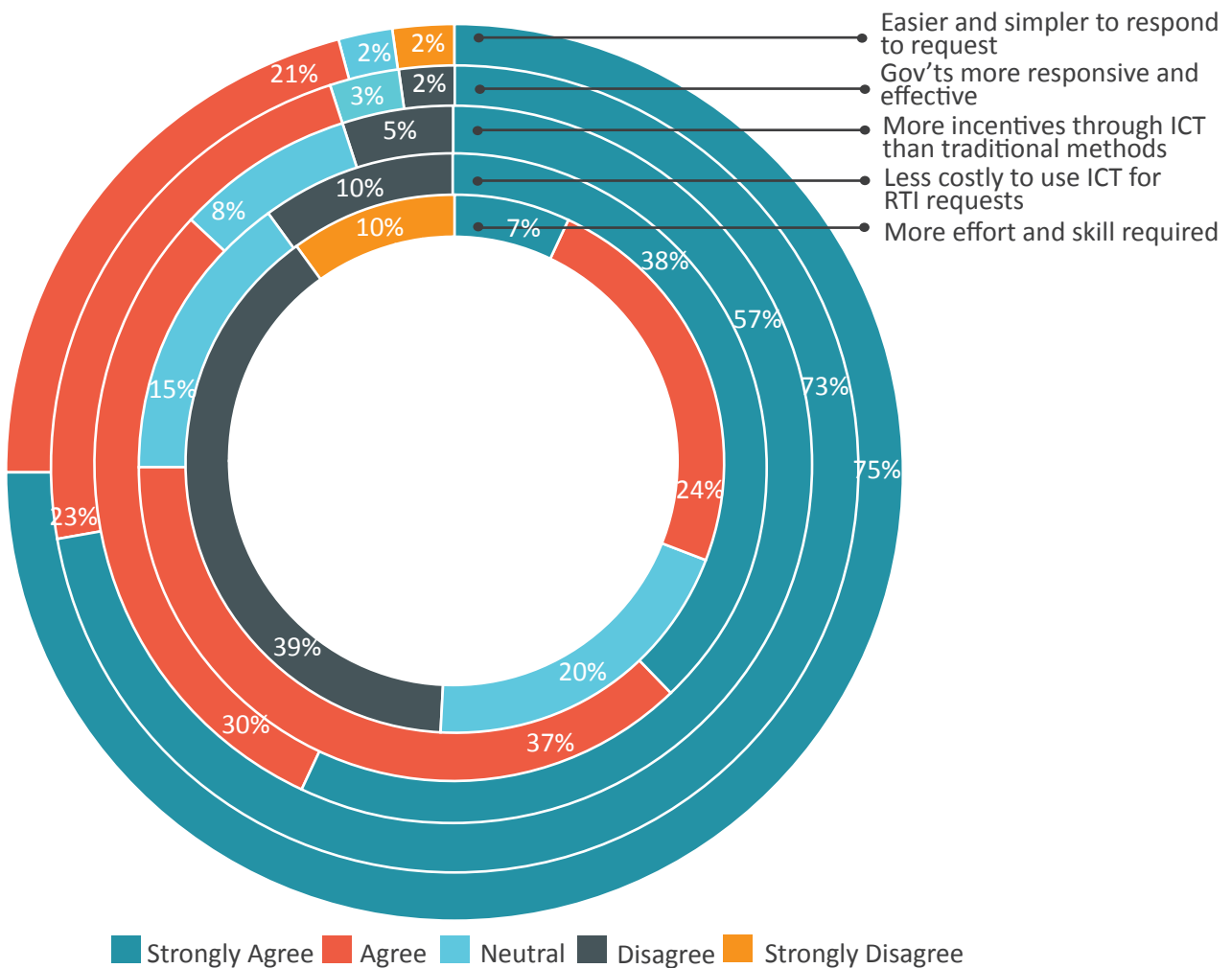


Figure 6: What is your perceived usefulness of ICT for responding to RTI requests?

Respondents also felt that they would have more incentive to respond to information requests through ICT than traditional methods: 57% strongly agreed to this while 30% agreed. A combined total of three quarters of officials (38% strongly agreeing and 37% agreeing) indicated that it was less costly for citizens to use ICT for RTI requests.

A small number of officials (7%) felt strongly that a lot of effort was required to become skillful in using ICT for RTI responses. Nearly a quarter of the respondents were in general agreement with the same. However, 39% disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed that considerable effort was required to become skillful at using ICT to respond to RTI requests.

Challenges to uptake of ICT in government work

Challenges cited by officials as hinderances to the uptake of ICT in government work included:

- Limited ICT access due to high equipment costs and skills shortages: "Although employed by government, many officials have no access to ICT and some lack knowledge of how to use the tools," said one respondent. For some MDAs where ICT were available, officials cited low bandwidth, electricity shortages and use of outdated equipment as additional hindrances
- Lack of dedicated ICT personnel in some MDAs
- An "old school" and "paper" culture prevailing among the older officials
- Conflicting laws and guidelines in Public Service which hindered information openness
- Corruption and fraud in procurement processes
- Distrust of ICT tools by some officials
- A poor change management culture

How should public bodies open up their information?

Suggestions by respondents on making public information more available included:

- Summarising large documents into smaller easy-to-read formats
- Provision of ICT equipment to officials
- Training/capacity building activities in information disclosure
- The provision of more power to information and communication officers to disclose information
- Provision of regular updates to government websites
- Allocation of funds for RTI implementation
- Adoption of electronic records management and processing
- Repealing the Official Secrets Act (1964) which inhibits release of government information
- Adoption of private sector/business driven mentality by public servants
- Joint government and civil society efforts in promoting openness and RTI
- The increased use of interactive websites and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube that are actively updated with information and responses to comments
- Use of discussion boards on ministries' intranets to encourage openness

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the results, it is evident that public officials are aware of the existence of the Access to Information Act and are willing to embrace use of ICT in promoting access to information. The officials also believe that implementation of the ATIA has the potential of enhancing government transparency, responsiveness and effectiveness.

However, underlying concerns such as the lack of the requisite skills in the use of ICT, and the lack of access to ICT within the government agencies make it hard for them to implement the law. Also, the existence of conflicting policy frameworks governing government information such as the Official Secrets Act (1964) has been a major challenge for public information officers. Thus there is a need to adopt a multi-layered approach to promoting access to information, including efforts to strengthen e-government systems in the country.

Specifically, the survey makes the following recommendations:

- ✓ Advocate for the repeal of the Official Secrets Act (1964) that bars government officials from engaging in proactive disclosure of information.
- ✓ Conduct public awareness campaigns for platforms such as the www.askyourgov.ug among public officials, highlighting its benefits, and encourage citizens to use them. These campaigns can be conducted through training workshops, print and electronic media.
- ✓ Encourage public officials to engage in proactive disclosure of information using the available ICT (websites, social media, SMS, email, etc.) instead of waiting for information requests from the citizens. This should, however, be done alongside efforts aimed at encouraging citizens to use ICT in filing information requests.
- ✓ Encourage and support government agencies to adopt electronic records management and processing systems that would make it easier to retrieve and disseminate information to citizens.
- ✓ Train information officers on how to use ICT for information dissemination as well as build their confidence and trust in online communication and use of ICT.
- ✓ Encourage government departments to adopt interactive and user-friendly websites that are regularly updated with news and information about their activities for public consumption.
- ✓ Where possible, adopt stricter enforcement of MDA ICT compliance measures and maintain constant follow ups to monitor and evaluate the performance of MDAs in this area.

Annexes

Annex 1: The MDAs surveyed

1. Civil Aviation Authority
2. Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Control
3. Directorate of Public Prosecution
4. Inspectorate of Government
5. Judicial Service Commission
6. Kampala Capital City Authority
7. Ministry of Agriculture
8. Ministry of Education and Sports
9. Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development
10. Ministry of Foreign Affairs
11. Ministry of Information and National Guidance
12. Ministry of Internal Affairs
13. Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs
14. Ministry of Land, Housing and Urban development
15. Ministry of Public Service
16. Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives
17. Ministry of Works and Transport
18. National Information Technology Authority
19. Office of the Auditor General
20. Office of the Prime Minister
21. Parliament of Uganda
22. Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Authority
23. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation
24. Uganda Free Zones Authority
25. Uganda Human Rights Commission
26. Uganda Investment Authority
27. Uganda Law Reform Commission
28. Uganda Media Centre
29. Uganda National Bureau of Standards
30. Uganda National Council for Science and Technology
31. Uganda National Roads Authority
32. Uganda Registration Services Bureau
33. Uganda Revenue Authority

Annex 2: Questionnaire



QUESTIONNAIRE Assessment of Public Officials' Perceptions of Using ICT to Respond to Information Requests

The Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC) and the Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) are conducting a survey on perceptions about using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools and systems to advance the right to information (RTI) in Uganda. Uganda passed an Access to Information Act in 2005 and it is the intention of AFIC and CIPESA to use the results of this survey to increase citizens' requests for information and the release of information by public bodies. Please spare 15 minutes to answer this short survey.

<p>1. Gender a) Male b) Female</p>	<p>2. Please state the government Ministry, Department/Agency you are employed in</p>
<p>3. Which of the following best describes your current position? (Select only one response) a) Information Officer b) Media and Communications / Public Relations Officer c) Permanent Secretary d) Project Officer e) IT Officer f) Intern g) Other (please specify): _____</p>	<p>4. How would you rate your knowledge of Uganda's Access to Information law? (Please choose at most 1 answer) a) Extremely Knowledgeable b) Rather Knowledgeable c) Moderately Knowledgeable d) Barely knowledgeable e) Not at all Knowledgeable</p>

5. Have you ever received a request for information from the public made formally using the Access to Information Act?
a) Yes b) No

If yes, what information was requested for and what was your response to the request?

.....
.....

6. Are most information requests made by the public to you formally made (quoting the Access to Information Act) or informally (not filling in a form)?

.....

7. Please rate the level of your knowledge and proficiency in use of the following technology tools and services: *(Please tick wherever applicable)*

Tool/service	None	Poor	Workable	Good	Excellent
Google and other search engines					
Email (including sharing photos and documents as attachments)					
Contribute to online discussion groups/ chats					
Use of social media (Twitter, Whatsapp, Facebook, MySpace etc)					
SMS on mobile phone					
Blogging					
Downloading files (documents and media)					
Video conferencing (Skype, Google Plus etc.)					

8. Increased openness and disclosure of information by government officials is beneficial to citizens (Please choose at most 1 answer)

- a) Agree b) Strongly agree c) Neither agree nor disagree d) Disagree d) Strongly disagree

9. How often do you use these ICT tools and services in your role as a public official? (Please tick wherever applicable)

Activity	Frequency				
	Daily	2-4 times a week	Weekly	Monthly	Never
Email					
Search engines – Google, yahoo, bingetc					
Content Management System for website updates and uploads					
Online discussion groups					
Facebook					
Twitter					
SMS via mobile					
Other (please specify)					

10. Would the use of ICT make it easier for you to respond positively to requests for information made electronically?
 a) Yes b) No

Please explain the answer you have given.....

11. Had you heard of the askyourgov.ug portal before you were invited to this workshop? a) Yes b) No

12. Had you used the askyourgov.ug portal before today's training? a) Yes b) No

13. Suggest ways to enable more citizens and public officials to use the portal?.....

14. What are the main challenges in the uptake of ICTs in government work?.....

15. What is your perceived usefulness of ICT for responding to RTI requests? (please tick all that apply)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Using ICT would make it easier and simpler to respond to requests					
Using ICT to make RTI responses would make government bodies more responsive and more effective					
I would have more incentive to respond to requests for information through ICT than traditional methods					
It is less costly for citizens to use ICT for RTI requests					
It would require a lot of effort to become skillful at using ICT for RTI responses					

16. Suggest ways in which public bodies (central and local government, and statutory agencies) can more actively open up their information through ICT.

.....

Additional comments/suggestions.....

THANK YOU

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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