



Bridging the gap between citizens and government for better service delivery in times of crisis

Policy Recommendations from Ugandan Civic Leaders
August 2020

We are facing very challenging times, and this affects the relationship between citizens and the government. As citizens continue to rely on public services, many of us are championing ways to improve public service delivery despite the pandemic. With citizens giving their feedback on new government policies and guidelines through various modes (social media included) many still ask whether this feedback is collected and reviewed in the setting of guidelines and the better provision of public services. In Uganda, debates and discussions are ongoing on how the country has handled the unexpected crisis of COVID-19 and how we should react to future crises like these, in an accountable and collaborative way.

On 17 July 2020, SEMA convened 22 civic leaders within Ugandan government institutions and non-government organizations, to share their recommendations on how we should be *bridging the gap between citizens and government for better service delivery in times of crisis*. The leaders were divided according to their expertise in four groups, covering the following four topics:

- The power of data and data literacy
- Building trust with security forces
- Supportive public health responses
- Inclusion of citizen voice in COVID-19 policies

Recommendations



The power of data and data literacy: room for more data-driven policy making

The government is making progress towards the use of data, however, a lot remains to be done. From the onset of the partial lockdown as a result of COVID-19, a significant proportion of the populace resorted to mobile phone calls, SMS, online platforms and radio stations to share their experiences of how various policies, guidelines and standard operating procedures were being implemented. There have been incidents of the government using this citizen feedback to respond and address the concerns raised. The civic leaders under this dialogue group have come up with the following recommendations towards properly utilizing citizen feedback:

- Online platforms and applications will continue to play a significant role in the way citizens engage and provide feedback to the government and vice versa. In view of this trend therefore, we recommend that;

- Government should urgently undertake a national assessment to scientifically establish the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic and, based on the results, review the response plan for quicker and better-focused interventions.
 - Government takes advantage of the existing big data, analyzes it for trends and association of citizens and uses it to guide decision making. This will fill in some of the current data gaps the government is faced with.
 - Through the lead agency, Uganda Bureau Of Standards (UBOS), the government should put in place a mechanism and or platform for data analysis experts to share, review and ensure that correctly interpreted data is used as well as drafting new or reviewing existing policies, so that the final policies are grounded and scientifically informed.
- As citizens continue to give feedback on various aspects of service delivery in this period, it is recommended that the government should;
 - Train all public officers charged with the responsibility of data collection, analysis, curating, and disseminating information as well as provide general trainings across the country on the Data Protection and Privacy Act, 2019.
 - Design and implement an awareness campaign targeting citizens to increase their understanding of the ethical considerations that have to be observed by data collectors so as to improve involvement in research processes and clarify on how these data are used.
 - Explain to citizens that their feedback is very important in decision making. To have meaningful feedback, feedback tools have to be implemented for the citizens to give their views.
 - Aside from the government's efforts to make use of citizen feedback, many private sector organizations have collected data on different aspects of the COVID-19 situation in Uganda and how it has affected citizens. They have produced and disseminated reports that are useful in many ways.
 - We encourage these actors to open the data in accessible formats or machine readable formats that allows for further analysis. This will grow the spirit of open data to allow increased use of data among the various stakeholders.
 - To increase appreciation, uptake and use of data in decision making and the various levels of government, there is need to invest in developing capacities or leveraging capacities in the private sector to produce and package data and information in ways that make most meaning to the target audiences, consumers be it in government user departments or citizens more broadly.

Building trust with security forces: focus on community policing and shared responsibilities

Since the initial onset of the nationwide lockdown, there have been concerns around the work of security forces in Uganda, and citizen's trust in these forces has been affected. Various reports on social media platforms led citizens to doubt the role that security forces are to play in the implementation of policies like curfew. With the unforeseeable end of the COVID-19 situation, and in preparation of potential new crises, there is a need for citizens to relate with the security forces that live amongst them. The civic leaders under this dialogue group have come up with the following recommendations.



- The police and other security forces need to understand the community they are serving with a clear and effective setup towards joint development through feedback.
 - Observance of human rights is very important: we need security forces that are seen as neutral and flexible. There has to be internal accountability within the security forces but also there has to be external accountability for the security forces to the community. We should not be waiting for a crisis to share this information but instead proactively have open discussions around security forces and community engagement. Currently, there are community policing programs carried out between the Uganda Police Force and citizens, this is an example of citizen focus that should be encouraged and expanded into other security forces.
 - Security forces need to be facilitated to get their work done effectively so that citizens know that they can count on them when needed. Issues of accountability have mainly arisen in the form of corruption/ taking bribes which could be as a result of poor monitoring.
 - Build capacity of security officers to appreciate the interaction between internal accountability and external accountability by involving citizens in the maintaining of order in the community and provide accurate information concerning the security threats in the community. There needs to be a “working” and secure reporting platform that citizens can use to give feedback in confidence, this may include toll free lines, SMS services, online platforms.

- The negative view that citizens have towards the security forces should be addressed. Citizens should also be involved in ensuring their own safety and security since, many times, the security forces are not fully equipped or may not be present to immediately handle security concerns.
 - The community should also be sensitized on the role of the different security agencies in their community since the two are supposed to work hand in hand towards a safe environment. Different security agencies are doing different things and the standards we expect from them should be clear. There are currently refresher courses on policies and standards within the police but this should be extended to other security agencies and the community.
 - Security forces must engage with the community in order to ensure transparency in terms of what they (the respective security forces) are able to provide and what they are lacking so that citizens can task them to get their work done efficiently. For example, citizens have to have the confidence that the respective security forces will respond when needed.
 - We need to leverage local leadership structures like the community policing programme. There is a need to engage local leaders within the local government structures in order to understand community needs through leaders. Good leaders in both security forces and local government entities have a role in effecting a more positive view of security forces within the community.



Supportive public health response: the need for accountability and sharing information

The health sector plays a key role in the management of cases of COVID-19. Information pertaining to the country's situation often comes from the Ministry of Health as cases are recorded, prevention and cure methods are under trial and information is shared on the same. Therefore, an ill equipped medical sector can be detrimental to the country's efforts to fight COVID-19 and future pandemics, and is consequential to the economy. The civic leaders under this dialogue group have made the following recommendations.

- The government should prioritize accountability in the health sector in the fight against COVID-19. We recommend that the following efforts be made in order to make the sector more efficient:
 - There is a need for accountability and compliance on the part of the government and subsequent health centres both in terms of case information and money allocation. There should be a provision of adequate and reasonable funding for the general response towards COVID-19. This would allow for community sensitization activities, the setting up of screening desks, sanitization stations, the supply of protective equipment and the overall upkeep of health workers.
 - The Government urgently needs to put in place institutional mechanisms to facilitate accountability and transparency during response, recovery, and reconstruction processes.
 - Digital interventions like official call centers, health mobile applications, social media should be effectively set up and utilized for citizens to give their feedback on the delivery of services so as to foster community involvement.
 - Much of the current infrastructure does not support the current policies of social distancing. Emergencies are going to be recurring during such a time, whether COVID-19 related or not, health facilities need to be equipped with the required ambulance equipment, relevant emergency medicines, supplies, and personnel to respond to these scenarios appropriately.
- In any public health emergency, we need participation from both the government and the people it is serving and also effective communication so that information can be understood by a common Ugandan.
 - Citizens should be involved in their own care by being informed of legitimate sources of reliable information to follow, new and already existing policies, and continued risk communication messages. Wrong myths and misconceptions should be clearly addressed.
 - Information is crucial in dealing with emergencies, therefore, having systems in place so that the citizens can give feedback to the health institutions is a necessity during this time as the focus should be on patient-oriented care and community sensitization. Using the existing platforms, health institutions need to disseminate this necessary information to the communities.
 - Food insecurity, which causes malnutrition, is an issue for many vulnerable families, as food supply chains are interrupted, and lockdowns cause loss of income. Despite food availability, the Government needs to acknowledge that food access remains an issue and ensure food security and nutrition for all — especially the poorest and most vulnerable—during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

- During COVID-19, civil servants and local leaders came to the aid of vulnerable people by providing food and other necessities of life. The role that civil society organizations can play in this is providing medicine, transport, disseminating and communicating information to the general public.
 - The Government needs to develop and make available, appropriate guidance to CSOs involved in service delivery on standards and principles they should adhere to, including establishing systems of accountability and coordination mechanisms.
 - In the post-COVID recovery phase, the Government needs to recognize and facilitate both state and non-state actors' complementary roles. It is essential to emphasize and promote the crucial role of local and national civil society in developing in the post-Covid19 recovery strategies, policies and plans and ensuring their adequate implementation.



Inclusion of citizen voice during COVID-19 policies: create transparency and collaboration

When the pandemic was first declared, the government took the necessary measures to curb its spread. Gradually, different bodies and civil organisations came up to support in this fight. Citizen engagement has been a gradual process which has proven very important to the fight against COVID-19. An example for this is the work that the local council leaders have done in their communities. The civic leaders in this dialogue group have shared the following recommendations.

- Although the response was initially a top-bottom approach, different stakeholders are gradually being brought on to assist in the fight. The grassroots interventions should now be strengthened as the struggle continues.
 - With Local Defence Forces initially engaging with the community to carry out their roles under unclear guidance and the imprisonment of citizens under unclear systems, there has been suspicion towards the followup guidelines that have been implemented. With this in mind, citizens should take the initiative and demand accountability from the government and the government in turn take on an open data approach to empower citizens with adequate and accurate information concerning the state of the country and focus on generating citizen focused policies.
 - It was noted that there was no clarity on how money was budgeted for during the COVID19 response. The Office of the Prime Minister collected a lot of money in the fight of COVID-19 but the information to where and why it is going to be invested in different causes is no longer in public discourse. It is important that, as a matter of transparency and accountability, how finances are spent is shared, especially now that foreign bodies have also contributed to the country's efforts in responding to the pandemic. There's a need to see that this money is going to the right areas.
 - The government should consider that data precedes policy making. Understanding data sources even at the lowest ranks and civil society organization groups should therefore be a priority. Information sources should therefore be maximized in all the fields of COVID-19 (and future pandemic) responses. This should be followed by efficient dissemination of the results and actions taken to the public.

- Civil society organizations need to evolve how they operate and support the government during this pandemic. In this situation, citizen representatives need to work together with the government to safeguard lives and ensure the situation does not worsen. They can inform the government of what is needed and help in explaining to the citizens the policies put in place by the government.

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The recommendations in this report reflect solely the views of individual Civic Leaders, not their organizations' views nor SEMA's views



Do you have any questions about this report or want to learn more about SEMA? Contact us via info@talkosema.org, visit www.talkosema.org or follow us on social media @talktosema